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Key facts;

* Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī raised Siddhartha (as his step mother) after the early death of his mother Queen Mahāmāyā
* As the wife of King Suddhodana she gave birth to his half-brother Nanda (she and Queen Mahamaya were married to King Suddhodana at the same time)
* the Bhikkhuni Sangha was established after she became the first woman to be permitted ordination as a bhikkhuni (nun).

The ordination of woman was hugely significant at the time as women in Hindu and Indian culture were often considered to have gained bad karma in their previous lives and therefore had the less than auspicious reincarnation as a woman rather than a man.

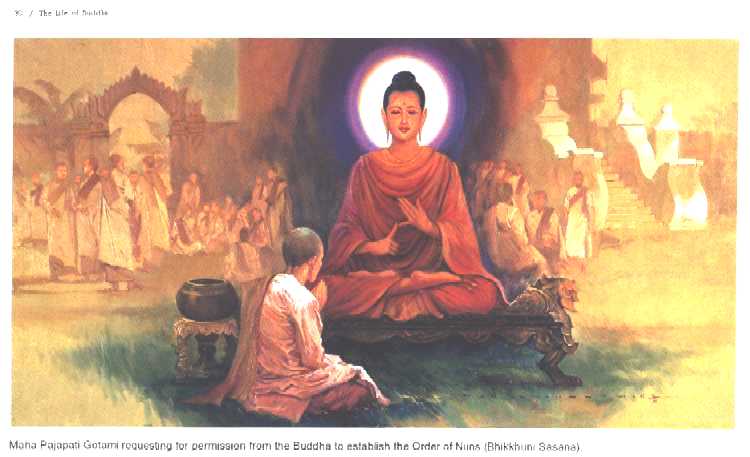
**A Level Buddhism – The Role of Women**

How the Bhikkhuni sangha came about.

When King Suddhodana, the Buddha’s father, passed away, his stepmother, Mahapajapati, together with five hundred royal women, went to the Buddha to request permission to join the sangha. The Buddha responded, “Do not ask so.” She repeated the request again three times, and each time the Buddha simply said, “Do not ask so.” Nobody knew what he was thinking, and it is not clear why he refused.

However, that the Buddha hesitated to accept her into the sangha has been interpreted by some to mean that the Buddha did not want women to join the order. Therefore, some people think that it was no problem when the bhikkhuni order died out in India approximately one thousand years later.

The Buddha left Kapilavatthu and went to Vesali, which was many days’ journey on foot. By that time, Mahapajapati had shaved her head and put on robes. Together with five hundred royal women who had done the same, she walked to Vesali, thus demonstrating women’s determination to be ordained and follow the Buddha. Once there, she sat by the entrance to the vihara, weeping, her feet swollen and bleeding from the journey. Ananda, the Buddha’s cousin and attendant saw the women, spoke with them and learned of their problem. He approached the Buddha on their behalf saying, “Mahapajapati, is here, waiting for you to give her permission to join the order.” Again, the Buddha said, “Do not ask so.” Ananda tried another tact, “After all, she was the one who fed you with her milk.” The Buddha still refused. Then Ananda asked, “Are you not giving permission because women do not have the same spiritual potential as men to become enlightened?” The Buddha said, “No, Ananda, women are equal to men in their potential to achieve enlightenment.” This statement opened a new horizon in the world of religion in general at that time. Previously, no founder of any religion had proclaimed men and women to have equal potential for enlightenment.

Then, the Buddha said he would give women permission to join the order if Mahapajapati would accept the ***eight gurudhamma***—eight important rules—as the nuns’ garland to decorate themselves. Mahapajapati did.

(1) A nun who has been ordained even for a hundred years must greet respectfully, rise up

from her seat, salute with joined palms, do proper homage to a monk ordained but that

day. Buddha later altered this rule, a bhikkhuni does not have to bow to every monk,

only to a monk who is worthy of respect.

(2) A nun must not spend the rains in a residence where there are no monks.

(3) Every half month a nun should desire two things from the Order of Monks: the asking

as to the date of uposatha day, and the coming for the exhortation.

(4) After the rains (3 months rainy season retreat) a nun must 'invite' (pavarana) before

both orders in respect of three matters, namely what was seen, what was heard, what

was suspected. A revised version allows bhikkhunis to perform pavarana by themselves.

(5) A bhikkhuni who has broken any of the vows of respect must undergo penance for half

a month under both Sanghas.

(6) When, as a probationer, she has trained in the six rules for two

years, she should seek higher ordination from both orders.

(7) A monk must not be abused or reviled in any way by a nun.

(8) From today, admonition of monks by nuns is forbidden.

Equality?

The first of these eight rules is very annoying to many Western Buddhist scholars; it says that a nun ordained even a hundred years must bow to a monk ordained but one day. By Western standards, it seems as if nuns are being suppressed, but there is another way to look at this. The Vinaya recounts the story of six monks who lifted up their robes to show their thighs to the nuns. When the Buddha learned about this, he made an exception to that rule and told the nuns not to pay respect to these monks. A nun, then, does not have to bow to every monk, but only to a monk who is worthy of respect. Each gurudhamma needs to be understood properly, as the Buddha made exceptions after the general rule was established.

