

Through Darkness to Light

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa.

‘Evil One, I shall not enter *parinibbāna* until I have *bhikkhuṇīs* who are accomplished, trained, skilled, learned, bearers of the Dhamma, trained in accordance with the Dhamma, correctly trained and walking the path of the Dhamma, who will pass on what they have gained from their own Teacher, teach it, declare it, establish it, expound it, analyse it, make it clear; until they shall be able by means of the Dhamma to refute false teachings that have arisen, and teach the Dhamma in all its wonder.’¹

The sentence above was Buddha’s answer to the insistence of Pāpima (Māra) who demanded Buddha to enter *parinibbāna* immediately. Māra reminded Buddha for His promise, knowing *catuparisā* (the community of *bhikkhu*, *bhikkhuṇī*, *upāsakas* and *upāsikas*) has had the quality expected by Buddha as mentioned above. Against the request, Buddha asked Pāpima not to worry by ensuring He will enter *parinibbāna* three months from that day. The narration was recorded in Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, one of the most dramatic discourses in the entire Sutta Piṭaka.

I brought up this paragraph here as a reminder to the candidates whom will be ordained as *bhikkhuṇī* at Wisma Kusalayani, Maribaya, Lembang, Bandung on June 21st 2015. This paragraph embodied all Buddha’s expectations that should be possessed by a *bhikkhuṇī*. To be ordained as a *bhikkhuṇī* is not the end but rather the beginning of a spiritual journey, where many tasks awaiting to fulfill the qualities mentioned above.

¹ D 2:112

Even in a normal circumstances, it is not easy to fulfill that expectation, moreover in an abnormal situation where the existence of *bhikkhuṇīs* is still a matter of debate, which may obstruct their mind and her spiritual journey.

This article is intended to provide some positive outlooks relating to the position of *bhikkhuṇī* against all odds, so that they will be more determined in walking on this Path.

I am not going to give a detailed discussion with complete textual references here. This article is merely intended to give more encouragement to *bhikkhuṇīs*. On the other hand, this article is expected to inspire lay devotees – *upāsakas* and *upāsikās*, to no longer hesitate in supporting the existence of *bhikkhuṇīs* because in fact, they too, can be the incomparable field of merits.

The Problem of ‘Double-Ordination’

The ordination of Theravāda *bhikkhuṇī* is still mired in controversies. So great, that the Theravāda *saṅgha* seems to have split into two: one group of *saṅgha* that against any form of this ordination, and others to allow and to support by providing valid ground based on Tipiṭaka. The parting of these two groups clearly visible from the fact by the exclusion of one group by another group; one group seemed to have lost *mettā* and would not accept the presence of the opposite group. Of course, this situation is alarming because harmony has been defeated by the attachment to one’s view.

This controversy comes from the central issues, namely the assumption that *bhikkhuṇī sāsana* have become extinct since the 11th century. It is said to have become extinct because 'legal basis' to revive it is no longer exist. Those who reject the *bhikkhuṇī sāsana*’s revival hold on the following Buddha’s statement:

“*Bhikkhus*, I allow the higher ordination in the community of *bhikkhus* for one who has been higher ordained on one side and has cleared herself in the community of *bhikkhuṇīs*.”²

In other words, to become a *bhikkhuṇī*, one must undergo two ordinations, i.e., ordination by *bhikkhuṇī saṅgha*, and then be ordained by *bhikkhu saṅgha*. This ordination is technically known as Double-Ordination (*ubhatoupasampannā*).³ And because *bhikkhuṇī saṅgha* have become extinct, then Double-Ordination is no longer possible to hold. This is the logic embraced by those who do not agree with the revival of *Bhikkhuṇī Sāsana*.

But, is it true that the chance for women to become a *bhikkhuṇī* has closed forever? “Through Darkness To Light “(Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang) is the ‘magic spell’ taught by RA. Kartini - an Indonesian feminist who elegantly demand for women’s emancipations. *Bhikkhuṇī sāsana* has been put into darkness since 11th century, but in this modern era, ‘Light’ has begun to illuminate the revival of *bhikkhuṇī sāsana*.

