



BAD NUN:

**Thullanandā in Pāli Canonical
and Commentarial Sources**

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THREE INTERPRETIVE MODES

(from Amy Langenberg's lecture of 04/23)

- **reading the texts as literary products of a certain (gendered) worldview**
- **reading the texts as normative statements about ethical ideals**
- **reading the texts as records of custom**

Thullanandā (Pāli) / Sthūlanandā (Sanskrit)

- the most misbehaving nun in the Pāli *Vinaya*
- her misbehavior is responsible for the promulgation of 2 Pārājika rules, 4 Saṅghādisesa rules, 7 Nissaggiya-Pācittiya rules, and 24 Pācittiya rules
- = 12% of all rules incumbent upon nuns
- = 28% of all rules unique to nuns (not shared in common with monks)
- no record of her attaining any level of spiritual progress; in fact, she “fell away from the religious life” (*Samyutta Nikāya*) or she fell down dead and was reborn in hell (*Mahāvastu*)
- thus: a bad nun in terms of both Dharma & Vinaya

But also a nun who excels in Dharma & Vinaya:

- **DHARMA:** “the nun Thullanandā was very learned, she was an experienced preacher, and she was skilled at speaking of Dhamma” (7 rules); thus, “many people attended to the nun Thullanandā” (1 rule); she even preaches to King Pasenadi of Kosala, who is “instructed, roused, excited, and gladdened” and rewards her with expensive gifts (2 rules); in the *MSV*, she is “one who knows the Tripiṭaka.”
- **VINAYA:** She has the seniority & requisite knowledge to act as a preceptor, ordain her own disciples, & settle legal questions within the Saṃgha; she criticizes other nuns for not knowing “what a formal act is, or the defect in a formal act, or the failure of a formal act, or the success of a formal act,” and contrasts this with her own knowledge.
- **REPUTATION:** She has her own pupils & followers, she has no trouble receiving ample alms from householders, and certain lay families are specifically dedicated to her support.

external trappings vs. internal transformation



external trappings vs. internal transformation

- **Mohan Wijayaratna: Bad monks & bad nuns in the Pāli *Vinaya*** “never transgress an established rule, but are crafty enough to commit another fault of the same type, all while respecting the established law.”
- **Gregory Schopen: The “Group of Six” monks, in spite of their obviously bad behavior, are “almost always *technically* correct in their shenanigans.”**

The ability of “bad” monks and nuns like Thullanandā to manipulate their detailed knowledge of monastic discipline in order to engage in unethical behavior—requiring the Buddha to promulgate one new rule after another, pertaining to ever-more-specific situations—seems to be a common theme of *Vinaya* literature. I would suggest that perhaps this was a way for *Vinaya* authors not only to illustrate the cleverness of misbehaving monastics, but also to acknowledge the limitations of their own ethical system—its failure to finally capture, through a maze of specific rules, what it means to lead an ethical life. In this sense, one might argue that “bad” but *Vinaya*-savvy monastics such as Thullanandā serve a dual function: On the one hand, they illustrate individual faults and bad qualities, such as greed; on the other hand, they provide a critical commentary on the limitations of the *Vinaya* project itself—a subtle acknowledgment that no list of rules, no matter how comprehensive, can ever wholly crystallize the ethical life.

Thullanandā preaches the Dhamma without internalizing it, and she masters the Vinaya without sharing its underlying motivation. In her case, mastery of the external trappings of both Dhamma and Vinaya is not undergirded by the genuine internal transformation that Dhamma and Vinaya are meant to achieve. This points to a larger conclusion: In spite of the great benefit provided by the Buddha’s word, neither Dhamma nor Vinaya themselves finally embody the profound internal transformation he calls for. In the end, they are only external trappings. The Buddha provides human beings with precious resources that *can* lead one to the ultimate good—yet there is no guarantee that they will have their desired effect. In this sense, far more than just a “bad” nun, I would suggest that Thullanandā becomes an emblem of the limitations of Buddhism itself.

excelling at the external trappings of motherhood:

“Sthūlanandā put down her begging bowl, tucked up her clothes and took the baby. After rocking him for a little while, she scrubbed him down with soap, rinsed him with lukewarm water, poured medicinal eye drops into his eyes, drew a *bindu* with soft clay, brushed off his hair, spoon-fed him honey and fresh butter, placed him in the crib and put him to sleep. Then she instructed the mother, ‘Do this every day.’ She took her parcel of alms and left.”