The sixth gurudhamma mentions sikkhamanas, probationary nuns. It says that after a probationary nun has trained with a bhikkhuni for two years, that bhikkhuni preceptor has the responsibility to fully ordain her. However, when the Buddha ordained Mahapajapati, there were no probationary nuns, Buddha ordained her directly as a bhikkhuni. This is one of the textual errors in the gurudhammas: the Buddha supposedly created one rule that requires probationer training which did not exist in the Buddha's time. So how might this be explained? One suggestion is that the gurudhamma arose much later on, and were shifted to the forefront by the monks who were the historical recorders. These eight important rules very clearly put nuns in a position subordinate to monks, so would have been to the monks’ advantage for the recorders to attribute them to the Buddha.

Why was Buddha reluctant to ordain women?

The Buddha may have hesitated to accept women into the order for several reasons. One might have been his compassion for the nuns, especially his stepmother, for the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis received their food by collecting alms in the villages. Sometimes receiving very little, a handful of rice, a piece of bread, or some vegetables. Imagine the elderly queen Mahapajapati and five hundred royal women going out begging. It would have been almost impossible because they had led such comfortable lives in the palace. Maybe out of compassion the Buddha did not want these women to face such hardship.

At that time there were no monasteries. Monastics lived a very difficult lifestyle, dwelling under trees and in caves. Who would give this group of wandering women dwelling places? Who would teach the nuns? They could be ordained, shave their heads, and put on robes, but if they did not receive an education and training, they would be just like any ascetic in India at that time. No plan for educating them existed yet. Later, it was established that a few bhikkhu sangha could teach the nuns.

Furthermore, the Buddha had already received criticism from lay people that he was destroying the family unit. To accept five hundred women into the order implied that he was going to destroy five hundred families because women were the heart of the family. However, later the Buddha learned that the husbands of these women had already joined the order. So by ordaining the women, he would not break up those families. The Buddha must have thought through all these issues, and upon realizing that the problems could be overcome, he accepted the nuns into the order.

It is also possible that he had never thought about women joining the order prior to Mahapajapati’s request because in ancient India, women never left household life. In fact, it was unthinkable for women to be on their own at that time. Even nowadays in India, women seldom leave the family. But since the Buddha knew that enlightenment was a possibility for all human beings, he opened the door for women to be ordained. This was a revolutionary step given the social climate at the time.

Thus the bhikkhuni sangha was formed about seven or eight years after the bhikkhu sangha. This could be argued as one of the reasons the Buddha made the bhikkhuni sangha subordinate to the bhikkhu sangha. They are subordinate in the sense of being younger sisters and elder brothers, not in the sense of being masters and slaves.

It was recorded that just after admitting women into the sangha, the Buddha said, “Because I have accepted women into the order, Buddhadhamma will only last five hundred years.” This statement could be a reflection of the mentality of the monks who first recorded the Vinaya in written form in Sri Lanka 400-450 years after the Buddha’s parinibbana. These monks apparently did not agree that women should join the order. Some Western scholars think that this statement was later attributed to the Buddha but was not really his. As we see, over twenty-five hundred years have gone by, and not only is Buddhism still prospering in Asia but it is also spreading to the West. The prophecy saying that the Buddhadhamma would last only five hundred years because women joined the sangha is therefore invalid.

Things to do – the basics;

1. Who was Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī? Give three responses.
2. What was Buddha’s response when Mahapajapati asked permission to join the monastic sangha? Include a quotation in your answer.
3. What did Mahapajapati do to try to persuade Buddha to change his mind? Did this work?
4. How did Ananda persuade Buddha to change his mind? Include a quotation in your answer.
5. What, is it said that Buddha told the women they would have to do to join the monastic sangha?
6. Note down the eight gurudhamma.

Things to do – In more depth;

1. Why was Buddha’s comment, ‘…women are equal to men in their potential to achieve enlightenment’, significant and surprising at the time?
2. Explain some reasons why it could be said, that Buddhism does not treat women equally to men. Give some arguments to suggest this may not be the case. Make sure you refer to quotations and the eight gurudhammas.

Things to do – Evaluate;

‘Buddha did not want women to be members of a monastic sangha’. Assess this claim.

In your answer you could refer to the following;

* Equality in enlightenment
* Questionable aspects of the
* eight gurudhammas
* Compassion for Mahapajapati
* Family traditions already changing?
* 500 years?
* Bhikkuni sangha subordinate or just ‘younger’ than bhikkhu sangha?
* Questionable attitude of some Bhikkhus.
* Buddha’s initial refusals
* Examples of the eight

gurudhammas

* Lifestyle of Mahapajapati
* Family traditions
* 500 years of the Buddhadhamma
* Appearance of subordination of Bhukkhunis



Research;

The International Congress on Buddhist Women’s role in the Sangha. Make notes on some of the main issues discussed and comments made (including quotations).