In 1998, the ordination lineage of Theravāda *bhikkhuṇī* was revived by an ordination ceremony in Bodhgaya, India; attended by *saṅgha* of various traditions. Without taking the Bodhisattva Vow, the candidates were first ordained by Mahāyāna *bhikkhuṇīs*, then the candidates were ordained by Theravāda *bhikkhus*. Soon after the ordination, the Sri Lankan new *bhikkhuṇīs*, initiated by Ven. Inamaluwe Sumangala Thera, granted the reordination by *bhikkhu saṅgha* at Rangiri Dambulu Temple, Sri Lanka. This ordination gives a very positive impact upon Sri Lankan devotees’ acceptance of *bhikkhuṇī*. In short, since 1998 the wheel of *bhikkhuṇī sāsana* spins again on this earth. Today, we see more and more women ordained as Theravāda *bhikkhuṇī*, and movements to accept their presence has increasingly extended to various

² V 2:272: “*anujānāmi, bhikkhave, ekatoupasampannāya bhikkhunisaṅghe visuddhāya bhikkhusaṅghe upasampādetun*”ti.

³ ThĀ 297

parts of the world. Their existence was already widely accepted by laymen and laywomen in some countries, such as Srilanka, Indonesia and Australia.

However, the orthodox Theravāda *saṅgha* is still not able to accept the validity of that ordination. The main reason is that, Mahāyāna *bhikkhuṇīs* who performed the ordination in Bodhgaya is not considered as part of Theravāda lineage which has been maintained in its unstained purity since the time of Buddha. The Mahāyāna *bhikkhuṇīs* come from Dharmaguptaka lineage, which differ from *Pāḷi Vinaya*. Of course, their opinion is understandable and must be respected.

While, on the other hand, those who supported the Bodhgaya Ordination, consider the Mahāyāna *bhikkhuṇīs* who performed the ordination come from the Theravāda lineage too. In fact, in the 5th century, Sri Lankan *bhikkhuṇī* planted the seed of ordination lineage in China,⁴ then followed by the translation of *Pāḷi Vinaya*,; although later disappeared due to the instability of the political situation in the back days.

In the later development, by the order of the King, the *saṅgha* there then follow the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya.⁵ For those who support the revival of Theravāda *bhikkhuṇī* believe that Dharmaguptaka Vinaya originated from Pāḷi Vinaya, which is a Theravāda Vinaya.

It is still very early for the two opposite opinions to reconcile, because one party is not ready to accept the other's opinion. Indeed, there is a ray of light that can be used to bring the two sides together, viz., by interpreting *vinaya* regarding *bhikkhuṇī*'s ordination more accurately. One of which requires such interpretation is what is mentioned in Cūḷavagga Vinaya Pāḷi:

⁴ Taishō L939c

⁵ Taishō L 793c

“*Bhikkhus*, I allow the giving of the higher ordination of *bhikkhuṇīs* by *bhikkhus*.”⁶

The above mentioned sentence was pronounced by the Buddha as the permission granted to *bhikkhu saṅgha* to ordain *bhikkhuṇī*. This ordination is technically known as 'single-ordination' (*ekatoupasampannā*).⁷

Thus, here, we have come to know two types of *Bhikkhuṇī* Ordination, namely 'double-ordination' and 'single-ordination.' To understand further, we will discuss the chronology of both occurrences.

Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī was the first *bhikkhuṇī* in the present Buddha Sasana. She became a *bhikkhuṇī*, only by accepting 'eight rules which must be respected' (*aṭṭhagarudhammā*).

“If Ānanda, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī accepts eight rules must be respected, that may be ordination for her.”⁸

After becoming a *bhikkhuṇī*, Gotamī posed the following question to Buddha, “Bhante, now, what line of conduct should I follow in regard to these Sakyan women?”⁹ The question was presented by Gotamī given at the time *bhikkhuṇī saṅgha* was not yet established, thus *aṭṭhagarudhammā* (especially point 6) cannot be accepted and fulfilled by the candidates. Buddha, then, comforted and encouraged Gotamī by giving a sermon, which was ended by the following sentence, “*Bhikkhus*, I allow the giving of the higher ordination of *bhikkhuṇīs* by *bhikkhus*.” With this permission, *bhikkhu saṅgha* then ordained 500 Sakyan women who had been following Gotamī.

⁶ V 2:258: “*anujānāmi, bhikkhave, bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetun*”ti.

⁷ ThĀ 297

⁸ V 2:255: *sace, ānanda, mahāpajāpatī gotamī aṭṭha garudhamme paṭiggaṇhāti, sāvassā hotu upasampadā.*

⁹ V 2:257: *kathāhaṃ, bhante, imāsu sākiyānīsu paṭipajjāmī*”ti?

