

Higher Ordination of *Bhikkhunīs*: Some Reflections on the Current Debate

D.K.M. Kaushalya Karunasagara¹

Abstract

In Asian culture, almost all social institutions including religious institutions are male dominated. In religious contexts usually the decision-making power is wielded by male participants and sometimes decisions which concern women are also taken by them. In the Sri Lankan context, the existence of the Bhikkhunī order is not accepted by the Bhikkhu order authorities and not recognized by the Sri Lankan government based on the decision of Bhikkhu community by emphasizing that religious authority is more valued than the constitution of the country. Bhikkhunī's 'Right to Franchise' is denied as their identity is not approved by the government and they are recognized only as a Dasasil Māta. This controversy extends by developing different interpretations to Buddhist Vinaya rules enacted by the Buddha regarding Bhikkhunis. The aim of this paper is to appraise the Vinaya rules related to Bhikkhunīs in order to evaluate the validity of the rationality held by the Bhikkhu authority regarding their rejection of reviving the Bhikkhunī order in Sri Lanka. A descriptive content and historical analysis of the information from both primary and secondary sources reveals that the controversy around Bhikkhunī's rights to franchise and continued denunciation of the Bhikkhunī order has been a result of Vinaya rules being interpreted wrongly. Therefore, the paper concludes that the matter of accepting a revival of the Bhikkhunī order should be solved as soon as possible by the most venerable Mahā Sangha of all three nikāyas coming to a fair decision.

Keywords: *Bhikkhunī Order, Bhikku Order, Right to Franchise, Vinayapitaka, Ordination, Four-fold Order,*

Introduction

Since the establishment of the *Bhikkhunī* order in early India, *Bhikkhunīs* had to face many difficulties internally as well as externally to survive. But the Buddha always attempted to provide maximum protection to them by enacting Vinaya rules and facilitating required advices from the *Bhikkhu*

¹ Lecturer, Sri Lanka International Buddhist Academy (SIBA), Kandy, Sri Lanka

Sangha who were well-versed in the Dhamma (doctrine) as well as the Vinaya (discipline). Hence, four-fold assemblies (*Bhikkhu*, *Bhikkhunī*, *Upāsaka* and *Upāsikā*) of the Buddhist tradition flourished in India during the time of the Buddha as well as after his passing away, because of the immense amount of sacrifices done by these four-fold assemblies for the wellbeing of Buddhist dispensation.

Influenced by the Emperor Asoka of India, Sri Lankans were gifted Buddhism with the arrival of the Arahant Mahinda during the time of King Devanampiyatissa. Sri Lankans embraced the new doctrine under the patronage of the king and within a short period of time Buddhism flourished throughout the country. Queen Anula developed her faith for the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha and requested ordination from Arahant Mahinda thero through king Devanampiyatissa. This request was accepted and *Bhikkhunī* Sangamittā and her order arrived in Sri Lanka with the branch from the Bodhi tree to be planted in Sri Lanka. These two incidents are celebrated even today by Sri Lankans during the Poya day of December (*Uduvap*). However, Queen Anula became the first Sri Lankan *Bhikkhunī* and the *Bhikkhunī* order continued through the ordination of a number of Sri Lankan women. But during the early 11th century, the *Bhikkhunī* order of Sri Lanka disappeared due to foreign invasions and the Theravada *Bhikkhunī* order was not found elsewhere in the world too.

The disappearance of the *Bhikkhunī* order has been a major reason for the setbacks in the revival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, a fact that the authority of the *Bhikkhu* order in Sri Lanka clearly denied. This was only acknowledged by the newly ordained *Bhikkhunīs* who tried their best to get the approval from the authority of the *Bhikkhu* order. Even today this matter continues due to developing controversies about Buddhist Vinaya rules enacted by the Buddha and questioned by the lay community.

In this context, the existence of the *Bhikkhunī* order is not accepted by the *Bhikkhu* order authorities and not recognized by the Sri Lankan government based on the decision of *Bhikkhu* community. They emphasize that the religious authority is more valued than the constitution of the country so that *Bhikkhunī*'s 'Right to Franchise' has continued to be denied. In a sense, this is mainly because of the fact that *Bhikkhunīs* identity is not approved by the government and they are recognized only as *Dasasil Māta*. This controversy extends by developing different interpretations to Buddhist Vinaya rules enacted by the Buddha regarding *Bhikkhunīs*. The aim of this paper is to examine this controversy by appraising the Vinaya rules related to *Bhikkhunī*

order and assess the validity of the rationality held by the *Bhikkhu* authority regarding their rejection of reviving the *Bhikkhunī* order in Sri Lanka.