Also find out what the Dalai Lama has said about women in Buddhism, particularly the Bhikkhuni (Bhiksuni) sangha.

**Interview with the Dalai Lama about the**

**Full Ordination of Women**

**Buddhismus aktuell | Michaela Doepke**

**Question:** Most Buddhists in the modern world don’t understand why there is no equality between nuns and monks in the Tibetan tradition. What could we do to promote the development of gender equality in Tibetan Buddhism?

**Answer:** Actually Tibetan Buddhism is the pure tradition of Nālandā Buddhism, there is no doubt about that,¹ and Buddha himself did not discriminate between male and female. The highest level of ordination for a man is that of a bhikṣu. Similarly, the highest level of ordination for a woman is that of a bhikṣuṇī. Basically they have the same rights. Especially in Tantrayāna, the female is more important. To criticize a woman is a transgression of a Vajrayāna vow, but in the Vajrayāna there is no vow saying women are not allowed to criticize men. So we men have to complain (laughs).

The problem concerning the highest ordination of the Buddhist nun, the bhikṣuṇī, is that there are different Vinaya traditions. In Thailand, Burma [and other South Asian and Southeast Asian countries], they follow the Theravāda Vinaya. The Tibetan monastic system follows the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya. There are four major traditions in the Vinaya tradition. In the Chinese Canon there are some more traditions.² Śantarakṣita introduced the monastic system into Tibet in the 8th century. I think he himself belonged to the Mūlasarvāstivādins. Then Atiśa Dipaṃkara came to Tibet in the 11th century. Some Tibetans asked him to give the bhikṣu ordination, but some of his senior students like Dromtönpa asked him “please do not give the Vinaya vow” because Atiśa Dipaṃkara’s tradition was not Mūlasarvāstivāda.³ They thought it would be better to have just one Vinaya tradition because there are slight differences between them. For example, in the Theravāda tradition, the Theravāda Prātimokṣa,⁴ the number of precepts of a fully ordained monk is 227. According to the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition, in our Prātimokṣa, there are 253. So there are some differences. According to our tradition, the ordination of a bhikṣuṇī must be carried out by a bhikṣuṇī preceptor, and since a Mūlasarvāstivāda bhikṣuṇī preceptor is not available, according to our tradition the bestowal of ordination stopped. This is the problem. During the last thirty years we examined whether there are some exceptions to this. Some scholars say an exception is possible but the majority still says “no”. I have no power according to Vinaya (laughing). According to Vinaya, the final decision must be made by a saṅgha—a group of monks—not by a single monk. I think here we have to “complain” a little bit to the Buddha himself. While he was alive, he was the final authority; it was in his own hands. When he passed away, he didn’t give final authority to a single person, but to a group of monks. That is the problem now.

As far as study is concerned, there is not such kind of restriction or problem. Around forty years ago I introduced serious studies such as those done by the monks in the big monasteries in a nunnery in Dharamsala. Many of these senior nuns have reached an excellent level of education through learning and debate. People should be aware of this. Otherwise some feminists from the West could accuse me by saying, “The Dalai Lama is the authority but he doesn’t help the nuns.”

**Question:** Do you think the next Dalai Lama should be a woman?

**Answer:** Twenty or thirty years ago, a journalist from a French women’s magazine asked me this question for the first time. Can the Dalai Lama’s incarnation be female in the future? I say, yes, because firstly, there are already high female reincarnations among Tibetan lamas. For example Samding Dorje Phagmo is an incarnation tradition which has existed, I think for seven or eight hundred years.⁵ That reincarnation lineage is almost as old as that of the Karmapa,⁶ I think it must have begun around the time of Lama Tsongkhapa.⁷ In our time there are high female lamas as well. Yes, we accept female gurus, female teachers. The purpose of a reincarnation lineage is to serve people through the Dharma, and if the circumstances are such that a female form is more useful, then why not? I mentioned that to the French journalist. I also said half-jokingly that if the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation is female, she must be very attractive. The reason is so that she will have more influence on others. If she is an ugly female, she won’t be very effective, will she? What do you think? (laughs). Good! Thank you very much!

**Notes**

¹ Nālandā was the biggest Buddhist University in India. It was founded in the 5th century. Tibetans challenge the expression “Tibetan Buddhism”, which doesn’t exist in the Tibetan language. They understand their Buddhism as the continuity of Indian Buddhism, especially that of the Nālandā tradition.

² Vinayas were translated into Chinese: Sarvāstivāda, Mūlasarvāstivāda, Dharmaguptaka, Mahīśāsaka and Mahāsāṅghika. However, since the early eighth century only the Dharmaguptaka tradition has been practiced in China.

³ He was Mahāsāṅghika.

⁴ The Bhikṣu and Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣas list the bhikṣu and bhikṣuṇī precepts and are recited twice a month.

