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Can the Theravada Bhikkhuni Order be Re-established? *It Already Has* By Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi

In March 2012, Sri Lanka's national newspaper, the Ceylon Daily News, printed a statement issued by the Concise Tripitaka Editorial Board, which discusses whether the Dhammavinaya allows the re-establishment of the Bhikkhuni Order. The statement begins:

The re-establishment of the Bhikkhuni Order which was the subject of debate a few decades ago has surfaced once again. Agitation and press conferences were held recently by the parties who claim to have established the Bhikkhuni Order, in a bid to pressurize the Government to recognize the Bhikkhuni Order. Already the Most Venerable Maha Nayaka Theras have informed the Commissioner-General of Buddhist Affairs that it is not possible to establish a Bhikkhuni Order according to the 'Dharmavinaya' the doctrine of the Buddha.

American scholar-monk Bhikkhu Bodhi submitted the following response (which was not published in the Ceylon Daily News).

I am writing in response to a statement published in the *Daily News* on March 29, 2012, "Can the Theravada Bhikkhuni Order be Re-established?" issued by the Concise Tripitaka Editorial Board. The Board offers a negative answer to this question, but I find its statement to be grounded upon biases and assumptions that are not absolutely convincing. I have already addressed these in detail in a booklet I published titled "[The Revival of Bhikkhuni Ordination in the Theravada Tradition](#)". In this short article, with all due respect to the Mahanayaka Theras, I wish to contend not only that the Theravada Bhikkhuni Order *can be re-established*, but that it *has already been re-established* and that by taking a liberal point of view, the

ordination should be regarded as legitimate.

The main legal objection the Mahanayaka Theras raise against a revival of the Bhikkhuni Sangha stems from the fact that the Vinaya holds that women are to be ordained by both the Bhikkhuni Sangha and the Bhikkhu Sangha. In their view, to be a purely Theravada ordination, it must also come from an existing Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha. This leads to a predicament. In the absence of an existing Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha, a legitimate Theravada Bhikkhuni ordination cannot be granted, and since, in their view, there is no existing Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha,

they conclude that “setting up a Bhikkhuni Order cannot be done under the Dharmavinaya.”

It is just this conclusion that I wish to contest. The first step in doing so is to note that Theravada Vinaya theory often merges stipulations that stem from the canonical Vinaya and Commentaries with interpretations and assumptions that have gained currency through centuries of tradition. I do not want to undervalue tradition, for it represents the accumulated legal expertise of generations of Vinaya specialists. However, we also must remember that tradition should not be placed on a par with the canonical Vinaya or even the secondary authorities, the Vinaya Commentaries.

to apply under all circumstances without exception; (2) the Theravada is the only Buddhist school that preserves an authentic Vinaya lineage stemming from the Buddha. These two assumptions are only traditional beliefs without canonical support. Both can be challenged by making two contrary stipulations.

The first is that under exceptional circumstances the Bhikkhu Sangha alone can ordain women as bhikkhunis, based on the Buddha’s statement: “I allow you, bhikkhus, to ordain Bhikkhunis.” This allowance was never rescinded by the Buddha. The legitimacy of ordination by bhikkhus alone, when a Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha does not exist, was



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We can illustrate this point with an analogy from geometry. If we draw a straight line through a point and extend the line, the distance between its two ends increases and it seems logical to hold that the two ends will never meet. But this is so only because we are thinking in the framework of Euclidean geometry. If we adopt the standpoint of spherical geometry, we can see that a continuous line drawn on a sphere eventually winds back on itself. Thus, if I break away from my familiar assumptions, a new range of possibilities suddenly opens up.

The same applies to the Mahanayakas’ position regarding the possibility of bhikkhuni ordination: they are based on implicit assumptions. The two assumptions behind their position are: (1) the dual-Sangha ordination was intended

recognized—even advocated—by no less a figure than the original Jetavan Sayadaw of Burma, one of the most learned monks of the twentieth century, the meditation master of the famous Mahasi Sayadaw (I have translated the text from Pali into English in my booklet referred to above).

The second stipulation is intended to preserve the form of a dual-Sangha ordination. It holds that the Theravada Bhikkhu Sangha can collaborate with a Bhikkhuni Sangha from an East Asian country such as Taiwan in conducting a dual-Sangha ordination. The Mahanayaka Theras think that what the Chinese Buddhists confer is a Mahayana ordination, but this is a misunderstanding. While Chinese monks and nuns for the most part follow Mahayana Buddhism, the Vinaya tradition they observe is *not a Mahayana Vinaya* but the Vinaya of the

Dharmaguptakas, an early Buddhist school that prevailed in northwest India. The Dharmaguptakas also originated from the Asokan missions and belonged to the same Vibhajjavada tradition to which the Theravada school belongs.