Later, the candidates feel embarrassed when, as a condition for becoming a *bhikkhuṇī*, they have to answer a set of questions which is very sensitive to women. Knowing this, Buddha then made the rules of 'double-ordination' in order to avoid embarrassments by ordering *bhikkhuṇīs* to carry on the duty to ask such sensitive questions. Thus, briefly, it is the chronology of the occurrence of single-ordination and double-ordination.

Pāḷi Vinaya never explicitly prohibits or aborts 'single-ordination.' The obligation to take the path 'double-ordination' is only found in the commentaries. But it is too, in the commentaries, we can find a phrase: '*ācariyavādato hi suttānulomaṃ balavataraṃ*'¹⁰ - *suttānuloma* (four *mahāpadesā*) is stronger than the teachings of the teachers (the commentaries). In other words, if there is a difference with the commentaries, the Pāḷi Canon is to be taken as a main reference.

Thus, the problem regarding the two types of ordination is merely a matter of interpretation. Those who reject the revival of *bhikkhuṇī sāsana* are holding on to the belief of that when Buddha introduced 'double-ordination', the 'single-ordination' was then obsolete without the need to mention it explicitly. This opinion is supported by the fact that the 'single-ordination' was given only to 500 Sakya women (*pañcasatā sākiyāniya*)¹¹ and not for those candidates that appeared after that. On the other hand, those who support the revival of *bhikkhuṇī sāsana* could have put forward arguments that 'single-ordination' is never explicitly aborted because Buddha may have looked far ahead, that one day, this regulation will be needed in the future when the *bhikkhuṇī saṅgha* have become extinct.

When there is a room for two different interpretations from the Canon, we must choose the interpretation that is based on love, compassion and wis-

¹⁰ VA 2:231

¹¹ ThĀ 297

dom.¹² And based on this spirit, Mingun Jetavan Sayādaw from Burma interprets ‘single-ordination.’ He is a famous, highly educated, respected *bhikkhu* and a famous meditation teacher. In his writing in *Milindapañha Aṭṭhakathā*, published by Hamsāvati Piṭaka Press, Rangoon, Myanmar year 1311 (=1949) page 228-238, he stated the following:

“Thus the Exalted One’s statement: “*Bhikkhus*, I allow *bhikkhus* to ordain *bhikkhuṇīs*” concerned restriction [of the ordination solely by a *Bhikkhu Saṅgha*] to a period in the past when the *Bhikkhuṇī Saṅgha* did not exist; in the future, too, it will be restricted to a period when the *Bhikkhuṇī Saṅgha* will not exist; and at present it is restricted to a period when the *Bhikkhuṇī Saṅgha* does not exist. Since the Exalted One had seen [such situations] with his unobstructed knowledge and vision, that is, with his knowledge of omniscience, his statement should be allowed [to have such applications].... Hence at present, or even now, though restricted to a situation in which the *Bhikkhuṇī Saṅgha* has become non-existent, women can be ordained by the *Bhikkhu Saṅgha*.”¹³

His opinion is certainly very comforting for those who favor the revival of *Bhikkhuṇī Sāsana*. The paragraph above is ‘a light of wisdom’ from Sayādaw who dispels the darkness that has long engulfed *bhikkhuṇī sāsana*. Sayādaw’s explanation can be used to break the arguments about the absence of ‘single-ordination’ cases other than those granted to 500 Sakyan women. The absence of such instances occur because the ‘single-ordination’ was only be implemented in a state of ‘emergency,’ that is at the moment when *bhikkhuṇī saṅgha* was not found to exist. With the ordination of 500 Sakyan women, *bhikkhuṇī sāsana* has emerged, thus the ‘single-ordination’ is not

¹² In this context, we have to follow closely Mahāpadesa V 1:250 and D 16

¹³ Bodhi, Bhikkhu 2009 *The Revival of Bhikkhuṇī Ordination in the Theravāda Tradition*, Inward Path Publisher.

required and temporarily kept to be used when the 'emergency' situation is emerged in the future.

The interpretation that is based on love, compassion and wisdom is in line with current increasing trend of gender equity. In the same context, foreseeing the changes in time, we can feel the 'spirit' when Buddha said "Ānanda, after my passing, the order may, if it wishes, abrogate the lesser and minor rules."¹⁴

It is hard to imagine how Buddhism can last for, say, one million years into the future if it does not allow the women (which, according to current data is 49.6% of the human population in this earth) to become *bhikkhūṇī*. Our compassions should be triggered and moved by allowing them to walk the holy-life (*brahmacariya*), by fully practicing as a *bhikkhūṇī*.