⁵ Samding Dorje Phagmo founded one of the few female Tulku lineages. In the early 15th century the princess Chökye Drönme was considered an emanation of the meditation deity Dorje Phagmo. She became a nun. For details see: Hildegard Diemberger, When a Woman Becomes a Religious Dynasty: The Samding Dorje Phagmo of Tibet. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

⁶ In 1288 the great yogi Orgyen Rinchen Pal recognized his master Karma Pakshi (1204-1283) in a child. This child, the third Karmapa Rangjung Dorje (1284-1339), was the first official tulku in Tibetan history.

⁷ 1357-1419.

# Women in the sangha

The First International Congress on Buddhist Women’s Role in the Sangha

by [**Venerable Thubten Chodron**](http://thubtenchodron.org/biography/) on Jul 30, 2007 in [**Congress of Women’s Role in the Sangha**](https://thubtenchodron.org/monasticism/07-buddhist-nuns/04-bhikshuni-ordination/03-congress/)

[The First International Congress on Buddhist Women’s Role in the Sangha](http://www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org/) in Hamburg, Germany, July 18–20, 2007, was a great success. Organized under the auspices of the University of Hamburg and the Foundation for Buddhist Studies, it gathered together monastics from Tibet, Taiwan, Korea, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Thailand, and several Western countries, as well as academic scholars researching bhikshuni ordination and other topics concerning Buddhist nuns.

* [**A**](http://thubtenchodron.org/2007/07/ordination-lineage-bhikkunis/)[A](http://thubtenchodron.org/2007/07/ordination-lineage-bhikkunis/" \o "Reset font size)**[A](http://thubtenchodron.org/2007/07/ordination-lineage-bhikkunis/" \o "Increase font size)**

With 65 speakers and nearly 400 participants from 19 countries, the conference consisted of two days of presentations followed by one day with talks by the first female Bishop of Hamburg and His Holiness the Dalai Lama in the morning and a panel discussion on bhikshuni ordination with His Holiness and other monastics in the afternoon. [Bhikshuni Jampa Tsedroen](http://www.jampatsedroen.de/) and Dr. Thea Mohr were the principal organizers, and they did a great job drawing together this international group.

The array of accomplished Buddhist nuns who attended the conference was inspiring. Abbesses of large Korean and Taiwanese monasteries spoke of the well-organized Vinaya training programs, Dharma studies, and meditation practices for the nuns at their temples. Monks from the Sri Lankan and Thai Theravadin traditions spoke in support of the introduction of full ordination for women (bhikshuni) in their tradition, and the Sri Lankan monks and nuns described how this was accomplished in recent years in accord with the Vinaya (monastic code of conduct). These monks, as well as those from the Chinese and Vietnamese Mahayana, and a Tibetan geshe endorsed and encouraged the introduction of full ordination for women in the Tibetan tradition. Western and Asian scholars told of their research in this area, the Tibetan nuns voiced their preferences, and many lively discussions evolved.



His Holiness’ interest in and support of bhikshuni ordination and the geshema degree is unequivocal.

While some people hoped that His Holiness would announce the reinstatement of full ordination for women in the Tibetan tradition, this was not possible. His Holiness has repeatedly said that this is not a decision that he can make alone. The Buddha established the sangha as a community and all major decisions must be made by community consensus. His Holiness said, “If Buddha were here today, I’m sure he would give permission for bhikshuni ordination. But Buddha is not here, and I cannot act as Buddha.”

Still, His Holiness’ interest in and support of bhikshuni ordination and the geshema degree is unequivocal. He stressed the necessity of having the bhikshuni sangha so that Tibet can be considered a Central Land, which is defined by the existence of the four-fold Buddhist community: male and female fully ordained monastics and male and female lay followers. “I wish more of an effort had been made to introduce the bhikshuni vow when Buddhism was first brought to Tibet centuries ago,” he said.

Many members of the Tibetan bhikshu sangha are very conservative. Since there has never been a bhikshuni sangha in Tibet, they don’t understand why there is the need or interest to have one now. In addition, they want to see the ordination done in accord with the details of the Vinaya. Thus His Holiness encouraged the Tibetan sangha to do more research and have more discussion amongst themselves regarding bhikshuni ordination. Currently, there are two proposals for how it could be accomplished.

1. The first is by ordination by the Tibetan bhikshu (monk) sangha alone.
2. The other is ordination by a dual sangha of Tibetan bhikshus from the Mulasarvastivadin Vinaya tradition (followed in Tibet) and bhikshunis from the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya tradition (followed in China, Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam).

There are advantages and disadvantages to each method. The Tibetan nuns present at the conference preferred ordination by the Tibetan monks alone, saying that they felt most comfortable being able to take the ordination in Tibetan language, from their own monks in the Tibetan community, in the Mulasarvastivadin Vinaya followed by the Tibetans. Geshe Rinchen Ngodrup, from Seraje Monastery, described a way for this to happen according to the Mulasarvastivadin Vinaya. Other people think dual ordination by both the bhikshu and bhikshuni sanghas is more appropriate. Most everyone would be satisfied with whichever way the Tibetan bhikshu sangha thinks is appropriate.

