

Theravāda orthodoxy may not pick on or shoo away a non-Theravāda bhikṣuṇī, but it would certainly cause anyone who advocates the revival of the Theravāda Bhikkhunī Saṅgha to ask,

"Why Pick-shoo-me?"

Aggacitta Bhikkhu gives us an inside view of the orthodox Theravāda mind-set.

Now, please don't get me wrong. I have nothing against women. In fact, many of my staunch supporters are women. Most of the landscaping and housekeeping in the 10-acre compound of Sāsanārakkha Buddhist Sanctuary, where I am staying, is done by voluntary womanpower. Monastics would starve to death if not for the nutritious food prepared and offered mostly by women. It is common knowledge that women usually outnumber men in Dhamma talks. In our Christmas meditation retreat last year, there were 11 female yogis and only 3 male ones. And many meditation teachers can tell you that women yogis make faster progress in their practice compared with men.

Yet, why am I writing this article, as though championing a male chauvinistic cause?

Attempts to revive the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha have, in recent years, received increasing publicity. There is a widespread rumour that the established Bhikkhu Saṅgha "feels threatened" by these attempts and is therefore making questionable objections, which have been commonly portrayed as unfair and chauvinistic. Is there any truth in this allegation?

Within the Bhikkhu Saṅgha, questions have also arisen. Why are these women so keen on reviving the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha? Are they seeking equal status with the Bhikkhu Saṅgha? If the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha can be revived, are they willing to abide by the many rules for bhikkhunīs that, by modern reckoning, would be regarded as discriminative and humiliating?

"To understand is to forgive," says an English adage. If we understand the circumstances why Theravāda orthodoxy objects to any attempts at reviving the extinct Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, perhaps we can forgive its "male chauvinistic attitude"—which may be more apparent than real—and accept the Dhamma-vinaya as it has been handed down to us.

A deeper understanding of some of the bhikkhunī rules may clear certain misconceptions about equality of status built around the notion that "the grass is greener on the other side."

I would therefore like to address these issues from two angles—the stipulations of Theravāda monastic law (all based on the Vinaya Piṭaka) and the acceptability of modern women—and conclude with a brief description of modern female monasticism that Theravāda Orthodoxy should not pick on or shoo away.

Stipulations of Theravāda Monastic Law

Many of us are probably familiar with the story of how Venerable Ānanda persuaded the Blessed One to allow the latter's stepmother, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, to become a bhikkhunī. The Blessed One said that if she agreed to abide by the Eight Grave Conditions (*aṭṭha garudhamma*), which we shall discuss later, then that would be her ordination. She gladly agreed, "like a youth fond of ornaments would delightfully accept a garland of fragrant flowers and place it on her or his head."

As for her followers, the Blessed One initially allowed the Bhikkhu Saṅgha to ordain them. Nevertheless, all bhikkhunīs were still bound by the Eight Grave Conditions. In fact, they had to be reminded of that twice a month, on each *Uposatha* (Observance) Day.

The numbers of bhikkhunīs grew substantially and, eventually, circumstances required the ordination procedure to include intimate screening of the candidate, e.g. asking questions such as: "Are you always wearing a menstrual pad? Are you always oozing? Do you have an extraordinarily long clitoris? Your two organs are not joined, are they?" In the light of such an embarrassing situation, the Blessed One subsequently laid down the rule that women must undergo two ordinations: first by the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, which conducts the screening, and then by the Bhikkhu Saṅgha, which ratifies the ordination.

To qualify for bhikkhunī ordination, a candidate must satisfy many requirements, including the following:

- A non-virgin must be at least 12 years old
- A virgin must be at least 20 years old
- She must have successfully completed 2 years' probation as a *sikkhamānā* (trainee).

A *sikkhamānā* is actually a *sāmaṇerī* who has obtained formal consent from the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha to observe the first six of the ten precepts impeccably for a period of two years. This means that if she breaks any of the six after having formally obtained her probation from the Saṅgha, she must renew her precepts and start afresh from that point of time.

If she can keep the six precepts intact for two continuous years, then she is qualified to request the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha to give her a formal consent of "emergence from probation". So a candidate for bhikkhunī ordination must obtain formal consent from the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha on two occasions: before starting the two-year probation and after its successful completion.

The Pāli scriptural tradition also states that only a bhikkhu can give *sāmaṇera* ordination to a male and only a bhikkhunī can give *sāmaṇerī* ordination to a female.