The Bhikkhuni Sangha that has recently sprung up in Sri Lanka derives from a grand ordination held at Bodhgaya in February 1998, conducted under the auspices of Taiwanese Buddhist elders working in collaboration with Sri Lankan elders. First, the grand ordination ceremony assembled bhikkhus from several countries and traditions—mainly Taiwanese and Sri Lankan—along with Taiwanese and Western bhikkhunis to serve as the Bhikkhuni Sangha. The women who were ordained included Theravada ten-precept nuns from Sri Lanka and Nepal, as well as Western nuns following Tibetan Buddhism. A full dual-ordination was conducted in accordance with the Dharmagupta Vinaya tradition. In Vinaya terms, the women that were ordained became full-fledged bhikkhunis inheriting the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya lineage.

To make them heirs to the Theravada Vinaya lineage, the Sri Lankan bhikkhus took the newly ordained bhikkhunis to Sarnath and conferred on them another ordination based on the Pali Vinaya Pitaka. This ordination did not negate the earlier dual-ordination received from the Chinese Sangha but supplemented it, inducting the bhikkhunis into the Theravada Vinaya lineage. This procedure was very similar to the *dalbhikamma* often given in Sri Lanka to allow bhikkhus from one Nikaya to change over to another Nikaya or to join another monastic community.

It may be of interest to note that while the Concise Tripitaka Editorial Board ends by quoting Venerable Madihe Paññasiha Mahanayaka Thera to support its repudiation of bhikkhuni ordination, the Ven. Paññasiha's close disciple, the late Ven. Dhammavihari, a Vinaya scholar, came to recognize the validity of bhikkhuni ordination late in his life and defended it at the 2007 conference in Hamburg. Thus, different views are possible even between close colleagues in the Sangha.

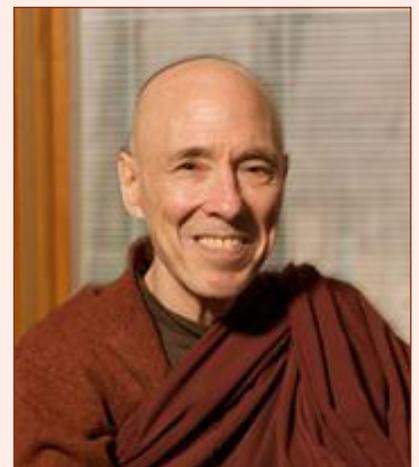
As I see it, the Vinaya itself cannot be read in a fixed manner as either unconditionally permitting or forbidding a revival of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. It yields these conclusions only as a result of interpretation, which often reflects the attitudes of the interpreters and their framework of assumptions. In my opinion, in dealing with this issue, the question that should be foremost in our minds is this: "What would the Buddha want his elder bhikkhu-disciples to do in such a situation, *now*, in the twenty-first century?" Would he want us to apply the regulations governing ordination in a way that excludes women from the fully ordained

renunciant life so that we present to the world a religion in which men alone can lead the life of full renunciation? Or would he instead want us to apply the Vinaya in a way that is kind, generous, and accommodating, thereby offering the world a religion that truly embodies principles of justice and nondiscrimination?

The answers to these questions are not immediately given by any text or tradition, but I don't think we are left entirely to personal opinion either. We can see in the texts how the Buddha displayed both compassion and rigor in setting up the Vinaya. We can also see how, in laying down rules for the Sangha, he took account of the expectations of lay people in the wider society. In working out a solution to our own problem, therefore, we have these two guidelines to follow. One is to be true to the spirit of the Dhamma. The other is to be responsive to the social, intellectual, and cultural ideals of people in the present period of human history.

Looked at in this light, the revival of a Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha can be seen as an intrinsic good that conforms to the spirit of the Dhamma, helping to fulfill the Buddha's own mission of opening "the doors to the Deathless" to everyone, women as well as men. At the same time, the existence of a Bhikkhuni Sangha allows women to make a meaningful contribution to Buddhism as preachers, scholars, meditation teachers, and also as counselors and guides to women lay followers. A Bhikkhuni Sangha will also win for Buddhism the respect of people in the world, who regard the absence of gender discrimination as the mark of a truly honorable religion in harmony with the worthy trends of present-day civilization.

The author lived as a monk in Sri Lanka for twenty-three years and was editor of the Buddhist Publication Society for eighteen years. He now lives in the United States. He is translator of the Saṃyutta Nikāya and Aṅguttara Nikāya and other works from Pali into English.



To read the full statement of the Concise Tripitaka Editorial Board, visit <http://www.dailynews.lk/2012/03/29/fea40.asp>.