Very few monks in the Tibetan community are familiar with Geshe Rinchen Ngodrup’s and others’ research, so more education and discussion need to occur. His Holiness recommended that another conference occur in India, with many Tibetan geshes, abbots, and rinpoches present. He appreciated the attendance of the sangha from other Buddhist traditions and would like them to attend the future conference as well. His Holiness feels so strongly about having bhikshuni ordination in Tibetan Buddhism that he said he would cover the costs of this conference, which is planned for the winter of next year.

His Holiness also encouraged the bhikshunis who practice in the Tibetan tradition and ordained in the Dharmaguptaka tradition to perform the three principal monastic rites together—the bimonthly confession and restoration of vows (*posadha, sojong*), the rains retreat (*varshaka, yarne*), and the rains retreat’s concluding ceremony (*pravarana, gaye*). He welcomed them to translate these rites into Tibetan and to conduct them in Dharamsala.

I’d like to share a personal reflection. One day during His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s teachings on Aryadeva’s Four Hundred Stanzas that followed the conference, a sramanerika (novice nun) offered lunch to some of the Western bhikshunis. I found myself sitting at a table with a group of extraordinary women such as Bhikshunis Tenzin Palmo, Lekshe Tsomo, Jampa Tsedroen, Jotika, Khenmo Drolma, and Tenzin Kacho. Ven. Tenzin Palmo has been ordained for 43 years, two others for thirty years, and the rest over twenty years. Each one was learned, good-hearted, and actively involved in benefiting others by establishing monasteries, teaching the Dharma, running Dharma centers, and so on. This is indicative of how much the Buddhadharma in general and the Tibetan community in specific would benefit if Tibetan nuns were able to become bhikshunis and geshemas. At the conclusion of our lunch, we rejoiced in each other’s good works and pledged to pray for the success of each other’s projects and practices. I left feeling grateful and inspired by the joyous effort and abilities of these remarkable nuns and hopeful for the future of nuns and monks working together to spread the Buddha’s teachings for the benefit of all.

## The relationship between the bhikkhu and the bhikkhuni sangha

As we would expect, the monks treated the nuns in the same way that men in general treated women in Indian society at that time. When women joined the order, the monks expected them to clean the monastery and to wash their dishes, robes, and rugs. Lay people noticed this and reported it to the Buddha, saying that these women wanted to be ordained so that they could study and practice the teachings, but now they had little time for these. In response, the Buddha established rules for monks regarding how to treat nuns. For example, he established precepts forbidding monks to ask bhikkhunis to wash their robes, sitting cloths, and so on.

The Buddha also protected nuns from being taken advantage of by lax monks. One 120-year-old bhikkhuni went on almsround each morning, walking the long distance from the monastery to the village. She received food and took it back to the monastery in her almsbowl. At the entrance to the monastery waited a young monk, who was too lazy to walk into the village for alms. Noticing that his bowl was empty, she offered her food to him. It was enough for only one person, so she then had nothing to eat for the rest of the day.

The next day, he waited for her again, and again she offered him her food. On the third day, after having not eaten for three days, she went to the village to collect alms. A carriage owned by a wealthy supporter of Buddhism passed very near to her, and as she stepped out of its way, she fainted and fell to the ground. The rich man stopped to help her and discovered that she fainted because she had not eaten for three days. He reported the situation to the Buddha and protested that a nun had been treated that way by a monk. The Buddha thereby established the precept prohibiting monks from taking food from bhikkhunis. Of course, understanding the spirit of each precept is important; this one does not mean that nuns having plenty of food should not share it with monks.

Nuns at the time of the Buddha had equal rights and an equal share in everything. In one case, eight robes were offered to both sanghas at a place where there was only one nun and four monks. The Buddha divided the robes in half, giving four to the nun and four to the monks, because the robes were for both sanghas and had to be divided equally however many were in each group. Because the nuns tended to receive fewer invitations to lay people’s homes, the Buddha had all offerings brought to the monastery and equally divided between the two sanghas. He protected the nuns and was fair to both parties.

## The first council and the bhikkhuni patimokkha

Ananda, the Buddha’s attendant, played a very important role in relation to the nuns. He was well liked by the nuns and visited many nunneries in order to teach them. Because he heard almost all of the Buddha’s teachings and had a phenomenal memory, he was a key person at the First Council when the teachings were recited and collected.

That some monks had not been happy that the Buddha allowed women to join the order had never been expressed while the Buddha was alive. It first came out at the First Council, which five hundred male arhats attended about three months after the Buddha’s *parinibbana*, his passing away. Before the actual recitation of the Buddha’s teachings, they told Ananda he had made eight mistakes and forced him to confess to these. One was that he had introduced women into the sangha. Ananda responded that he did not see that as a mistake, nor did he violate a precept in doing so. However, in order to avoid causing schism in the sangha so soon after the Buddha’s *parinibbana*, he said that if the monks wanted him to confess, he would do so.