(From: Damchö Diana Finnegan, “For the Sake of Women, Too”: Ethics and Gender in the Narratives of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 2009.)

“Is there any craft or art whatsoever about which I have no knowledge?”

Thullanandā's Favoritism and Partiality:

FAVORS: Devadatta and his fellow schismatics; Ānanda; her sister Sundarīnandā; her disciple Caṇḍakālī; the suspended monk Ariṭṭha.

DISFAVORS: the nun Bhaddā Kāpilānī; the monk Mahākassapa

This favoritism/disfavoritism violates the Buddhist emphasis on equanimity, detachment, and impartiality—especially within the context of Buddhist monasticism.

Origin-Story for Saṅghādisesa 4

(Thullanandā's own disciple, the nun Caṇḍakālī, is described as a quarrelsome nun who is constantly causing trouble within the Saṃgha, but whenever the other nuns try to discipline her, Thullanandā finds some way to prevent it. One day, when Thullanandā is away from the nunnery, the other nuns take the opportunity presented by her absence to suspend Caṇḍakālī from the Order. When Thullanandā returns to the nunnery, she wonders why Caṇḍakālī is not standing up to greet her.)

Caṇḍakālī: “It is because I am without a protector.”

Thullanandā: “But why are you without a protector?”

Caṇḍakālī: “These nuns, knowing that I was without a protector, that I was not renowned, and that I had no one to speak up for me, suspended me for not acknowledging an offense.”

(Thullanandā flies into a rage and convenes her own assembly of nuns to restore Caṇḍakālī to full status. The Buddha then promulgates Saṅghādisesa 4, which prohibits such behavior.)

Origin-Story for Pārājika 2

(The nun Sundarīnandā—who is Thullanandā’s own sister—becomes pregnant and leaves the Order to give birth. When the other nuns wonder whether she became pregnant after becoming a nun, Thullanandā tells them that she did.)

Nuns: “But knowing that another nun had become guilty of a Pārājika offense, why didn’t you rebuke her yourself or tell others about it?”

**Thullanandā: “Whatever is a fault for her is also a fault for me;
whatever is infamy for her is also infamy for me;
whatever is disgrace for her is also disgrace for me;
whatever is loss for her is also loss for me.
Why would I tell others about my own fault,
infamy, disgrace, and loss?”**

(The Buddha promulgates Pārājika 2: If a nun knowingly conceals another nun’s Pārājika offense, this concealment itself also constitutes a Pārājika offense.)

The ties of loyalty Thullanandā feels toward specific others such as her sister always outweigh the imperatives posed by monastic regulations intended for the generic “all.” Once again, Thullanandā becomes a highly relatable figure who stakes a claim for the importance of worldly and familial emotions, even as her behavior comes to define a serious monastic offense.

Thullanandā as Proto-Feminist?

In several stories, Thullanandā seems to get into trouble primarily for her insistence on defending the rights of women and refusing to show the proper deference toward powerful men.

(Is this how she became the “bad nun”?)

