

On the *Bhikkhunī* Ordination Controversy

Bhikkhu Anālayo

INTRODUCTION

In the Theravāda tradition the lineage of *bhikkhunīs* died out some thousand years ago. Present day attempts to revive this lineage meet with opposition. In what follows I examine arguments raised by opponents to the revival of *bhikkhunī* ordination. I begin with the legal aspect, followed by taking up the question whether a revival of an order of *bhikkhunīs* is desirable.

Before getting into the actual topic, I need to briefly comment on the methodological background for my discussion, in particular on different ways how *Vinaya* can be read. For the present context two modes of reading *Vinaya* are of particular importance. One is what I would call a legal reading, the other is a historical-critical reading. A legal reading attempts to understand legal implications, a historical-critical reading attempts to reconstruct history through comparative study. Both ways of reading have their proper place and value, depending on the circumstances and particular aim of one's reading the *Vinaya*.

For someone ordained within the Theravāda tradition, the Pāli *Vinaya* is the central law book on which the observation of the monastic rules is based.¹ The rules in the way they are set forth in the Theravāda *Vinaya* are binding on anyone taking ordination in the Theravāda tradition, not the rules in other *Vinaya* traditions. So for legal purposes, the appropriate reading is a legal reading of the descriptions given and the rules pronounced in the Theravāda *Vinaya*, together with their understanding by later Theravāda tradition. Other *Vinayas* are not of direct relevance, as they do not have legal implications for a monastic of the Theravāda tradition.

The situation is different, however, when one aims at reconstructing an early, perhaps the earliest possible account of what happened. This requires a historical-critical mode of reading, where the relevant portion of the Theravāda *Vinaya* needs to be studied in comparison with other *Vinaya* traditions.

In the first part of the present article I will be examining the legal question, consequently my discussion will be based solely on the description given in the Theravāda *Vinaya*, irrespective of the historical likelihood or otherwise of this description. In the second part of the article I will attempt a historical reconstruction of the Buddha's attitude towards an order of *bhikkhunīs*, hence at that point I will also consult *Vinayas* of other traditions.²

THE LEGAL QUESTION: THE RULES

The main argument raised against *bhikkhunī* ordination is based on the widely held assumption that, once a Theravāda *bhikkhunī* order has become extinct, it cannot be revived. This assessment is based on the two main rules that, according to the *Cullavagga* (Cv) of the Pāli *Vinaya*, were given by the Buddha to *bhikkhus* on the matter of the higher ordination of female candidates. The two rules are as follows:

Cv X.2: "*Bhikkhus*, I authorize the giving of the higher ordination of *bhikkhunīs* by *bhikkhus*."³

Cv X.17: "*Bhikkhus*, I authorize the higher ordination in the community of *bhikkhus* for one who has been higher ordained on one side and has cleared herself in the community of *bhikkhunīs*."⁴

According to the earlier rule given to *bhikkhus* on the issue of ordaining *bhikkhunīs* (Cv X.2), *bhikkhus* alone can give the higher ordination. Without this rule being explicitly rescinded, the subsequent rule (Cv X.17) then stipulates that the higher ordination of female candidates requires the cooperation of a community of already existing *bhikkhunīs*. These first perform their part in giving the candidate the higher ordination, followed by a completion of the ordination ceremony in the presence of a community of *bhikkhus*.

The reasons why these rules are held to prevent a revival of an extinct order of *bhikkhunīs* can be gathered from the writings of two eminent contemporary Theravāda *bhikkhus*, Phra Payutto and Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro. Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro (2001/2013: 449f) critically takes up the suggestion that

"because the original allowance for *bhikkhus* to ordain *bhikkhunīs* was never explicitly rescinded, it is still in place and so *bhikkhus* may ordain *bhikkhunīs*."

He explains that

"this argument ignores the fact that the Buddha followed two different patterns in changing Community transactions, depending on the type of changes made. Only when totally withdrawing permission for something he had earlier allowed ... did he follow the pattern of explicitly rescinding the earlier allowance."

"When keeping an earlier allowance while placing new restrictions on it, he followed a second pattern, in which he merely stated the new restrictions for the allowance and gave directions for how the new form of the relevant transaction should be conducted in line with the added restrictions."

"Because Cv.X.17.2, the passage allowing bhikkhus to give full Acceptance to a candidate who has been given Acceptance by the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, simply adds a new restriction to the earlier allowance given in Cv.X.2.1, it follows this second pattern. This automatically rescinds the earlier allowance."

He concludes that

"in the event that the original Bhikkhunī Saṅgha died out, Cv.X.17.2 prevents bhikkhus from granting Acceptance to women".