A descriptive content and historical analysis of the information from both primary and secondary sources was adopted in this study within qualitative research framework. The *Vinayapitaka* is referred as the primary source while references were made the *Suttantapitaka* and some of the commentaries including the records on analytical observations to it, which was considered as secondary sources. The assumption is that there should be a possibility included in the *Vinayapitaka* of reviving *Bhikkhunī* order in Sri Lanka and it may not only assure the fundamental rights of *Bhikkhunīs* as citizens of Sri Lanka, but also will guarantee the wellbeing of the four-fold order of the Buddha *Sāsana*.

***Bhikkhunī* Order and Rights to Franchise**

The current Sri Lankan constitution (1978) has safeguarded the sovereignty of people under chapter 1(3) as follows:

In the Republic of Sri Lanka sovereignty is in the people and is inalienable. Sovereignty includes the powers of government, fundamental rights and the franchise.²

This is common to all Sri Lankans regardless of race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion or place of birth.³ But in the current context, the *Bhikkhunīs* of Sri Lanka have been identified as one of the most vulnerable groups which does not have the Right to Franchise. Their identity is not recognized by the government and they do not have a recognized identity card issued by the government for a *Bhikkhunī* because the authorities of the *Sangha* community do not accept their existence under the Buddhist dispensation and the government also does not have a sufficient action plan to solve this issue as it is an internal matter of the Buddhist community. However, this violates the following articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which was ratified by Sri Lankan government in 1955.

Article 08

Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.⁴

² Lanka, 2015

³ Ibid.

⁴ UN, 2018

Article 21

1. Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
3. The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.⁵

At the same time, when a citizen of Sri Lanka is not granted permission to vote, his/her right to be an elector granted in the chapter 14 (88) of the constitution is violated even though he/she is not disqualified as provided in the regulations under the chapter (89).⁶ The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka has sent an open letter to the Commissioner General of the Elections Commission prior to the presidential election of 2019 suggesting to issue at least a temporary identity card in order for the *Bhikkhunīs* to be recognized electors. This suggestion was accepted and *Bhikkhunīs* were granted permission to vote with a temporary identity card as an elector but its validity was cancelled soon after their voting process was completed. Hence it can be identified as a temporary plaster for a gangrened wound.

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi has identified this issue as per his publication *The Revival of Bhikkhunī Ordination in the Theravada Tradition* (2009), where he pointed out the importance of reviving the *Bhikkhunī* order for the wellbeing of the Buddhist dispensation. He elaborates the provisions where it indicates the possibility of doing so. But his discussion has been continued only under a doctrinal point of view as per his objective but not in human rights perspective.

In his book, *The Legality of Bhikkhunī Ordination* (2013), Ven. Bhikkhu Analayo presents his views of *Bhikkhunīs* by agreeing with Bhikkhu Bodhi. He discusses the legal background of Bodhgayā ordination completed in 1998 in order to revive the *Bhikkhunī* sāsa and is deeply concerned with the Theravada legal principles. Concluding his discussion, he claims that the

⁵ UN, 2018

⁶ GOS, 2015

combination of higher ordinations adopted for the 1998 Bodhgayā procedure is legally correct.⁷

The book *Bhikkhunī Ordination: From Ancient India to Contemporary Sri Lanka* (2018) of Bhikkhu Analayo includes a discussion on the *Bhikkhunī* order since its establishment in India to the present time. He points out that when there is a validated methodology to establish the *Bhikkhunī* order without the presence of *Bhikkhunīs* as approved by the Buddha, it gives a negative impression of the Buddha's decision making process when contemporary monks refuse to agree with it.

BBC (2019) has reported the Sri Lankan *Sangha* authority's rejection of accepting the *Bhikkhunī* ordination as *inter alia* of patriarchal social stratification and institutional and legal impediment of Sri Lanka. Further they elaborate that giving a temporary identity card is not a solution to a question which should be answered with the direct involvement of the religious, legal and institutional sectors.

Sakeena Razick included *Bhikkhunīs* as a community who cannot vote for presidential elections in 2019 as per her article *Disenfranchised: Those Who Can't Vote This Election* (2019). She commented that this greatly marginalises this community, who are unable to, complete their education due to not being able to produce relevant identification at examination centres, obtain a passport, or even participate in the political process by voting.⁸ But Sri Lankan *Bhikkhunīs* were enabled to vote at the presidential elections of 2019 as they were provided a temporary identity card valid only for the duration of the election.