Origin-Story for Saṅghādisesa 1

A faithful Buddhist layman donates a shed to the Order of Nuns. After he dies, his son—who is not a follower of the Buddha—decides that the shed belongs to him, forcibly repossesses it, and orders the nuns to vacate. Thullanandā immediately objects: “No, Sir, don’t say that; this shed was given to the Order of Nuns by your father.” The dispute is brought before the **(male)** ministers of justice, who seem uninterested in dealing with it: “Ladies, who knows whether or not this shed was given to the Order of Nuns?” Again, Thullanandā objects, reminding the ministers of the legal transfer of the shed: “But didn’t you yourselves see, hear, and arrange witnesses for the gift of the shed?” The ministers of justice, realizing that “the lady has spoken truly,” award the shed to the nuns. The son becomes angry and reviles the nuns, calling them “shaven-headed whores.” Thullanandā reports this abuse to the ministers of justice, which leads to the son being punished. Angered yet further, he then persuades a group of **(male)** non-Buddhist ascetics to verbally harass the nuns; again, Thullanandā turns him in to the ministers of justice, and this time, the son is locked up. **“Men”** become critical of the nuns: “First, the nuns allowed this shed to be stolen away from that son; second, they had him punished; third, they had him locked up. Pretty soon, they will have him killed!” In response to this criticism, the Buddha promulgates Saṅghādisesa 4: “If a nun speaks with envy about a householder, a householder’s son, a slave, a servant, or even a recluse who has gone forth **(all male-gendered nouns)**, this nun has become guilty of an offense.”

Origin-Story for Saṅghādisesa 2

“In Vesāli, a certain Licchavi man had a wife who committed adultery. The man said to his wife: ‘Please stop doing this, or I will harm you.’ But even though he said this, she didn’t take it to heart.” [*The man then goes to a council of (male) Licchavi elders and says:*] “Gentlemen, give me permission over one woman.” [*They ask:*] “Who is she?” [*He says:*] “My wife—she has committed adultery; I will kill her.” [*They reply:*] “Go ahead.”

“Then the wife heard that her husband wished to kill her. Taking her most valuable possessions, she went to Sāvathī, approached the heretics, and asked to be ordained. The heretics did not want to ordain her. She approached the nuns and asked to be ordained. The nuns did not want to ordain her. She approached the nun Thullanandā, showed her the possessions, and asked to be ordained. The nun Thullanandā took her possessions and ordained her.”

[*The husband finds out that his wife has become a nun, goes to the king, and asks to be given power over her, but the king says that once someone has joined the Saṃgha, this is impossible.*] “Then the Licchavi husband became annoyed, irritated, and angry: ‘How can the nuns allow a female thief to be ordained?’” [*This eventually leads the Buddha to promulgate Saṅghādisesa 2:*] “If a nun knowingly ordains a female thief who has been caught and sentenced to death, without getting permission from the king, the Order, a corporation, or a guild... this nun has become guilty of an offense.”

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Footnote to I. B. Horner's translation:

“The Licchavi husband appears to lose sight of his wife's original sin in his effort to recover the property.”

Thullanandā as Proto-Feminist:

—Her favoritism for Ānanda, coupled with her dislike of Mahākassapa.

—Oskar von Hinüber: “Ānanda stands for the pro-*bhikkhunī* faction, and Mahākassapa for his opponents.”

Thullanandā as Proto-Feminist:

aññatarassa kulassa kulūpikā

“one who relies upon a certain family for alms”

But: Sharad Patil argues that *kulūpikā* derives from an older term, *kula-pā*, which refers to “the female head and head priestess of a matrilineal clan.”

Thullanandā as the distant memory of such a woman??

SUMMARY:

- (1) Thullanandā's character is used to illustrate the difference between external trappings and internal motivations/dispositions/transformation, showing that the former do not necessarily lead to or imply the latter.**
- (2) Thullanandā's character is used to give credit to the compelling nature of ordinary, worldly emotions, such as favoritism and partiality, even though they violate the Buddhist values of equanimity, detachment, and impartiality and cause problems within a monastic context.**
- (3) Thullanandā might be seen as a “proto-feminist” who sometimes gets into trouble for stubbornly defending the rights of women and failing to show the proper deference toward powerful men.**
- (4) In all of these ways, she is a far more complicated figure than just the prototypical “bad nun.”**

“reading between the lines”

“reading against the grain”

especially important when reading about women

Thank you for listening! 😊

Questions, comments, insights?