So according to Bhikkhu Thānissaro, with the disappearance of an order of *bhikkhunīs* it becomes impossible for *bhikkhus* to give the higher ordination to female candidates. The reason is that the first rule (Cv X.2) that allows them to do so has been implicitly rescinded by the promulgation of the second rule (Cv X.17). His argument is in line with a basic principle in law in general and in the *Vinaya* in particular, where the latest rule on a particular matter is the one that is valid and which has to be followed.

In a similar vein, Phra Payutto (2013: 58f) explains that

"when the Buddha prescribes a specific rule and then later makes revisions to it ... the most recent version of the rule is binding. It is not necessary to say that previous versions have been annulled. This is a general standard in the Vinaya." He adds that "the reason why the Buddha didn't rescind the allowance for bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunis is straightforward: the bhikkhus were still required to complete the bhikkhuni ordinations."

Phra Payutto (2013: 71) adds that

"if one were to assume that the original allowance for bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunis by themselves has been valid all along ... then later on in the Buddha's lifetime there would have also been ordinations conducted solely by the bhikkhus...but this didn't happen. Why? Because once the Buddha laid down the second regulation the bhikkhus practiced accordingly and abandoned the first allowance."

In short, Phra Payutto and Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro conclude that the earlier ruling has been automatically rescinded by the later ruling. The interpretation proposed by Phra Payutto and Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro clearly follows an inner coherence and logic. It is in line with a basic Vinaya principle according to which the latest rule on a specific issue is the valid one. This inner coherence explains why the conclusion arrived at by these two eminent *bhikkhus* has for a long time been taken as the final word on the issue.

THE LEGAL QUESTION: THE NARRATIVE CONTEXT

Note that the discussion so far has considered the two rules apart from their narrative context. *Vinaya* law is in principle case law. The various rules which according to the *Vinaya* have been promulgated by the Buddha come in response to a particular situation (the only exception being the *garudhammas*). As with any case law, a study of the significance of a particular ruling requires an examination of its narrative context. This narrative context, independent of its historical accuracy, determines the legal applicability of the respective rule.

In order to take into account this requirement, in what follows I sketch the *Vinaya* narrative at the background of these two rules. In this sketch I follow a legal reading of the text, in the sense that I am not attempting to reconstruct or make a pronouncement on what actually happened. Instead my intention is only to summarize what the Pāli *Vinaya* presents as the narrative background to the promulgation of these two rules, Cv X.2 and Cv X.17.

The promulgation of Cv X.2 is preceded by an account of how Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī became the first *bhikkhunī*. This took place by her accepting the eight *garudhammas*, "principles to be respected". The sixth of these *garudhammas* deals with the ordination of *bhikkhunīs*. It reads as follows:

"A probationer (*sikkhamānā*) who has trained for two years in six principles should seek for the higher ordination from both communities."⁵

Having become a *bhikkhunī* through the acceptance of the eight *garudhammas*, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī then approached the Buddha with the following question: "Venerable sir, how should I proceed in relation to those Sākyan women?"⁶ She was asking about the proper course to be taken in relation to her following of 500 Sākyan women, who had come together with her in quest of higher ordination. In reply to this question, the Buddha promulgated Cv X.2, according to which *bhikkhus* on their own should give the higher ordination to female candidates.

Considering the background to the first rule clarifies that, according to the *Vinaya* narrative, the Buddha wanted from the outset *bhikkhunī* ordination to be done by both communities. This is clearly evident from his pronouncement of the sixth *garudhamma*.

Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī had accepted to undertake this and the other *garudhammas* and thereby became a *bhikkhunī*. Since she was only a single *bhikkhunī*, she was unable to follow the sixth *garudhamma*. There were no other *bhikkhunīs* to form the minimum quorum required for higher ordination. Because it was impossible for her at this juncture of events to act according to the sixth *garudhamma*, she approached the Buddha and inquired about the proper line of conduct to be adopted regarding her female followers. In reply, the Buddha authorized that *bhikkhus* should give them ordination on their own.

So the first of the two rules under discussion, Cv X.2, has a very clear purpose. It addresses a situation where an ordination by a community of *bhikkhus* in cooperation with a community of *bhikkhunīs* is the proper way to proceed, as indicated in *garudhamma* 6. However, this is not possible if a community of *bhikkhunīs* is not in existence. In such a situation the Buddha authorized that the *bhikkhus* should give the higher ordination on their own. He laid down this rule *after* having promulgated the sixth *garudhamma* and thereby *after* having clearly expressed his preference for *bhikkhunī* ordination to be conducted by both communities.

