

The Order of Buddhist Nuns and Its Revival: Arguments for and Against

Senarat Wijayasundara

The Buddha gave the world a teaching that will bring happiness to all if chosen to be practised. Those who follow it form the Buddhist society and that society as enunciated by the Buddha consists of the following four components namely 1) Monks 2) Nuns 3) Laymen 4) Laywomen. Out of the two Buddhist traditions into which Buddhist society is divided Mahayana alone has all these four components even to the present day whereas Theravāda has lost the Order of Nuns some time back. This places the female members of the Theravāda Buddhist society at a spiritually disadvantageous position for no fault of their own.

The origin of the Order of Buddhist Nuns is known to all of us.¹ That too, as it is natural in the male dominated world, was won with much difficulty. It was inaugurated, thanks to the intelligent handling of the matter, by Ven. Ananda Thera. Here the position of the Buddha must be understood clearly. Writing a well documented book under the title, *Women Under Primitive Buddhism*, Miss. I. B. Horner has the following (in her own words):

“...I hope to show that he (Buddha) did not, as is usually said of him, grudge women their entry into the Order, but that his compassion for the many folk included, from the beginning, women as well as men and animals. He saw the potentially good, the potentially spiritual in them as clearly as he saw it in men. Hence, were their life spent in the world or in the religious community, he spared himself no trouble to point them the way to happiness, to salvation, a way which they might train themselves to follow by self-mastery”²

After the establishment all went well with it: except for the fact that Ven. Ananda was charged with having prevailed on behalf of Nuns.³ Whatever that may be the *Bhikkhuni* Order seems to have functioned well.

At the third Buddhist Council held in India in the 3rd century B.C., it was decided to dispatch nine missions to different places for the spread of Buddhism.⁴

One mission headed by Ven. Mahinda, son of Emperor Asoka of India, reached Sri Lanka. The tremendous success it achieved was so much that within a few days there was a request from a group of five hundred ladies led by Queen Anulā to make room for them to join the Order. Ven. Mahinda's sister, Ven. Saṅghamittā, was invited to Sri Lanka. Thus both Orders grew in strength and popularity.

But due to the expansionist policy of invaders especially of those who were close to her, Sri Lanka was disturbed greatly.⁵ At the turn of the tenth century Buddhism suffered very much at the hands of those invading non-Buddhist rulers. Thus at the turn of the eleventh century the country was under South Indian rulers. When Sri Lanka gained independence, it was found that Buddhism had suffered. The new King was keen to revive Buddhism which had fallen into a pathetic state. It was brought to his notice that there was no member of the *Bhikkhu-Saṅgha*. So he sought assistance from Burma (Myanmar) to restore the Order of Monks. But there was no mention of reviving the Order of Nuns. If during the said period of political dependency the male members had suffered so much there is hardly anything to be said about the plight of the female members. But there is no record that the king tried to revive it.⁶ Even though the Order of Nuns disappeared the earnestness for the spiritual awakening among Buddhist women did not die down altogether. It had given expression to some rather unusual steps on the part of women in Thailand⁷ and Sri Lanka.⁸

In Thailand there are several groups of women who have come forward to participate in religion more than is allowed for ordinary laywomen. There is a group of Mae-jis. Their status is far from satisfactory. So not being pleased with their condition there has evolved a group known as *sīlācārinīs*. They started in 1957 with the ordination of five women who observe the ten precepts. Their centre is in Bangkok and they have a separate nunnery. They wear brown robes. There is still another group wearing dark brown robes and living under the guidance of a self ordained monk named Ven. Bodhirakṣa who initiated the ordination lineage himself. There is yet another group whose head, Ven. Voramai Kabilsingh, began as a *Mae-ji*. She received her full ordination in Taiwan. Her temple is away from Bangkok. Members of their group wear light yellow robes. This group I think will have the opportunity of catering to the needs of Buddhist women who choose to lead a life of renunciation.

Now let us see what is happening in Sri Lanka. There is no record dealing with the nature of active participation of Buddhist women in religious matters apart from the traditional role after the disappearance of the *Bhikkhuni* order. Their local rulers were fighting hard to maintain the independence of the country. In the latter part of the 19th century, Buddhist resurgence was given an impetus by local leaders like Ven. Anagārika Dharmapāla.