Life is built on one of the pillars of the so-called 'history' which is often twisted into 'his-story' (the story of men). What will occur in the future if one day, the world is built on pillars named 'Herstory' (stories of women) and no longer by the 'history'? Very interesting to know how the men react if such sentence as 'a monk who has been ordained for a hundred years must greet respectfully, ...salute with joined palms, do a proper homage (*abhivādana*) to a *bhikkhūṇī* ordaiend but that day.'

Back to the ordination of *bhikkhūṇī* in Bodhgaya, if ordinations performed in front of Mahāyāna *bhikkhūṇīs* considered invalid because they are not from the Theravāda lineage, then, the ordination performed in front Theravāda *bhikkhus* have automatically qualified as 'single-ordination.' Thus the *bhikkhūṇīs* were ordained at the time is a legitimate Theravāda *bhikkhūṇī*.

¹⁴ D 2:154. Although Mahākassapa Thera then decided not to abrogate any rules. The decision was respected by saṅgha. For further details, please see DA 2:593

About Aṭṭhagarudhammā

We have discussed about *aṭṭhagarudhammā* as a special model of Mahāpajapatī Gotamī's ordination. The 6th *aṭṭhagarudhammā* states:

“A candidate (*sikkhamānā*) who has trained for two years in six principles should seek for higher ordination from both communities.”¹⁵

Often, this point is used against the Bodhgaya ordination, because the candidates were considered failed to fulfill the obligation set here in. When Gotamī accepted *aṭṭhagarudhammā* as the prerequisite of her ordination, she never took the practice of *sikkhamānā* for 2 years. The same applied to the 500 Sakyan women that accompanied Gotamī at that time. The exact same condition happened to the Bodhgaya ordination in 1998. At that time, considering the *bhikkhuṇī saṅgha* was not existent (overriding the *bhikkhuṇī saṅgha* from Mahāyāna school). Therefore, based on the example of the 500 Sakyan women, the Bodhgaya ordination is in fact legitimate, despite the lack of 2 years of *sikkhamānā* practice. Although, in fact, the candidates were carefully selected —they were all *dasasīla mātā* whom have been practicing precepts, which also include six principles for many years.

Furthermore, if we look deeper at *aṭṭhagarudhammā*, then we find that most of these regulations can be found in Pācittiya of Bhikkhuṇīvibhaṅga. None of the *aṭṭhagarudhammā* have its counterparts in the monastic discipline categorised as heavy as Pārājika or Saṅghādisesa. Even the 6th rule is similar to Pācittiya 63 of Bhikkhuṇīvibhaṅga, except to seek double-ordination from two *saṅgha*. Whatever it is, *aṭṭhagarudhammā* has the similar characteristic to Pācittiya. And in Pācittiya, we are taught that the first offender (*ādikammika*) is not guilty. Thus, *aṭṭhagarudhammā* was not a heavy rule, but it is an

¹⁵ V 2:255: “*dve vassāni chasu dhammesu sikkhitasikkhāya sikkhamānāya ubhatosaṅghe upasampadā pariyesitabbā.*”

advice from Buddha which should be revered, respected, honored and held in esteem.

Packaging vs Content

Nowadays, we can feel secure and glad to find that *Bhikkhuṇī Sāsana* is already spinning fast. More and more women wanted to be ordained as *bhikkhuṇī*. Their existence is more solid, it can be seen from the increasing support from *upāsakas* and *upāsikās*. And it leaves us a question to ponder, “Is this the end of the endeavour?”

The question is very important for us to reflect, so we do not lose the direction. Becoming a feminist that fight for *bhikkhuṇī*'s existence doesn't necessarily make one a better person to one that does not fight for it. The same case as becoming a *bhikkhuṇī* doesn't guarantee one to become a better person compare to *sayālay*, *dasasīla mātā* or *mae chee*. We are not fighting for *bhikkhuṇī*'s existence by eliminating the existence of *sayālay* etc's existence.

If it is only for the sake of showing love and affection to our mother, it is not necessary to insult, scold or get rid of the rest of mothers. Our love and affection can be shown by caring and ensuring her well-being and happiness. This parable is to show us how we supposed to support *bhikkhuṇī*. We have to ensure that *bhikkhuṇī* can get a well and happy life. It is unwise to show our support to *bhikkhuṇī* by insulting or worse, destroying the existence of *sayālay*, *dasasīla mātā*, or *mae chee*. Harmony is in-negotiable for all *pabbajita* (those who renounce home and worldly life) to coexist peacefully.