The ruling Cv X.2 comes in the *Vinaya* directly after the report of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī becoming a *bhikkhunī*. Following Cv X.2, the *Vinaya* continues with a series of other events related in some way or another to an already existing *bhikkhunī* order. For example, the

Buddha explains to Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī that for her and the new *bhikkhunīs* the rules they have in common with the *bhikkhus* are as binding as the rules promulgated specifically for them (Cv X.4).⁷ Then the *Vinaya* reports that the *bhikkhus* were actively engaged in various legal performances on behalf of the *bhikkhunīs* (Cv X.6), such as recitation of the code of rules (*pāṭimokkha*), the confession of offences (*āpatti*), and the carrying out of formal acts (*kamma*). Later on, the Buddha is on record for explicitly stopping the *bhikkhus* from doing these legal activities on behalf of the *bhikkhunīs*.⁸

According to the *Vinaya* narrative, the rule Cv X.17 was occasioned by the fact that some female candidates were too shy to reply to questions by the *bhikkhus* regarding their suitability for higher ordination. As part of the standard procedure for the higher ordination for males as well as females, the ordaining monastics need to ascertain that the candidate has no sexual abnormality. In a traditional setting women can easily feel embarrassed if they have to reply to such questions in front of *bhikkhus*.

To deal with this problem, the second of the two rules mentioned above came into existence. According to the rule Cv X.17, the questioning of female candidates was now delegated to the *bhikkhunīs*. A community of *bhikkhunīs* should first give higher ordination. Once this has been accomplished, the *bhikkhus* perform their part. This second rule is given in a situation where a community of *bhikkhunīs* is in existence. Its purpose is to enable the carrying out of the higher ordination for a female candidate without creating unnecessary embarrassment for them.

The wording of Cv X.17 does not support the assumption by Phra Payutto that Cv X.2 could not be rescinded because "the *bhikkhus* were still required to complete the *bhikkhuni* ordinations". Cv X.17 clearly indicates that a female candidate should receive "the higher ordination in the community of *bhikkhus*". This is sufficient in itself and does not require the maintenance of any other rule in order to function. Even if there had never been any ruling of the type given at Cv X.2, the functionality of Cv X.17 would not be in any way impaired. It would still be clear that *bhikkhus* are to give the higher ordination to female candidates, once these have been ordained by the *bhikkhunīs*. In fact already with the sixth *garudhamma* the Buddha had made it clear that he wanted *bhikkhus* to perform their part in the ordination of *bhikkhunīs*. Once this was made clear, there was no need to make a rule just to clarify that.

The function of Cv X.2 is more specifically to enable the giving of the higher ordination to female candidates in a situation where no *bhikkhunī* order is in existence. This is unmistakably clear from the narrative context. In contrast, the function of Cv X.17 is to regulate the giving of the higher ordination to female candidates when a *bhikkhunī* order is in existence. This is also unmistakably clear from the narrative context. So there is a decisive difference between the two rules that needs to be taken into consideration: The two rules are meant to address two substantially different situations.

Contrary to the assumptions by Phra Payutto and Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro, what we have here is not just an early rule and its subsequent adaptation. Instead we have two rules on related but different issues. This explains why, after an order of *bhikkhunīs* had come into existence during the lifetime of the Buddha, there were no ordinations by *bhikkhunīs* conducted solely by *bhikkhus*. There can be only one situation at a time: Either a community of *bhikkhunīs* is in existence, in which case Cv X.17 is to be followed, or else a community of *bhikkhunīs* is not in existence, in which case Cv X.2 is to be followed.

Since the belief in the impossibility of reviving an order of *bhikkhunīs* has such a long history in Theravāda circles, perhaps an example may help to clarify the point at issue. Suppose a person regularly commutes from home to work via a highway that connects two towns, and this person hears that the municipal authorities have set a speed limit of 100 km/h for this highway. Later on, the municipal authorities set another speed limit of 50 km/h.

Even though the earlier limit of 100 km/h has not been explicitly abolished, when caught by the police for driving at 80 km/h this person will not be able to argue that he or she had on that day decided to follow the earlier speed limit regulation. It is not possible to assume that both limits are valid simultaneously and one can freely choose which one to follow. The last speed limit is the one that counts.

The situation changes considerably, however, once closer investigation reveals that the second speed limit set by the municipal authorities was not put up by the highway, but in town. It refers to traffic in the town in which this person works, it does not refer to the highway that leads up to this town. In that case, both speed limits are valid at the same time. While driving on the highway, the speed limit is still 100 km/h, but when leaving the highway and driving into town to reach the working place, the speed limit of 50 km/h needs to be observed.