The origin of the *Dasa-Sīla Mātās* is to be traced to the pioneering role played by Ven. Sudhammacārī (1885 - 1937). Her lay name was Miss Catherine de Alwis Gunatilaka. She was born into a Christian family in Bentota. But as time went on she became interested in Buddhism and wished to become a Buddhist nun. However, as there were no nuns in Sri Lanka and no monk would administer the ten precepts to women she had to go to Burma (Myanmar). There she underwent a course of training and was given the ordination by Ven. Dow-Ni-Chari. She got the name Ven. Sudhammacārī at ordination. She returned to Sri Lanka in 1903 and founded the Lady Blake Nunnery at Katukele (Kandy). Many women from various parts of the country came to her to receive the precepts. Thus the present *Dasa-Sīla Mātā* movement was born. It can be said that it commands respect from the lay community. The Buddha *Sāsana* Ministry of the government of Sri Lanka is organizing them and is working on a programme to help them in their education and material needs. It must be said that some members are satisfied with the precepts as they accept the traditional interpretation given to the eight *Garu-Dhamma*. But most of them are hopeful of working towards becoming fully ordained nuns in the near future either within the Theravāda tradition or a non-Theravāda Buddhist tradition. Almost all the heads of *Nikāyas* in Sri Lanka are against such a move and maintain that it cannot be granted within their *Vinaya* tradition and quite unjustifiably are against getting it from other Buddhist traditions whereas they themselves by their own admission are not in a position to confer it. But fortunately some leading educated members of the *Saṅgha* are of the opinion that these women could receive the due ordination from countries like China, Korea, and Taiwan where the lineage is maintained without a break.⁹ A considerable number of laymen and laywomen are also in favour of such a step and in fact support their cause.

The opposition on the part of some Buddhists to the revival of the Order of Buddhist Nuns, seems to run counter to the spirit as well as the aims of Buddhism. Here I wish to draw your attention to two significant statements coming from two authoritative *Suttas* which indicate how important is the presence of the nun in the religion of the Buddha and how much is lost by her absence.

In an important discussion that took place between the Buddha and a sympathetic wanderer (*Paribbājaka*) Vacchagotta by name, claims of Buddhism are specified.¹⁰ Acknowledging that the Buddha has been successful in realizing the claims, Vacchagotta asks the Buddha whether he can assert the success on behalf of his followers. The Buddha answers in the affirmative and says such disciples are many. It is interesting to note that Vacchagotta divides the Buddhist community into six components namely.

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| 1. Monks | 2. Nuns |
| 3. Celibate laymen | 4. Celibate laywomen |
| 5. Ordinary laymen | 6. Ordinary laywomen |

In the discussion it is assumed that all the six components are expected to realize their respective ideals which are claimed according to the status of each one. Numbers 1 and 2 constitute monks and nuns with no distinction whatsoever and are expected to realize the same ideal. This shows that Buddhism is a living religion in the sense that both men and women are treated equally and expected to lay claim to the same ideal. So both these components must exist together.

The other statement is found in the answer reported to have been given by the Buddha to Māra.¹¹ Here Māra comes to the Buddha and reminds him of an announcement made on a previous occasion to the effect that he would not pass away unless the four components of Buddhist society namely 1) Monks 2) Nuns 3) Laymen 4) Laywomen become eligible by cultivating necessary qualities. Here, too, the nun is a component that cannot be left without consideration. Thus these two instances indicate the role played by the nun for exemplification of Buddhist ideals. Thus the discussion shows by its own admission that Theravāda Buddhism has unfortunately become incomplete. It is by the revival of the Order of Nuns it becomes complete and can deliver the goods.

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In such a situation, what could be the position of those women in Theravāda tradition who aspire to join the order to practise Buddhism to realize the ideal? Their counterparts in Mahāyāna tradition will face no obstacles in their way as all the avenues including the presence of the Order of Nuns are open to them.

But Sri Lanka happens to be the only Theravāda country that had the Order of Nuns to begin with but lost it later thereby depriving women in Theravāda countries of the most effective opportunity to realize the ideal. So let us be familiar with the history of the Order of Nuns and learn from the experience of the so-called Mahāyāna countries in order to find a solution to our problems.

Mahāyāna Tradition

Fortunately the situation is entirely different with the Mahāyāna tradition. It was really difficult for the Indian nuns to travel over those distant parts of the world to work for Buddhism especially to establish their order. Thanks to Ven. Pao-chang we have an account of the early beginnings of the Order of Nuns in China.¹²

There are many legends associated with the introduction of Buddhism to China. Generally speaking historians believe that Buddhism reached China around the first century A.C.¹³ But it took some time even for the Order of Monks to appear there. How much more difficult would it have been for the nuns to establish an Order for themselves?

It is quite natural that some Chinese women got interested to become nuns. It appears that there was a good deal of discussion among the Buddhists in China for the establishment of the Order of Nuns. Some maintained that it was not possible without the participation of nuns. Some said Chinese women could get only the initial ordination. Yet others explained that the *Vinaya* rules binding over full ordination could be so interpreted that in spite of the absence of nuns, monks could grant it to women.¹⁴

At last the problem of full ordination was referred to Ven. Guṇavarman of Kashmir

by Ven. Hui Huo who herself was an expert on *Vinaya*.¹⁵ She asked whether it would not be wrong on the part of monks to grant the full ordination to women without nuns. To that also he maintained that no fault could lie with them. Then he went on to explain that monks would be deemed to be at fault only if they had given full ordination without nuns when the latter were available for it. As there were no nuns at the time in the country nothing was wrong.