I have doubts that only men—five hundred male arhats—were at this council. On *uposatha* days every new and full moon, the bhikkhunis would recite their Patimokkha *Sutta* apart from the monks. I believe that technically, it could not be possible for the monks to recite the Patimokkha Sutta of the nuns, and so bhikkhunis must have been present at the First Council. The recorders, who were all monks, may not have thought it important to mention their presence. Some monks have been kind enough to speak about this point: recently, a Sri Lankan monk told me that he too did not think that only men attended the First Council.

## The bhikkhuni order in India and its spread to other countries

Both the bhikkhu and bhikkhuni sanghas existed until the eleventh century A.D. when the Muslims attacked India and wiped out the Buddhist monasteries. In 248 B.C.E., about three hundred years after the passing away of the Buddha, King Asoka the Great came to the throne. A great supporter of Buddhism, he sent Buddhist missionaries in nine different directions. His own son, Mahinda Thera, traveled to Sri Lanka to teach the Dhamma and establish the bhikkhu sangha. Princess Anula, the sister-in-law of King Devanampiyatissa of Sri Lanka, converted to Buddhism when he did. After listening to the teachings of Mahinda Thera, she became a stream-enterer and asked him if she could join the sangha. Mahinda Thera told her that dual ordination by both the bhikkhu and the bhikkhuni orders was necessary to become a bhikkhuni. At least five bhikkhunis must be present to form a sangha, and the preceptor must have at least twelve years standing as a bhikkhuni in order to give the precepts. He suggested that she ask King Devanampiyatissa to send a messenger to India to request King Asoka to send his daughter, Sanghamitta Theri, and some other bhikkhunis to give the ordination. Sanghamitta Theri, a princess, had given up royal luxury to practice the Dhamma. Well versed in the Vinaya, she also taught the Dhamma. Thus, upon request from the king of Sri Lanka, King Asoka sent Sanghamitta Theri and other bhikkhunis to establish the nuns’ order in Sri Lanka. With her, King Asoka also sent a branch of the bodhi tree from Bodhgaya. She and the other Indian bhikkhunis, together with the bhikkhu sangha, ordained Princess Anula and other Sri Lankan women, thus establishing the bhikkhuni sangha in Sri Lanka, the first one outside India.

Hundreds of women wanted to receive ordination when Sanghamitta Theri arrived, and King Devanampiyatissa set about building nunneries for them. The bhikkhuni sangha prospered there along side the bhikkhu sangha, until both the orders were wiped out when the Chola King from Southern India attacked Sri Lanka in 1017 A.D. The next Buddhist king who came to the throne searched the entire island and found only one male novice left. To revive the sangha in Sri Lanka, he sent envoys to Burma and Thailand to request the kings there to send monastics to give ordination in Sri Lanka. However, since Thailand never had the bhikkhuni order, no bhikkhunis could be sent, and the Sri Lankan king was able to revive only the bhikkhu sangha.

## The chinese nuns

From the second century A.D., Chinese men were ordained as monks. In the early fourth century, one Chinese woman, Ching-chien, was very enthusiastic to become a bhikkhuni. Although she received sramanerika ordination from a monk, she did not receive bhikkhuni ordination, because the Chinese monks said that dual ordination was necessary. Later, a foreign monk, T’an-mo-chieh, said that insisting women receive dual ordination was not practical in a land where no bhikkhunis were present. He and a bhikkhu sangha ordained Ching-chien, whereupon she became the first bhikkhuni in China.

Later the Chinese people invited bhikkhunis from Sri Lanka to come to China. Some came, though not enough to give the bhikkhuni ordination. These nuns remained in China to study the Chinese language, while the ship owner returned to Sri Lanka to invite enough bhikkhunis to come to China to give the ordination. The following year, the ship brought many bhikkhunis from Sri Lanka, including one named Tessara. Together with the Sri Lankan bhikkhunis who had arrived earlier, they gave ordination to more than three hundred Chinese women at Southern Grove Monastery. The Indian monk Sanghavarman and the bhikkhu sangha also gave the ordination, making this the first dual ordination of bhikkhunis in China.

According to the Theravada Vinaya found in Southeast Asia—and this is different from the Dharmagupta Vinaya found in China—a bhikkhuni preceptor can give ordination to only one nun every alternate year. Nowadays some people question the validity of the Chinese ordination because many nuns are ordained together. However, when we study the spirit of the precept, it is evident why initially the number of disciples each bhikkhuni preceptor ordained was limited. First, for safety reasons, the nuns could not live in the forest, but had to stay in dwellings, and there weren’t enough of these. Secondly, the number of Indian women ordaining was so great that the bhikkhuni sangha did not have enough teachers to train them. One way of limiting the population of nuns was to limit the number of women each preceptor could ordain. In China, the situation was different, and it was practical to ordain many bhikkhunis at once.