The authorities of the *Sangha* community defend their refusal to revive the *Bhikkhunī* order in Sri Lanka, which disappeared during the 11th century, by pointing out that there is no provision in the *Vinayapitaka* for doing so. In addition, they emphasize that the revival of the *Bhikkhunī* order is an act which goes against the *Vinaya* rules enacted by the Buddha. Hence the main objective of this research is to appraise the *Vinaya* rules related to the *Bhikkhunīs* and to evaluate the validity of the manifesto held by the *Sangha* authority regarding their refusal of reviving the *Bhikkhunī* order in Sri Lanka. In addition, by succeeding the aforementioned objectives, the main research question will be answered as to which factors influence and restrict the Sri Lankan *Bhikkhunīs*' right to franchise.

⁷ Analayo, 2013, p. 28

⁸ Razick, 2019

Ordination Process of *Bhikkhunīs*

Being a member of the Buddhist monastic organization is not a must and has no effect on attaining the highest spiritual attainment; *Nibbāna*, but it facilitates attaining the goal with fewer obstacles unlike in the case of a layman. *Bhikkhūs* and *Bhikkhunīs* are members of the monastic order while the *Upāsaka* and *Upāsikā* are considered along with *Bhikkhūs* and *Bhikkhunīs* as the four-fold order of the Buddhist dispensation. Since this discussion is mainly based on the *Bhikkhunī* order, their monastic ordination should be given priority in continuing the discussion further.

The ordination process of the *Bhikkhunīs* have three main stages including going forth (*Pabbajjā*), training (*Sikkhāmāna*) and full ordination (*Upasampadā*). But according to Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, Theravadin Vinaya experts have positions hurdles at all three stages.⁹ Therefore, having a sound knowledge of the origin and development of the *Bhikkhunī* order is beneficial in sorting out the obstacles which prevent its revival as prompted out by conservative Vinaya legalists.

The *Bhikkhunīkandhaka* of the *Cūlavaggapāli* and the *Gothamisutta*¹⁰ of the *Attakavagga* in the *Anguttaranikāya* provide detailed accounts of *Bhikkhunī* ordination. It has been stated that once when the Buddha was in residence in the Nigrodarama of Kapilavatthu, Queen Mahāpajāpati Gotamī; the foster mother of prince Siddhartha appeared in front of the Buddha and requested to be ordained under him:

Lord, it was well that women should obtain the going forth from home into homelessness in this *dhamma* and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder.^{11 12}

However, her request was denied by the Buddha three times and finally her wish was granted with the support of Ven. Ananda who had requested ordination for Queen Mahāpajāpati Gotamī by emphasizing women's potential to reach the '*Satara Adhigama*' (four levels of awakening) and Queen Mahāpajāpati Gotamī's life time dedication towards prince Siddhartha by becoming a mother to him; during the lay life of the Buddha. Approval for female ordination was granted if only Queen Mahāpajāpati

⁹ Bodhi, 2009, p. 5

¹⁰ A. IV: 274

¹¹ Horner, 2001 (Trans.)

¹² "sādhu, bhante, labheyya mātuḡāmo tathāgatappavedite dhammavinaye agārasmā anagāriyam pabbajja'nti." Cv. 2:252

Gotamī accepted the eight principles (*Atthagarudhamma*) proposed by the Buddha as follow:

1. “A nun who has been ordained (even) for a century must greet respectfully, rise up from her seat, salute with joined palms, do proper homage to a monk ordained but that day. And this rule is to be honoured, respected, revered, venerated, never to be transgressed during her life.
2. “A nun must not spend the rains in a residence where there is no monk. This rule too is to be honoured ... during her life.
3. “Every half month a nun should desire two things from the Order of monks: the asking (as to the date) of the Observance day, and the coming for the exhortation. This rule too is to be honoured ... during her life.
4. “After the rains a nun must ‘invite’ before both Orders in respect of three matters: what was seen, what was heard, what was suspected. This rule too is to be honoured ... during her life.
5. “A nun, offending against an important rule, must undergo *mānatta* (discipline) for half a month before both Orders. This rule too must be honoured ... during her life.
6. “When, as a probationer, she has trained in the six rules for two years, she should seek ordination from both Orders. This rule too is to be honoured ... during her life.
7. “A monk must not be abused or reviled in any way by a nun. This rule too is to be honoured ... during her life.
8. “From today admonition of monks by nuns is forbidden, admonition of nuns by monks is not forbidden. This rule too is to be honoured, respected, revered, venerated, never to be transgressed during her life.¹³

These eight principles were accepted by Queen Mahāpajāpati Gotamī and she was ordained as the first *Bhikkhunī* of the Buddhist dispensation. At the same time, the *Cūlavaggapāli* reports that the Buddha’s prediction of the

¹³ Horner, 2001 (Trans.) Cv. 2:255

decline of the Buddhist dispensation by claiming that the life span of the order would be reduced from a thousand to five hundred years.