In the same way, Cv X.2 and Cv X.17 are both valid. The second of the two, Cv X.17, does not imply a rescinding of the first, just as the town speed limit does not imply a rescinding of the speed limit for the highway. Both rules are simultaneously valid, as they refer to two distinctly different situations.

In sum, the traditional belief that the Theravāda *Vinaya* does not enable a reviving of an extinct *bhikkhunī* order seems to be based on a reading of the relevant rules without sufficient consideration of their narrative background. If studied in their narrative context, it becomes clear that an extinct order of *bhikkhunīs* can be revived by the *bhikkhus*, as long as these are not extinct as well.

As already stated by the Jetavan Sayādaw in 1949:

“the Exalted One’s statement “Bhikkhus, I allow bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs” concerned...a period in the past when the Bhikkhunī Sangha did not exist; in the future, too, it will be restricted to a period when the Bhikkhunī Sangha will not exist; and at present it is restricted to a period when the Bhikkhunī Sangha does not exist.” He further explains that the Buddha knew “that when the Bhikkhunī Sangha is non-existent the occasion arises for an allowance [given to] the Bhikkhu Sangha [to be used], the Buddha laid down ... that woman can be ordained by the Bhikkhu Sangha, that is: Bhikkhus, I allow Bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs.”⁹

The interpretation proposed by the Jetavan Sayādaw is clearly a more accurate reflection of the Pāli *Vinaya* than the interpretations proposed by Phra Payutto and Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro. The conclusion that emerges, after giving sufficient consideration to the narrative context of the two rules in question, is that it is definitely possible to revive an extinct order of *bhikkhunīs* through ordination given by *bhikkhus* alone.

THE ORDER OF BHIKKHUNĪS: THE DESIRABILITY OF ITS REVIVAL

Phra Payutto (2014: 71) also wonders whether it is at all desirable for females to become *bhikkhunīs*. He comments that

"ordaining as a bhikkhuni may create even more obstacles for women. This is because once they have taken bhikkhuni ordination they will be obliged to keep the 311 training precepts. Go ahead and try to keep these rules in the present high-tech age. Would this simply increase problems?" "In today’s social environment and gen-

eral way of life, keeping the 311 training rules will be a stumbling block for women who are ordained."

While it is of course true that keeping precepts that evolved in a different setting two and a half millennia ago is a challenge, the same applies also to *bhikkhus*. One might similarly wonder if it is not going to increase the problems for males if they take higher ordination.

Another point worth noting is that often arguments raised against the revival of the *bhikkhunī* order seem to assume that this implies a rejection of the eight or ten precept nuns that have developed in Theravāda countries. These are the *mae chis* in Thailand, the *thila shins* in Burma and the *dasasil mātās* in Sri Lanka, to which the *sīladhārās* in the West could be added. The wish to revive a *bhikkhunī* order does not require a replacing of these orders in the respective countries. There is no reason why both cannot exist side by side. The question is thus not one of abolishing or dismissing what is already there, but rather one of enabling women to choose between the alternatives of becoming an eight or ten precept nun and taking ordination as a *bhikkhunī*.

Nowadays in Theravāda countries some men also prefer not to become *bhikkhus*, and instead live a celibate lay life, at times by becoming *anagārikas*. Such celibate males exist alongside with *bhikkhus*, in fact often they live in close relationship with *bhikkhus* at a monastery. In the same way, the option of being an eight or ten precept nuns will probably be of continuing appeal to some women in Theravāda countries. This does not imply, however, that the alternative option of becoming a *bhikkhunī* should not also be made available to those who feel ready for it.

Improving the situation of the eight or ten precept nuns is a very important and praiseworthy task that should be given full attention, but this does not suffice to fulfil the wish of those who want to have access to full ordination. Alongside such endeavours, there clearly remains a need to restore full ordination for *bhikkhunīs*. If some eight and ten precept nuns in Theravāda countries do not want to become *bhikkhunīs*, then this does not dispense with the need of reviving such an order in principle for others who do want higher ordination.

Recent developments in Sri Lanka have in fact shown that numbers of *dasasil mātās*, who earlier were not interested in *bhikkhunī* ordination, changed their mind once this became available and took higher ordination.¹⁰ Moreover, the new *bhikkhunīs* in Sri Lanka are well

respected by laity and make a major contribution by meeting the needs of lay followers.¹¹ This leaves little room for arguing that a revival of the *bhikkhunī* order is not needed or will not be beneficial for society at large.

THE ORDER OF BHIKKHUNĪS: THE BUDDHA'S ATTITUDE

The notion that such a revival is better avoided often seems related to the impression conveyed by the account of the founding of the *bhikkhunī* order in the *Vinaya*. According to the narration that comes before the *garudhammas*, the Buddha originally refused to let Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and her followers go forth.