Fighting for *bhikkhuṇīs* by rejecting *sayālay* etc. is merely fighting for *sīla*. Our practice consists not only about *sīla*, but we have another two equally important practices, i.e. *samādhi* and *paññā*. *Samādhisikkhā* and *Paññāsikkhā* can

be achieved by practicing any number of *sīla* – whether it is *sayālay*'s *sīla* or *bhikkhuṇī*'s *sīla*. For this reason, we have to respect the decisions of those who stay being *sayālay*, *dasasīla mātā*, and *mae chee*. Such correct way of thinking is needed to be enforced continuously as a reminder so that we do not lose the direction on walking the Path.

We are here not to fight for 'packaging' or 'robe' but for the 'content', that is by helping to create a quality *bhikkhuṇī*. A robe can be of any colour, but she has to be 'contained' –she needs to be '*accomplished, trained, skilled, learned, bearers of the Dhamma, trained in accordance with the Dhamma... and so on.*' We, especially the *bhikkhu saṅgha*, have to provide opportunities for them to flourish. Empowering women is not merely fighting for *bhikkhuṇī*'s existence, but more than that, how we could encourage and support them to get a better education (*pariyatti* – mastering Dhamma-and -Vinaya).

After the Buddha's *parinibbāna*, Dhamma-and-Vinaya is the one to receive the baton from Buddha to be our Teacher. By providing them opportunities and facilities to master Tipiṭaka, we have encouraged them to know their Teacher. It is Dhamma-and-Vinaya that will guide their *paṭipatti* (practice) to penetrate the Four Noble Truth (*paṭivedha*), and thus putting an end to all suffering and liberated from *saṃsāra*.

We must continue to support them to become a disciple of Buddha who is '*accomplished, trained, skilled, learned, bearers of the Dhamma, trained in accordance with the Dhamma, correctly trained and walking the path of the Dhamma, who will pass on what they have gained from their own Teacher, teach it, declare it, establish it, expound it, analyse it, make it clear; until they shall be able by means of the Dhamma to refute false teachings that have arisen, and teach the Dhamma in all its wonder.*'

Nowadays, there are a few Indonesian *bhikkhuṇīs* studying Theravāda Buddhism in Theravāda Buddhist countries such as Sri Lanka. In the future, may we have more of our *bhikkhuṇīs* to study the *pariyatti* and practice (*paṭipatti*)

rightly. Thus, this is the fight for ‘content’, not for the ‘packaging’. I, once again, congratulate the new *bhikkhuṇīs*. ‘Well-expounded is the *Dhamma*, live the holy life for the complete ending of *dukkha*.’¹⁶

Closing

Through Darkness to Light. By convening the *bhikkhuṇī* ordination in Wisma Kusalayani, Maribaya, Lembang, Bandung, thus *bhikkhuṇī sāšana*, especially in Indonesia, has begun to spin faster. The dark age has begone. To the newly ordained *bhikkhuṇīs*, always remember your initial intention to become *bhikkhuṇī*. It is not for the robe, not for alms, not for a residence, and not to gain a social status.

May the Buddha’s words recorded in Mahāsāropama Sutta be an inspiration and a closing for this article:

“*Bhikkhus*, the benefit of the holy life is not to gain material benefit, nor to win veneration and fame (*lābhasakkārasilokānisamsa*), ... *bhikkhus*, the purpose of the holy life is the unshakeable liberation of mind. This is the essence. This is the goal.”¹⁷

To Persaudaraan Bhikkhuni Theravada Indonesia, I would like to congratulate and offer the highest appreciation for the initiative to convene Upasampada Bhikkhuni 2015 which is the first Bhikkhuni Upasampada in Indonesia for the last 1000 years since Buddhism ‘asleep’ in our archipelago. Rise, *bhikkhuṇīs*, the sun has risen over the horizon. The darkness has begone, embrace the bright future ahead.

¹⁶ V 1:18: “*svākkhāto dhammo, cara brahmacariyaṃ sammā dukkhassa antakiriyāyā”ti*. This is Buddha’s admonition to Yasa on his ordination day.

¹⁷ M 1:197

May Buddha Sāsana prevail on earth.

Jakarta, May 12th 2015

Sammāsambuddhamatulaṃ sasaddhammagaṇuttamaṃ abhivādemi,
(I respectfully salute the Fully Enlightened One, the Peerless One, along with the
Sublime Teaching and the Noble Order)

Ashin Kheminda

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