When considering the eight principles proposed by the Buddha to Queen Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, the fourth, fifth and sixth principles cannot be fulfilled without the participation of the members of both the *Bhikkhu* and *Bhikkhunī* order. On this point, *Bhikkhunī* Mahāpajāpati Gotamī was the only available *Bhikkhunī* and other Sākyan women's ordination could not be completed as the quorum of *Bhikkhunīs* was not completed parallel with the quorum of *Bhikkhus*. Hence, she had to ask for a solution from the Buddha for the ordination of Sākyan women due to the unavailability of the required number of *Bhikkhunīs* for the ordination as proposed in *Atthagarudhamma*. Remarkably, the Buddha gave permission to the *Bhikkhus* to ordain *Bhikkhunīs* without the participation of *Bhikkhunīs* and it came to be known as single ordination. I.B. Horner has translated the Pali quotation of the *Cūlavaggapāli* which mentions it as follows:

“I allow monks, nuns to be ordained by monks.”¹⁴

It should be noted that this single ordination process was held as there was not a possibility of completing the ordination process with the presence of both *Bhikkhu* and *Bhikkhunīs* where *Bhikkhunī* ordination was not properly established as an institution. Additionally, the Buddha gave advice to monks which deemed that if a female candidate was willing to be ordained but lived in a faraway place from where monks resided during the rainy season, the monk was to visit her and complete the *quorum* of *Bhikkhus* to complete her ordination.¹⁵

The *Cūlavaggapāli* further elaborates that newly ordained *Bhikkhunīs* had a doubt about *Bhikkhunī* Mahāpajāpati Gotamī's ordination as she was not ordained by the *Bhikkhus* as they were. This was brought to the Buddha and the answer was given as,

“At the time, Ānanda, when the eight important rules were accepted by the Gotami, Pajāpatī the Great, that was her ordination.”¹⁶

¹⁴ “*anujānāmi, bhikkhave, bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetu'nti.*” Cv. 2:256

¹⁵ Vin. I:137

¹⁶ “*Yadaggena, ānanda, mahāpajāpatiyā gotamiyā attha garudhammā patiggahitā, tadeva sāupasampannā'ti.*” Cv. 2:256

The *Bhikkhunī* order developed thus and a number of female candidates entered the Buddhist dispensation as *Bhikkhunīs* by accepting the eight principles and were ordained under dual ordination; with the participation of both *Bhikkhus* and *Bhikkhunīs* under two steps. First step was that candidates were questioned for stumbling blocks (*Antarāikadhamma*) and secondly, they were ordained if there wasn't any question during the first step. Earlier, the first step was fulfilled by the *Bhikkhu* order, but embarrassment faced by female candidates during the questing process led the Buddha to allow the *Bhikkhunī* order to complete the first step without the participation of *Bhikkhus*. Therefore, the second step of dual ordination was completed only if the *Bhikkhunī*'s consent was given to proceed further.

In addition, there was an incident which occurred when Addakāsi; once a prostitute wished to be ordained by the Buddha. When thugs of her area heard of her journey to be ordained, they waited on the road expecting her arrival. This was heard by Addakāsi and she sent a messenger to the Buddha explaining her wish for receiving ordination and the barrier she had because of the thugs waiting in the road attempting to waylay her. Her request was accepted and he authorized to give her ordination through messenger¹⁷ and after that, he authorized that the messenger of ordination should only be a well experienced *Bhikkhunī*. With this approach, eight ordination processes can be identified according to the inclusions of the *Vinayapitaka* as;

01. *Ehi Bhikkhu Upasampadā*
02. *Saranāgamana Upasampadā*
03. *Ovāda Patigghahana Upasampadā*
04. *Panha Vyākaraṇa Upasampadā*
05. *Garudhamma Patigghahana Upasampadā*
06. *Dūtena Upasampadā*
07. *Atthavācika Upasampadā*
08. *Ñatti Catutthakamma Upasampadā*

Disappearance of *Bhikkhunī* Order in Sri Lanka

The *Bhikkhunī* order disappeared entirely in Sri Lanka during the early 11th century. Later in 1996, there was an attempt in India where a selected Dasasil Mātās were ordained under dual ordination by Chinese *Bhikkhunīs* who followed the *Dharmaguptika Vinaya* but earlier received ordination from Sri Lankan *Bhikkhunīs* before the *Bhikkhunī* order vanished. Secondly, they were again ordained by Theravada *Bhikkhus* by completing the