In order to understand the implications of this passage, a shift from the legal reading adopted earlier to a historical-critical reading is required. With what follows the task is not to ascertain the legal implications of a particular regulation in the Theravāda *Vinaya*, but much rather to attempt to reconstruct a historical event, in order to appreciate what the canonical texts have to say about the attitude of the Buddha towards an order of *bhikkhunīs*.

For a historical-critical reading that aims at reconstructing an early account of what happened, the relevant portion from the Theravāda *Vinaya* needs to be studied in comparison with other *Vinaya* traditions, because during the long period of oral transmission a portion of text can be lost.

The possibility of a portion of text being lost can be illustrated with the case of the *Chabbisodhana-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, the "Discourse on Sixfold Purity". In spite of the explicit reference to six in its title, the discourse expounds only five types of purity of an arahant. The commentary reports several explanations for this inconsistency, one of them being that, according to the reciters from India, an arahant's detachment in regard to the four nutriments (edible food, contact, volition, and consciousness) should be added to the five purities mentioned in the discourse.¹² That this is indeed the solution can be seen through comparative study of a parallel preserved in the *Madhyama-āgama*, a discourse collection brought from India to China so as to be translated into Chinese. Besides the five purities mentioned in the *Chabbisodhana-sutta*, this parallel lists the four nutriments as a sixth purity.¹³

From this it follows that at some point during oral transmission from India to Sri Lanka this sixth purity was lost. Indian reciters still knew of a complete version of the discourse that

had this sixth purity, but by the time the discourse had reached Sri Lanka, this part of the text had gone missing. The case of the *Chabbisodhana-sutta* shows that substantial portions of a Pāli canonical text could get lost during oral transmission.

The difficulties of relying on oral transmission are explicitly taken up in the Pāli discourses themselves. The *Sandaka-sutta* points out that oral tradition might be well heard or else might not be well heard, as a result of which some of it is true, but some of it is otherwise.¹⁴ The *Caṅkī-sutta* also takes up the unreliability of oral tradition, recommending that someone who wishes to preserve truth should not take a stance on oral transmission claiming that this alone is true, everything else is false.¹⁵

So a historical-critical reading that considers the parallel versions of a particular text offers a way of giving proper consideration to the nature of oral transmission and its possible errors in accordance with the indications made in the *Sandaka-sutta* and the *Caṅkī-sutta*. Doing justice to the indications in these Pāli discourses requires allowing, in principle, the possibility that at times a portion of text preserved in the Pāli canon could be incomplete due to textual loss.

Based on allowing in principle this possibility, revisiting the account of the founding of the order of *bhikkhunīs* in the Pāli *Vinaya* brings to light a turn of events that is not entirely straightforward. After the Buddha had refused Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī's request to go forth, she and her followers shaved off their hair and put on robes.

According to the Pāli commentarial tradition, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī had earlier become a stream-enterer.¹⁶ It seems inconceivable that a stream-enterer would openly defy the Buddha's command in this way.¹⁷ Moreover, when Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī with shaven head and wearing robes approaches Ānanda, the latter comments on her exhausted bodily condition after having travelled, but makes no remark at all about her being shaven-headed and wearing robes.¹⁸

The solution to this conundrum can be found by consulting accounts of the same event in other *Vinayas*, adopting what I have called a historical-critical reading, in order to allow for loss of text during oral transmission. Relevant to the present issue are versions of this story preserved in the canonical texts of three schools, the Mahīśāsaka, the Mūlasarvāstivāda, and the Sarvāstivāda. All these are texts from India, which have been brought to China for trans-

lation. Besides the Chinese translation, in the case of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* we also have the relevant passage preserved in a Sanskrit fragment as well as in Tibetan translation.

These texts report that when Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī approached the Buddha with her request, he indeed did not allow her to go forth, but he then offered her an alternative. This alternative was that she could shave her hair and wear robes.¹⁹ But she should apparently do so staying in the protected environment at her home instead of going forth to wander around India as a homeless person.

The perspective afforded by a historical-critical reading based on a comparative study changes the situation considerably. Instead of the Buddha just being against an order of *bhikkhunīs* in principle, he offers an alternative. This alternative seems to express his concern that, at a time when the Buddhist order was still in its beginnings, lack of proper dwelling places and the other harsh living conditions of a homeless life might be too much for queen Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and her following.

The Theravāda *Vinaya* in fact records that *bhikkhunīs* were raped, making it clear that in ancient India for women to go forth could be dangerous.²⁰ The situation then was clearly quite different from modern South and Southeast Asia, where women who have gone forth can expect to be respected in their choice of living a celibate life.

For Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and her following to go forth in such a situation would indeed be comparable to a household with many women and few men, which can easily be attacked by robbers (Cv X.1).²¹ The possibility of being raped would indeed be similar to ripe crop of rice or sugar cane that is suddenly attacked by a disease.

Returning to the *Vinaya* narration, on the assumption that Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and her followers had received an explicit permission to shave their hair and wear robes, the rest of the story flows on naturally. It now becomes understandable why they would indeed do so and why Ānanda on seeing Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī shaven-headed and in robes would not find this worth commenting on.

Laity at times followed the Buddha for quite some distance on his journeys.²² In view of such a custom, it seems natural for Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and her group similarly to follow the Buddha in an attempt to show that they were able to brave the living conditions of going forth. Such an action would not have been something the Buddha had forbidden. Having in

this way proven their ability to handle the condition of going forth would also explain why the Buddha eventually allowed them to become *bhikkhunīs*.

In order to validate this alternative understanding of how the *bhikkhunī* order came into existence, the canonical principle of the four *mahāpadesas* needs to be followed.²³ According to the principle enshrined in these four *mahāpadesas*, any particular statement claiming to go back to the Buddha needs to be compared with the discourses and the *Vinaya* in order to ascertain if it conforms with them. In the present case, this requires examining what other canonical passages have to say about the Buddha's attitude towards an order of *bhikkhunīs*. Do other canonical passages support what the historical-critical reading has brought to light, namely that the existence of an order of *bhikkhunīs* is not something undesirable that the Buddha would rather have avoided?

The *Lakkhaṇa-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya* describes the Buddha's possession of thirty-two superior bodily marks. Each of these has a special relationship to his virtues and former deeds. Here the wheel-marks on the soles of the Buddha's feet are portents of his destiny to be surrounded by a large retinue of four assemblies of disciples. These four assemblies are *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs*, as well as male and female lay followers.²⁴ According to this discourse, the Buddha was from his birth destined to have an order of *bhikkhunīs*. This makes the existence of *bhikkhunīs* an integral and indispensable part of the *sāsana*, the Buddha's dispensation.

The *Pāsādika-sutta* in the same *Dīgha-nikāya* proclaims that the completeness of the holy life taught by the Buddha was evident in the accomplishment of his four assemblies of disciples, including an order of *bhikkhunīs*.²⁵ The same emerges from the *Mahāvaccagotta-sutta* in the *Majjhima-nikāya* according to which the completeness of the Buddha's teaching can be seen in the high numbers of *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* who had become fully liberated, and in the fact that similarly high numbers of lay followers of both genders had reached other levels of awakening.²⁶ Clearly, without accomplished *bhikkhunīs* the Buddha's dispensation would not have been complete.

According to the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* in the *Dīgha-nikāya*, the Buddha had declared that he would not pass away until he had achieved his mission of having competent disciples from each of the four assemblies, including *bhikkhunīs*.²⁷ The importance of this statement

is reflected in the fact that it recurs again in the Pāli canon in the *Samyutta-nikāya*, the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, and the *Udāna*.²⁸

In this way, from his birth until his passing away, it was an integral part of the Buddha's mission to have an order of *bhikkhunīs*. On following the *mahāpadesa* principle, the results of the above historical-critical reading finds confirmation. An order of *bhikkhunīs* is a desirable, in fact an indispensable part of the dispensation of the Buddha.

THE ORDER OF BHIKKHUNĪS: THE DURATION OF THE TEACHING

The passages surveyed so far help to set into context the prophecy that because an order of *bhikkhunīs* had come into existence during the lifetime of the Buddha, the duration of the teachings will be shortened to 500 years.²⁹ Now this prophecy is surprising, since one would not expect the Buddha to do something which he knew in advance would have such an effect. In fact, the prophecy in the way it is recorded in the *Vinaya* has not come true, as after 2,500 years the teaching is still in existence. Even the *bhikkhunī* order was still in existence in India in the 8th century and thus more than a 1,000 years after the time of the Buddha.

It also needs to be noted that the basic condition described in this prophecy has been fulfilled when an order of *bhikkhunīs* came into existence during the Buddha's lifetime. The prophecy has no relation to whether an order of *bhikkhunīs* continues or is revived nowadays.

It seems, then, that here we have another presentation that is not entirely straightforward. On following the same principle of the four *mahāpadesas*, we now need to examine what other passages have to say about possible causes for a decline of the teaching. A discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* describes how each of the four assemblies can contribute to the thriving of the Buddha's teachings. Here a *bhikkhunī* can stand out for illuminating the Buddhist community through her learnedness.³⁰ Another discourse in the same collection indicates that a *bhikkhunī* also illuminates the community through her virtue.³¹ These two discourses reflect a clear appreciation of the contribution that learned and virtuous *bhikkhunīs* can make to the Buddhist community, instead of seeing them as something detrimental.