Earlier this century, many huge monasteries existed in Mainland China. Before the communist takeover, the monks thought they were strong and would be able to survive. However, when the nuns heard that China might be taken over by the communists, they started to migrate to Taiwan. They brought their resources along with them, began to build nunneries, and became well settled in Taiwan. When the communists took over the mainland, the monks realized that they could not survive under the communist rule, so they fled to Taiwan in a hurry and arrived with almost nothing. The nuns’ sangha gave them considerable help as they became reestablished. The monks remember their kindness, and thus the nuns in Taiwan are well respected by both the monks and the lay Buddhists. The nuns far outnumber the monks, are well educated, and have strong communities with their own abbesses.

Taiwan is a stronghold for bhikkhuni ordination; the nuns there are progressing very well. Venerable Master Wu Yin is noted for the high level of secular and religious education of her nuns. Bhikkhuni Cheng Yen received the Magsaysay Award for starting a hospital for poor people and a medical school. Her charitable organization is so popular in Taiwan that one has to be on a list to do volunteer work there! Another nun, Venerable Hiu Wan literally bought a mountain and built a college for engineering. Slowly she is introducing Buddhist studies in that college. During my visits to Taiwan, I have been very impressed with the nuns, and think that countries that are currently without the bhikkhuni lineage could bring it from Taiwan. However, due to some problems in the past, a few bhikkhunis in Korea and Taiwan are not very willing to train foreigners as nuns. They say that the Western nuns were too individualistic, making training difficult. It is hard for Chinese and Korean nuns to understand the Western mentality, so steps need to be taken to bridge the gap.

## The bhikkhuni ordination

After the Buddha’s passing, several Vinaya schools arose. Considering that the Patimokkha Sutta in each school was passed down orally for many centuries and that the schools developed in very disparate geographic areas, they are remarkably similar. Naturally, minor differences occur in the number of precepts and in their interpretation. The Chinese follow Dharmagupta Vinaya, which is a sub-branch of Theravada, the tradition followed in Thailand, Sri Lanka, and other Southeast Asian countries. The Tibetans follow Mulasarvastivada.

I am not sure which of these Vinaya lineages the Sri Lankan bhikkhunis brought to China. More research needs to be done to establish this important point. Nowadays there is much discussion about women from countries such as Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Tibet receiving the bhikkhuni ordination from the Chinese community and bringing it back to their own countries, where the lineage of bhikkhuni ordination does not exist at present. However, in general the monks in Sri Lanka and Thailand do not accept the bhikkhuni ordination of the Chinese tradition because it is considered to be from a different Vinaya lineage than theirs. I do not see this as important because all the traditions follow the same general body of Vinaya.

The Buddha said that for Buddhism to flourish in a country, the four groups of Buddhists are needed: bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, laymen, and laywomen. Thus it would be advantageous to bring the bhikkhuni sangha to Buddhist countries where it is not currently present. I think two types of people talk about the possibility of bhikkhuni ordination: the ones who say “no” to it cite a quote from a text and say, “You see, the Buddha never wanted women to join the order.” Those who say “yes” to it cite a quote from the same text and say, “You see, it is possible, if you understand the spirit of the precepts.” However, indications of change are slowly beginning to appear. For example, in 1998 some prominent Theravada monks participated in a bhikkhuni ordination given by a Chinese master in Bodhgaya, India. Twenty Sri Lankan nuns took the ordination at this time.

Nuns have committed their lives to the Dhamma, and they must not be shy to show others what a positive influence they can have on society. The Buddha’s last words were, “Be beneficial to yourself; be beneficial to others.” To win the support of society, the bhikkhuni sangha can show that through their Dhamma practice, they benefit themselves by becoming peaceful and happy. They can show that they benefit others by helping them to become peaceful as well. If the nuns come forward and show their capabilities, society will support them. Only then will the conservative monks understand that it is worthwhile for women to join the order. They will see that nuns can help solve many problems and serve others in ways that men cannot do.

## Approaching the Vinaya

Initially, only a small number of monks and nuns existed, and since most of them were enlightened, there was no need for a system of precepts. Later, the sangha grew much larger and its members came from more diverse backgrounds. The sangha needed a common set of guidelines for behavior, and thus the Vinaya came into existence. Theravada texts mention ten reasons why the sangha should follow the Vinaya. I have grouped these ten into three major purposes of the Vinaya:

1. To uplift one’s own body, speech, and mind. The Vinaya helps each person who joins the sangha to channel his or her physical, verbal, and mental actions in a virtuous direction.
2. To support harmony in the sangha. The sangha consists of people of different castes, social classes, genders, racial and ethnic backgrounds, habits, and values. Without following the Vinaya, such a diverse group could not be harmonious.
3. To confirm the belief of those people who are already Buddhists and to gladden the hearts of those who have not yet become Buddhist. The way an ordained person walks, eats, and speaks influences how people view the Dhamma and the sangha. It helps the general population when they see kind, polite, non-aggressive people. It enhances the faith of Buddhists and helps those who are not yet on the path to come to the path.