This was a wise solution within the limits of the *Vinaya*. But Ven. Guṇavarman who was an ardent propagator of Buddhism did not stop at that level. He worked very hard to get down a sufficient numbers of nuns for full ordination. In 429 A.C. some nuns from Sri Lanka arrived in China, but they were not numerically sufficient for a dual ordination as he wished to have.¹⁶ Later another group of nuns headed by Ven. Devasārā reached China in 438 A.C.¹⁷ By that time Ven. Guṇavarman had passed away. Thoughtful as he was, he had left detailed instructions with a Sinhala monk named Ven. Saṅghavarman.¹⁸ The latter had completed all that was necessary for the dual ordination. The two groups of nuns from Sri Lanka got together and conferred full ordination on the applicants. Thus for the first time dual ordination was introduced to China. It is said that more than 300 Chinese nuns received their full ordination from Sinhala *Bhikkhunīs*.¹⁹ But strangely enough no Sri Lanka chronicle mentions this important event. It comes to us only from Chinese sources.

Thus the Order of Nuns got firmly rooted in China and gradually spread through neighbouring countries such as Korea and Taiwan. At a well-attended ceremony held to bid farewell to a group of five Chinese monks who had completed education in Sri Lanka, Ven. Prof. W. Rahula referred to this fact and suggested Sri Lankan *Dasa-Sīla Mātā* could receive their full ordination from one of these countries.²⁰

The two *Suttas* discussed earlier quite clearly show that the disappearance of the component of nuns renders Theravāda tradition defective in its own eyes. Once Dr. Senarat Paranavitana is reported to have said that without the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*, the present day male *Saṅgha* in Sri Lanka cannot be called the *Mahāsaṅgha*. In addition to this aspect the inability to meet the legitimate demand of women to practise Buddhism as equal to men makes Theravāda vulnerable to many a criticism from a number of angles.

Therefore, it is left to Theravāda to stand up to the serious challenge and exploit the new developments taking place as reactions from Buddhist female devotees in Thailand and Sri Lanka mentioned earlier and open their door to nuns. The following are the six possibilities that could be worked out to achieve the aim.

The first three of these were presented by Prof. G. P. M. Malalasekera founder of the W.F.B. when he called upon the restoration of the Order of Buddhist Nuns. His contribution appeared as far back as 1934 in the Ceylon Daily News Vesak Number.²¹

Possibility No. 1

According to the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, the Buddha, lying on his death-bed is said to have told Ven. Ananda that his *Saṅgha*, if it so desires may on his death abolish lesser and minor rules.²² That then is the first possibility - the decision by a representative assembly of the *Saṅgha* to dispense with the traditional ceremonial in the ordination of nuns.²³ Making use of this concession, the *Saṅgha* can take a decision and make the necessary amendments to enroll them to restore the *Bhikkhunī* Order without the participation of nuns.

Possibility No. 2

There is another means which in his opinion may be less objectionable. That is to use an injunction issued by the Buddha which stipulates "I permit you monks, to confer full ordination on nuns."²⁴ There are instances to show that some regulations have been amended, altered or abrogated by the Buddha on various occasions under different conditions. But this injunction has never been changed. Therefore, its validity stands even today. This should be sufficient authority for monks to ordain nuns with their conscience clear that no transgression of rules has been committed. But those who oppose the restoration of the *Bhikkhunī* Order on *Vinaya* grounds seem either to ignore or forget this relevant injunction and the permission available under it.

Possibility No. 3

If the above mentioned two possibilities are not going to be adopted there is another one. This is made in consideration of the special practices followed in Buddhism.

Ven. Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and her companions took the precepts and ordained themselves.

The ordination is not something which someone can give to another. It is something which one undertakes to keep and has to be observed by one personally according to one's motivation. The ordination of Buddhist monks or nuns essentially consists of taking upon themselves voluntarily the observance of certain precepts. It is essentially different from the ordination of priests in other religions where the priests are regarded as intercessors between human beings and some divine power. There is no delegation of authority; no question of acting as representative on earth of some divine ministrant. There can, therefore, be no objection as far as we could judge, to the vows being taken in suitable places. Just as a Buddhist layman undertakes to observe the eight or ten precepts on a *Poya* (religious) day by reciting the precepts at a shrine, women can undertake to observe the precepts for initial or full ordination. This kind of self-ordination is one to which there cannot be any serious objection.²⁵ If any one of these suggestions of Prof. Malalasekera is accepted it would be possible to restore the *Bhikkhunī* Order within the Theravāda tradition. What is required here is to understand the spirit rather than the letter of the *Vinaya* regulations.