Other discourses more specifically address what prevents the decline of the teaching. According to a discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya*, such a decline can be prevented when the

members of the four assemblies, including *bhikkhunīs*, dwell with respect for the teacher, the Dhamma, the Saṅgha, the training, and concentration.³² Here the *bhikkhunīs* actually contribute to preventing decline, rather than being themselves its cause.

Similar presentations can be found in three discourses in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*. In agreement with the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* discourse just mentioned, these three discourses present respectful behaviour by the members of the four assemblies, including *bhikkhunīs*, as what prevents decline. Besides respect for the teacher, the Dhamma, the Saṅgha, and the training, these three discourses also mention respect of the four assemblies for each other, heedfulness, and being helpful (to one another).³³

These passages clearly put the responsibility for preventing a decline of the teaching on each of the four assemblies. It is their dwelling with respect towards essential aspects of the Buddha's teaching and each other that prevents decline.

According to Phra Payutto (2013: 49),

"the Buddha laid down the eight *garudhammas* as a protective embankment. With such protection the teachings will last for a long time, just like before."

Now for this protective embankment of the eight *garudhammas*, to function, the collaboration of the *bhikkhus* is required. Most of the eight *garudhammas* involve interactions between *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* in such matters as spending the rainy season retreat (2), announcement of the observance day and the exhortation, *ovāda* (3), invitation, *pavāraṇā* (4), penance, *mānatta* (5), and the granting of higher ordination, *upasampadā* (6).³⁴ These clearly require the cooperation of *bhikkhus*. Partaking in the higher ordination of *bhikkhunīs*, provided this accords with the legal requirements of the Theravāda *Vinaya*, thereby supports what according to Phra Payutto is the protective embankment constructed by the Buddha for protecting the long life of his dispensation.

In sum, following the principle of the four *mahāpadesas* it seems clear that an order of *bhikkhunīs* is desirable and an important asset in order to prevent the decline of the Buddha's teaching. In fact Buddhist countries that do not have such an order are in this respect in the category of border countries. It is an unfortunate condition to be reborn in such a border country, since the four assemblies, including an order of *bhikkhunīs*, are not found there.³⁵ Such a condition makes it more difficult to practice the Dharma.

A Buddhist tradition that has only three of the four assemblies could be compared to a noble elephant with one leg crippled. The elephant can still walk, but only with difficulties. The medicine to restore the crippled leg is now available, all it needs is a concerted effort to support the healing process.

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|----------------|------------------------------|
| AN | <i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i> |
| B ^e | Burmese edition |
| C ^e | Ceylonese edition |
| Cv | <i>Cullavagga</i> |
| D | Derge edition |
| Dhp-a | <i>Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā</i> |
| DN | <i>Dīgha-nikāya</i> |
| MĀ | <i>Madhyama-āgama</i> |
| MN | <i>Majjhima-nikāya</i> |
| Mv | <i>Mahāvagga</i> |
| Ps | <i>Papañcasūdanī</i> |
| Q | Peking edition |
| S ^e | Siamese edition |
| SN | <i>Saṃyutta-nikāya</i> |
| Sv | <i>Suttavibhaṅga</i> |
| Ud | <i>Udāna</i> |
| Vin | <i>Vinayaṭṭhaka</i> |

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END NOTES

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¹ On the centrality of the Pāli canon for a Theravāda sense of identity cf. Anālayo 2013b.

² My presentation is based in part on points already raised in Anālayo 2010, 2011b and 2013a.

³ Vin II 257,7: *anujānāmi, bhikkhave, bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetun ti*. In *Vinaya* contexts the term *anujānāmi* has a stronger nuance than simply "to allow", standing for a legal prescription or order; cf. Clarke 2014: 126.

⁴ Vin II 271,34: *anujānāmi, bhikkhave, ekato-upasampannāya bhikkhunīsaṅghe* (B^e: *bhikkhunisaṅghe*) *visuddhāya bhikkhusaṅghe upasampadan ti* (S^e: *upasampādetun ti*).

⁵ Vin II 255,19: *dve vassāni chasu dhammesu sikkhitasikkhāya sikkhamānāya ubhato-saṅghe upasampadā pariyesitabbā*.