Reflecting on these three purposes, we see that the Vinaya is not meant to benefit solely the individual monastic but also the community. For example, if the bhikkhunis follow the Vinaya properly, it will make waves. It will influence the countries that do not have ordained nuns, and the nuns will in turn be appreciated and respected by the larger population.

The Buddha was not a legalist. Each precept was established in response to a specific event. When monastic made a mistake or acted in a way that the lay people found bothersome, it was brought to the Buddha’s attention, and he established a precept to guide future disciples in similar situations. In this way, the list of precepts was developed gradually.

Even the Buddha’s action was the cause of at least one rule. When the Buddha ordained his son, Rahula, as a novice, the Buddha’s father complained. His father was sad because his only son, the Buddha, had become a monk, and now his only grandson, Rahula, was leaving the family life. His father asked the Buddha in the future to ordain young children only with the consent of their parents or guardians, and the Buddha set up a precept in this regard.

It is helpful to divide the material found in the Buddhist teachings into two parts: the teachings dealing with worldly life and those concerning the development of the mind and mental faculties. The latter teachings pertain to everyone. For example, enlightenment is a quality of the mind. It is not related to one’s gender, race, and so forth.

On the other hand, the teachings concerning worldly life deal with society and the world, and therefore sometimes speak of the behavior of men and women differently. These teachings can be subdivided into two categories. One corresponds to what was practiced in Indian society at that time. Certain ancient Indian social values were taken into Buddhism, because the Buddhist community was not separate from the general Indian society at that time. Of course, some of these values concerned the position of women. For example, women were to be submissive to men. Spiritual enlightenment was not spoken of in conjunction with women. In India, the only path through which a woman could achieve salvation was *bhakti*or devotion to her husband.

The second category of teachings concerning worldly life shows gender equality. The Buddha came forward and said that a woman can achieve enlightenment. She can be single and does not have to have children. If we look at the formation of the nuns’ order and their precepts in the social context of ancient Indian society, we see that the Buddha was ahead of his time when he validated women’s spiritual abilities and uplifted their position. By allowing women to be ordained, the Buddha gave women a vision and an unprecedented opportunity that no other religion at that time could offer.

Thus, two types of material are in the Tripitaka, the Buddhist Canon. One clearly supports women. The other seems discriminatory against women due to the incorporation of Indian social values. When we can distinguish between these two types, we can look at Buddhism in a clearer light.

Before the Buddha passed away, he allowed minor precepts to be lifted. However, the elders at the First Council could not decide which precepts were major and which ones minor. As a result, some of the elders proposed keeping the entire body of precepts without changing any.

The first category of precepts, *parajika*, means defeat. If one transgresses any of them, one is defeated in the sense that one no longer is a monastic. The sangha community does not expel that person. Rather, by one’s own action one is defeated. Interestingly, monks have four defeats whereas nuns have eight. At the time nuns joined the order, the four defeats for monks were already in existence. The other four were added due to actions of the nuns.

For example, the fifth defeat for nuns says that if a nun feels sexual pleasure from a man stroking upward, lightly touching, squeezing, or holding her in the area from the collar bone down to the knees, she is defeated and is no longer a nun. At first, I did not understand why these actions were serious enough to be considered a *parajika*. Having thought about it for a long time, I see that if both the man and the bhikkhuni feel sexual pleasure, it is like lighting a match. The fire will burn everywhere. If that kind of touching was allowed and sexual pleasure arose, it would be difficult for the two people to stop. That is why the precept is so serious.

## How nuns can help society

Nuns help society simply by being a good example of people who are unpretentious and live in the spirit of non-harmfulness. Aside from their spiritual studies and practice, nuns can also directly benefit society in other ways, one of which is to become involved in issues concerning women. For example, bhikkhunis can help with problems regarding abortion, prostitution, menopause, and other issues that women prefer to discuss with other women. Nuns can also help unwed mothers, many of whom do not want to have an abortion but do not know how to handle the situation. In Thailand, we have just opened a home for women with unwanted pregnancies, so they can avoid abortion and receive the care they need.

Nuns can also help women who suffer after having an abortion. Although as Buddhists, we discourage abortion, some women undergo them. Afterwards, some of these women have regret and confused emotions about their actions. We need to help them accept that this act was committed, teach them means to purify its karmic imprints, and encourage them to go forward in their lives without the burden of a guilty conscience. Some Buddhist women in the West have begun to create rituals to help these women do this.

The nuns’ order has great potential, for whatever nuns do will have a ripple effect for Buddhist women all over the world. My hope is that the nuns will use their collective energy to help each other, to contribute to society, and to preserve and spread the precious teachings of the Buddha.

4.3 The development of the role of women, and the changing role of men, in different forms of Buddhism

a) The significance of Māhapājapatī Gotamī and the development of the role of women in the ordained sangha; the role of men in the sangha.

b) Family life and the role of men and women in Buddhism in the dhamma, history and contemporary society.

c) Feminist approaches in contemporary Buddhism.

With reference to the ideas of N S Salgado and T Bartholomeusz.