¹⁷ "I allow you, monks, to ordain even through a messenger." Horner, 2001(Trans.): 383

ordination process according to the Vinaya. Unfortunately, Sri Lankan *Sangha* authorities did not accept this ordination process claiming that this was against Theravada ordination where Chinese *Bhikkhunīs* were from a different community which is not accepted according to the Vinaya rule in the *Mahāvaggapāli* as;

A legal act to be performed by a chapter of four that were to be performed as a legal act with one from a different community as forth is not a legal act and should not be performed.¹⁸

Even if the aforementioned ordination process completed by Chinese *Bhikkhunīs* cannot be accepted, single ordination has been done by Theravada *Bhikkhus* did not violate any Vinaya rule enacted by the Buddha because he clearly claimed that *Bhikkhus* are given authority to ordain *Bhikkhunīs* and that particular provision was not abolished by the Buddha after he enacted rules for dual ordination. So, if anyone claims that single ordination was automatically abolished after enacting Vinaya rules for dual ordination, then dual ordination should also be abolished with the enactment of ‘ordination by messenger’ which was enacted later after the authorization of dual ordination. Therefore, that argument is not valid to reject single ordination. If it is, then all previously enacted Vinaya rules should be automatically abolished with the enactment of new *Vinaya* rules. Therefore, single ordination can still be accepted in Sri Lanka where the Theravada *Bhikkhu* order is flourishing.

To explore this question further, single ordination can be adopted where there is no *Bhikkhunī* order established, dual ordination can be adopted where both *Bhikkhu* and *Bhikkhunī* orders are established, and ordination by messenger can be adopted where the security of the candidate is in a danger. Hence in the current context where dual ordination cannot be completed with the absence of *Bhikkhunīs*, single ordination can be successfully completed to revive the Theravada *Bhikkhunī* order in Sri Lanka. Then what is the question authorities of *Bhikkhu* order still have which does not allow them to accept *Bhikkhunī* ordination when there isn’t any obstacle to do so according to the Vinaya rules? Is it because of patriarchal perspectives they hold or simply misuse of authority when they have to take decisions?

¹⁸ “*catuvaggakaranam kammam nānāsamvāsakacatuttho kammam kareyya, akammam na ca karanīyam*” Mv. I: 319

If authorities of the *Bhikkhu* order still follow Ven. Mahinda's answer given to king Devanampiyatissa which deemed that he cannot ordain women as he is a *Bhikkhu*¹⁹, when he request to ordain queen Anula, it is completely irrelevant to the current context /situation. When Ven. Mahinda was requested to ordain females of Sri Lanka, there was a *Bhikkhunī* order in India. So, when the *Bhikkhunī* order was being established, dual ordination could be completed as there wasn't any requirement for performing single ordinations. It appears that even today authorities of the *Sangha* community might still follow Ven. Mahinda's words which cannot apply to a society in which both *Bhikkhus* and *Bhikkhunīs* exist. However, this matter does not have any limitation from the *Vinaya* rules and what is required is the careful attention of relevant authorities looking forward to a positive solution.

Conclusion

When someone claims that the *Bhikkhunī* order of Sri Lanka cannot be revived because of not having any provision in the *Vinayapitaka* to do so, and at the same time, states that the particular person questions the Buddha's capability of seeing the future and his legislative ability by showing a gap (which does not really exist) that became an obstacle after around 2500 years later, it becomes a matter which raises certain concerns. This is a serious matter where Buddhism is interpreted wrongly where there is no any gap in both the *Dhamma* and the *Vinaya* to be criticized or pointed out by anyone. Therefore, the matter of accepting a revival of the *Bhikkhunī* order should be solved as soon as possible by the most venerable *Mahā Sangha* of all three *nikāyas* coming to a fair decision.

If this matter of the ordination of *Bhikkhunīs* is to be solved and their revival is accepted, all other matters which are anticipated will be easily solved and they will also be able to cherish their rights as citizens of Sri Lanka. Finally, Sri Lanka will be recognized as a *Theravada* Buddhist country which propagates the spirit of the Buddhist doctrine by allowing continuation of the four-fold disciples of the Buddhist order peacefully protecting the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* for the wellbeing of the Buddhist dispensation.

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¹⁹ “*bhave cittam virājeti, pabbājehi Anūlakam. akappiyā mahārāja itthipabbajjā bhikkhuno*” “It is not permitted to Bhikkhus, o great king, to confer the *Pabbajjā* ordination on women (Oldenberg, 2000)

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