Apart from these three possibilities there are three further options available to restore the *Bhikkhunī* Order. These options came to light because of the public discussions that took place on this issue.²⁶

Possibility No. 4

In recent years due to improved relations and contact with China, Korea and Taiwan it became known to us that the *Bhikkhunī* Order that was taken to China by Sinhalese nuns continues in these countries in unbroken pupillary succession.

Therefore, it is possible to re-introduce the *Bhikkhunī* Order to Sri Lanka from one of these countries. Either we have to get down a chapter of *Bhikkhunīs* from one of these countries or else we can send a group of applicants to have them ordained there. The second approach is the better one because if they go there they will get the opportunity to undergo much training.

This step proposed is not one unknown or strange to us. It is just the receiving back of the Order of Nuns that went to China. Like when in the latter part of the 18th century during the period of Kirti Sri Rajasinha a delegation came to Sri Lanka on invitation and re-established the *Bhikkhu Saṅgha* in 1773. Thus began the Siamese Sect.²⁷ Then again two groups of monks went to Amarapura and Rāmañña in Burma and received full ordination there. On their return they founded the Amarapura Sect in 1803²⁸ and the Rāmañña Sect in 1864²⁹ respectively. It is known that Sri Lanka had helped earlier Thailand and Burma to organize Buddhism in those countries. Therefore, there is nothing wrong in seeking foreign assistance to restore the Order of Nuns.

Possibility No. 5

If the Ven. Mahānāyakas of the Theravāda Tradition in Sri Lanka are not prepared to admit the *Bhikkhunī* Order in China or in any other Mahāyāna country as acceptable to them, Sri Lankan Buddhist women would be free to seek ordination in any Buddhist tradition.³⁰ Nuns so ordained should be recognised as *Bhikkhunīs* without any discrimination. Theravāda leaders in Sri Lanka should not be so hasty as to oppose such a move. The option to renounce the worldly life and practise the holy life, as recommended by the Buddha is an inalienable right in South East Asian Women. No one can deny them this right and call oneself a Buddhist. Those who say that there is no room or possibility for women to join the Order (i.e. Theravāda Buddhist Order) should not deny them the right to do so according to some other Buddhist tradition where this is available. To adopt such an adverse stand is both un-Buddhistic and is a violation of a human right. On the other hand Prof. Gunapala Dharmasiri has pointed out that the tradition of ordination is the same for both Mahāyāna and Theravāda and if it is found in one tradition the other can borrow it from where it is preserved.³¹ Ven. Dr. Wellawatte Ananda Thera also held a similar view.³² So the problem of validity does not arise at all in this matter. In the face of these facts it would be seen that the present opposition is not justified. It is not based on reasonable grounds. And I maintain that the problem has not received the impartial attention it deserves.

Possibility No. 6

There is also a sixth alternative available if the previous ones are considered

unsatisfactory. That is to form a Special Body constituting leading members from the International *Saṅgha* Community representing several traditions all over the Buddhist world. Sri Lankan candidates can be given initial and full ordination by this body.

At present there are several organizations. Recently an International Buddhist Organization was formed at the BMICH in Colombo. Therefore, convening an International Body of monks and nuns will not be a difficult task.

If we Buddhists in Sri Lanka act with foresight and dedication we will be able to preserve the services to Buddhism initiated by Ven. Mahinda. It will be a tribute to the memory of his sister Ven. Saṅghamittā who dedicated her life to inaugurate and establish the *Bhikkhuni* Order here.

This is an era according to many people in which those who dedicate their life to spiritual values are rare. The *Dasa-Sīla Mātās* are women who have voluntarily dedicated their lives to tread the path to Nirvāna as nuns. Helping to promote their aspiration and activities will be an encouragement to them. It will be an important step taken to advance the welfare of Buddhism as a whole. Keeping this problem unsolved only helps to continue the frustration and dissatisfaction of Buddhist women

As pointed out by Prof. Jotiya Dhirasekera, Buddhism had contributed much to the emancipation of women.²³ The truth of this important role is impaired and vitiated by the opposition shown by certain Theravāda leaders in Sri Lanka to the revival of the *Bhikkhuni* Order. Some Buddhist leaders get up on platforms and proudly assert that from its inception Buddhism has stood for the liberty of womankind. Their words are rendered an idle boast in the face of the opposition to the revival of the *Bhikkhuni* Order. Therefore, we should no longer delay fulfilling the most socially significant aspiration of our women Buddhist devotees. Taking steps to revive the *Bhikkhuni* Order is a move in the direction of granting women's rights as declared in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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Conference of Buddhist Women held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in October 1993. Note that the references to the Pāli texts quoted here are from the Buddha Jayanti Edition (abbreviated BJE) and not from the PTS editions.)