Considering the above stipulations of Theravāda monastic law and regulation, how can a female be ordained a *sāmaṇerī*, not to mention a bhikkhunī, now that the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha has long been extinct?

But the Bhikṣuṇī Saṃghas of non-Theravāda schools are still existing, aren't they? Can't they help to revive the Theravāda Bhikkhunī Saṅgha by participating in the ordination procedures?

Orthodox Theravāda monasticism is perhaps the most conservative form of Buddhism existing today. Its conservatism is probably due to its extensive literature on monastic law and regulations, giving intricate details of methodology and practice.

To answer the above questions regarding the assistance of other Bhikṣuṇī Saṃghas, we need to first understand that according to the Vinaya Piṭaka, all *saṅghakammās* (formal acts of the Saṅgha) must be executed in Pāli, the language in which Theravāda scriptures are preserved. The wording and pronunciation of the legal text recited in a *saṅghakamma*, as well as the procedure of executing it, are primary factors that will determine the validity of the act.

In addition to the stipulations mentioned above, the validity of a bhikkhunī ordination, like any other *saṅghakamma*, rests ultimately upon the fulfilment of the following baseline conditions:

- The *sīmā* (a specially demarcated area) within which the *saṅghakamma* was performed must be a legally valid one, i.e. the *sīmā* must have been properly demarcated according to Theravāda monastic law and regulations
- The bhikkhunīs / bhikkhus participating in the *saṅghakamma* must have been properly ordained according to Theravāda monastic law and regulations
- The bona fide Theravāda bhikkhunīs / bhikkhus must fulfil the quorum for the *saṅghakamma*.

Non-Theravāda monastics do not use Pāli in their *saṅghakarmās*, which include the making of a *sīmā* and ordination. Nor are their procedures always similar to those of Theravādins. As they are not ordained according to the stipulations of orthodox Theravāda monastic law and regulations, one should be able to understand why they cannot participate in any *saṅghakamma*, let alone help to revive the extinct Bhikkhunī Saṅgha. No wonder Theravāda Orthodoxy would pick on and shoo away anyone who advocates the revival of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha.

All is not lost, however. There is still hope. If there were at least five bona fide Theravāda bhikkhus who underwent spontaneous sex change and decided to continue living the holy life in their new gender, they could be the seeds of a legitimate Bhikkhunī Saṅgha revival. For the Pāli scriptures explicitly state that in the case of a spontaneous sex change, the validity of the monastic's original ordination remains intact.

So, if at least one of them had twelve or more *vassas* ("rains" or years of standing reckoned according to the annual rainy season retreat) and were qualified to be a *pavattinī* (preceptor), the remaining four could perform the relevant *saṅghakamma* authorising her to

give bhikkhunī ordination to an eligible candidate. (See also section below for more information on rules about ordination.)

Let us say that such a kammic fluke that could precipitate a legitimate revival of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha has come to pass. Then, “pick-shoo-me” nuns who claimed to be bhikkhunīs could get into real trouble. They might not be accepted as eligible candidates for ordination because they could be regarded as *theyyasaṃvāsakās*.

A theyyasaṃvāsaka (thief of communion) is someone who has not been properly ordained according to Theravāda monastic law, but who lays claim to be a bhikkhu or bhikkhunī—by counting his or her vassas, and accepting respect and Saṅgha property that has been distributed according to seniority.

In the Vinaya Piṭaka, it is explicitly stated that such a “thief of communion” is not allowed to take part in any saṅghakamma, and that he/she can never be given higher ordination as a bhikkhu or bhikkhunī. If he/she was mistakenly ordained, he/she must be defrocked as soon as he/she was discovered.

Acceptability of Modern Women

But perhaps a more important issue in such an eventuality would be the acceptability of modern women contemplating bhikkhunīhood: would they be able to accept all the rules and regulations for bhikkhunīs laid down in the Pāli scriptures with the same humility as that of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī?