⁶ Vin II 256,37: *kathāhaṃ, bhante, imāsu sākiyanīsu* (B^e, C^e, and S^e: *sākiyanīsu*) *paṭipajjāmī ti?*

⁷ Vin II 258,17. This passage is addressed to Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, who became a *bhikkhunī* by accepting the *garudhammas*, and implicitly also addressed to her followers, who were ordained by *bhikkhus* only. This would settle a problem raised by Phra Payutto 2013: 58, according to which "in the formal explanation (*vibhaṅga*) of the bhikkhuni training rules laid down by the Buddha there is this definition: The term "bhikkhunī" refers to a woman who has been ordained by both sanghas. This poses a problem in that, if bhikkhunis are ordained without a bhikkhuni sangha present, none of these training rules will formally apply to them or be legally binding." In a modern-day situation of creating a new *bhikkhunī* order through ordination by *bhikkhus* only, the first generation of such *bhikkhunīs* could rely on Cv X.4, just as Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and her followers did.

⁸ Vin II 259,25, Vin II 260,11, and Vin II 260,30. If *bhikkhus* undertake legal actions on behalf of *bhikkhunīs* when a *bhikkhunī* order has gone out of existence and is being revived, then they would incur a *dukkāṭa*, but this would not invalidate the legal act itself.

⁹ Translated in Bodhi 2009: 60 and 62 (= 2010: 137 and 138).

¹⁰ Salgado 2013: 140-142.

¹¹ Mroziak 2014.

¹² Ps IV 94,23, commenting on MN 112.

¹³ MĀ 187 at T I 732b18.

¹⁴ MN 76 at MN I 520,6: *sussutam* (S^c: *susutaṃ*) *pi hoti dussutam pi hoti, tathā pi hoti aññathā pi hoti*. The Sanskrit fragment parallels to this discourse have unfortunately not preserved this particular statement; for a comparative study cf. Anālayo 2011a: 413-416.

¹⁵ MN 95 at MN II 171,1 notes that what has been well transmitted may still be wrong, consequently it does not suffice for one who protects the truth to come to the one-sided conclusion: This is true, everything else wrong, *svānussutaṃ yeva hoti, tañ ca hoti rittaṃ tuccaṃ musā ... saccam anurakkhatā ... purisena nālam ettha ekaṃsena niṭṭhaṃ gantuṃ: idam eva saccam, mogham aññan ti*; on the parallels cf. Anālayo 2011a: 557-566.

¹⁶ Dh-p-a I 115,13 reports that the Buddha established Mahāpajāpati Gotamī in the fruit of stream-entry at the outset of his first visit to Kapilavatthu.

¹⁷ Blackstone 1999: 302f in fact comes to the conclusion that "in defying the Buddha, Mahāpajāpati ... poses a direct challenge to the Buddha's authority".

¹⁸ Vin II 254,4 (Cv X.1).

¹⁹ Mahīśāsaka: T 1421 at T XXII 185b27; Mūlasarvāstivāda: Schmidt 1993: 242,5, T 1451 at T XXIV 350b16, and D 6 *da* 100b2 or Q 1035 *ne* 97b4; Sarvāstivāda: MĀ 116 at T I 605a17; for a translation of these permissions and a more detailed study cf. Anālayo 2011b: 287f.

²⁰ Cf., e.g., Vin I 89,10 (Mv I.67) and the discussion in Perera 1993: 107f.

²¹ Vin II 256,16.

²² Vin I 220,21 (Mv VI.24) reports that the Buddha was followed by a whole group of lay people wishing to make offerings in turn, a group apparently so large that it took a long time before each could get its turn; another such reference can be found in Vin I 238,33 (Mv VI.33).

²³ DN 16 at DN II 123,30 and AN 4.180 at AN II 167,31; cf. also the same principle in relation to rules at Vin I 250,34 (Mv VI.40).

²⁴ DN 30 at DN III 148,18.

²⁵ DN 29 at DN III 125,24.

²⁶ MN 73 at MN I 490,21.

²⁷ DN 16 at DN II 105,8.

²⁸ SN 51.10 at SN V 261,18, AN 8.70 at AN IV 310,32, and Ud 6.1 at Ud 63,32.

²⁹ Vin II 256,9 (Cv X.1); for a more detailed discussion of this prophecy cf. Anālayo 2010: 78-82.

³⁰ AN 4.7 at A II 8,22

³¹ AN 4.211 at AN II 226,1.

³² SN 16.13 at SN II 225,8.

³³ AN 5.201 at AN III 247,20, AN 6.40 at AN III 340,13, and AN 7.56 at AN IV 84,22.

³⁴ The delivery of the *garudhammas* is reported in Vin II 255,9 (Cv X.1).

³⁵ AN 8.29 at AN IV 226,8.