For a start, how would the Eight Grave Conditions that Gotamī agreed to (“like a youth fond of ornaments would delightfully accept a garland of fragrant flowers and place it on her or his head”) appear to them? In essence, these require all bhikkhunīs to impeccably honour, respect and abide by the following conditions for life:

1. A bhikkhunī with even 100 vassas (years of seniority) must respect, in every way, a bhikkhu ordained but that day.
2. A bhikkhunī must not spend the vassa (rainy season retreat) in a locality where there is no bhikkhu.
3. Every half-month a bhikkhunī must ask the Bhikkhu Saṅgha the Uposatha Day and [permission for] coming for exhortation [where she will be reminded of the Eight Grave Conditions].
4. After the vassa, a bhikkhunī must invite both Saṅghas [Bhikkhu and Bhikkhunī] for criticism on her conduct in respect of what was seen, heard or suspected.¹

¹ A bhikkhu is also required to do this, but he needs to invite the Bhikkhu Saṅgha only.

5. A bhikkhunī who has committed a grave offence must undergo penance (*mānatta*) for half a month under both Saṅghas.²
6. A sikkhamānā who has successfully completed her two-year probation should seek bhikkhunī ordination from both Saṅghas.
7. A bhikkhu must not be scolded or reviled in any way by a bhikkhunī.
8. Bhikkhunīs cannot admonish bhikkhus, but bhikkhus can admonish bhikkhunīs.

There are also many other rules in the Bhikkhunī *Pātimokkha* (Code of Fundamental Rules) that modern women would find rather restrictive. For example, a bhikkhunī commits a grave offence if she does any of the following alone, i.e. without the company of another bhikkhunī:

- travels to another village [town, city, etc.]
- crosses a river [water body, e.g. stream, lake, sea, etc.]
- passes the night
- separates from her bhikkhunī companion/s while travelling through an uninhabited area.

It is also an offence for a bhikkhunī to stand or converse privately and alone with a man whether in an enclosed space, in the open or by the roadside. She must ask permission before sitting in front of a bhikkhu and if she wants to ask any him questions on the Dhamma-vinaya. She is not even allowed to cry because of a quarrel or to personally hand food to a layperson.

If she attempts to give bhikkhunī ordination to a female illegally by disregarding any of the ordination stipulations mentioned in earlier paragraphs above, she commits an offence for each transgression. This includes giving ordination when she does not have a seniority of at least twelve vassas and authorisation from the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha to ordain. Moreover, even if she possessed these qualities, she would still be guilty of offences if she ordained annually or ordained more than one bhikkhunī per year.

When these rules are compared to those for bhikkhus, one can see, from the modern perspective, that bhikkhunīs were certainly not equal to bhikkhus in terms of privileges or status. Yet women at that time flocked to join the Saṅgha to such an extent that our Blessed One had to limit their admission as stated in the above paragraph. One can imagine how underprivileged women were in ancient societies.

It is unlikely that modern women, who enjoy so much more privileges and are seeking equal status with men, can acquiesce to such discriminative and humiliating conditions and rules.

² A bhikkhu must serve a six-day penance under the Bhikkhu Saṅgha only.

Legitimate Hopes for a Lofty Aim

In contrast to the above mentioned restrictions, a modern Theravāda nun (called *theelashin*, *sīlavatī*, or more recently *sikkhāvātī*, in Myanmar; *dasaseelamaataa* in Sri Lanka; *mae chi* in Thailand) has only eight or ten precepts³ to observe. Everything else is optional, except that she is generally expected to be shaven-headed and to wear some sort of uniform—robes over blouse and sarong: orange and pink in Myanmar, saffron in Sri Lanka, white in Thailand.

The nuns in Amaravati Monastery, UK, although they are linked to the Thai tradition, are dressed in maroon-coloured robes. Since their inception in 1984, they have gradually developed a new training code drawn from both the Bhikkhu and Bhikkhunī Vinayas. This has resulted in what they have called the *Sīladharā Vinaya training*—a body of some 120 rules and monastic observances based on the ten precepts. The selected training rules would not, I presume, include those that are regarded by modern western women to be discriminative and humiliating.

Such modernised forms of female monasticism within Theravāda Buddhism, as long as they do not lay claim to be revivals of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, should not expect to receive any legitimate objections from Theravāda Orthodoxy. No *Sīladharā* (precept holder) nun shall be warranted to ask, “Why pick-shoo-me?” On the contrary, all Theravādins should be supportive of these noble attempts to create conditions more conducive for growth in the Dhamma-vinaya within the context of a monastic lifestyle.

Modern women of today who are desirous of renunciation may find this more acceptable than the second-class status of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha enshrined in the Pāli scriptures.

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³ Some strict nunneries in Thailand expect mae chees to also follow over 200 rules of etiquette.