

## THE FOUNDATION OF THE BHIKKHUNĪSAMGHA AS A MODEL FOR A REVIVAL

If it is intended to revive the ordination of nuns in the Theravāda tradition, the Vinaya of this school must be scrutinized in order to trace possible obstacles or to find opportunities. The best way to begin such an investigation seems to be a close look at the story of the foundation of order of nuns as related in the Cullavagga of the Theravāda Vinaya.

At the same time, this investigation will be a forceful demonstration, I hope, that only reading texts in their original language yields results, because the most important information conveyed by certain expressions or words necessarily disappears in any translation. Thus the crucial keys to open the doors to a solution of many problems are misplaced from the very beginning when consulting only translations.

Who then were the first Buddhist nuns? As you all know the story of the foundation of the order of nuns, the *bhikkhunīsamgha* in Pāli, is related in the last chapter of the Cullavagga of the Vinayapīṭaka as a kind of appendix to the text describing the emergence of the Buddhist community and the formulation of the rules necessary to run it. Even from this superficial look at the text it seems evident - and it has never been doubted - that the order of nuns was founded later than the order of monks. Before having a closer look at the foundation of the *bhikkhunīsamgha*, it is useful to briefly recapitulate the well-known circumstances of the foundation of the order of monks in comparison.

The first converts are the famous five monks **approached by the Buddha** in order to deliver his first sermon. Then follows the rich and tender Yasa soon to be joined by his five friends followed by their fifty friends. The avalanche of converts really starts with the three Kassapas and their one thousand followers, and it ebbs away with the two principle pupils, Sāriputta and Moggallāna, who were, as the Kassapas former *aññatitthiyas*, attached to a non-Buddhist sect. All of them changed their loyalties to join the Buddha, a practice obviously quite common given all the rules in the Vinaya to be applied in such a case.

All this is radically differently in the case of nuns. This time, **the Buddha is approached** by Mahāpajāpati Gotami, who articulates her wish to become a nun, only to be rebuked very rudely by the Buddha in the same harsh words he used against Devadatta. Only after the intervention of Ānanda the Buddha gives in reluctantly, and grumbling establishes the eight severe rules for nuns to protect his organisation. And from the very beginnings he delegates the ordination of nuns to the monks.

Once the order of nuns is accepted, a second Pātimokkha is needed, and therefore the existing rules for monks are taken over by nuns and supplemented by rules taking into account the specific needs of women. However, together with this new Pātimokkha, also new problems are created for us. A good example is the LXV<sup>th</sup> Pācittiya for nuns:

*“Whatever nun should ordain a girl **married for less than twelve years**, there is an offence of expiation”*

*yā pana bhikkhunī ūnavādasavassam gihigatam vuṭṭhāpeyya, pācittiyam*, Vin IV 322,6\*\*f.

The last to discuss this rule and comment on the controversial translation “**twelve years old**” versus “**married for twelve years**” was P. Kieffer-Pülz in 2005 in her detailed article under the title “Ehe- oder Lebensjahre? Die Altersangabe für eine “verheiratete” Frau (*gihigatā*) in den Regeln der Rechtstexte der Theravādin”. P. Kieffer-Pülz argues that the correct translation is not the one given but “a girl of twelve years of age”, which, of course results in considerably difficulties seen by P. Kieffer-Pülz herself. There is a glaring contradiction to the question put to every future nun at ordination “Are you twenty years old”.

However, the problem exists only as long as we follow the assumed meaning “married” for *gihigatā*. In doing so and in concentrating on the figure “twelve”, it seems, all discussions including my own started from the wrong end concentrating on an almost non-existing problem, instead of looking at the meaning of the word *gihigatā* first, which has no parallel outside Pāli, it seems, and almost exclusively occurs in this very context the only exception being the sentence: “*Our rules are current among the householders, and the householders know us*”

*sant' amhākaṃ sikkhāpadāni gihigatāni, gihī pi no jānanti*, Vin II 288,16f.

This is said by Mahākassapa during the first council and justifies the refusal to change any rule lest the order should incur criticism from the laity. The etymologically obvious meaning supported by the context “current among householders” raises some doubts about the translation of *gihigatā* as “married”, a concept usually expressed in Pāli by totally different words, *ānītā* or *pariggahītā*.

This raises the question why *gihigatā* is translated by “married”. The reason seems to be that E. Waldschmidt choose this meaning when he translated the Pātimokkha for nuns, following those Chinese translations which assume the meaning “married” instead of following the explanation given in the canonical commentary to the Pātimokkha:

*gihigatā is called purisantaragatā*

*gihigatā nāma purisantaragatā vuccati*, Vin IV 322,10 etc.,

because *purisantaragatā* appears to be as unclear as *gihigatā*. However, *purisantaragatā* occurs once more in a different context on practices of non-Buddhist ascetics, which have been investigated in great detail by W. B. Bollée in 1971 in his article “Anmerkungen zum buddhistischen Häretikerbild.” Among the different practices the following are enumerated:

“He (that is this particular kind of heretical non-Buddhist ascetic) does not accept (food) from two persons eating, not from a pregnant woman, not from a nursing woman, not from a purisantaragatā ...”

*paṭigaṇhāti ... na dvinnaṃ bhuñjamānānaṃ na gabbhiniyā na pāyamānāya na purisantaragatāya na saṅkittisu ...*, D I 166,7f. = A II 206,12f. etc.

According to the later opinion expressed in the commentaries *purisantaragatā* designates a “non-virgin” (examples see hand out) thus comprising not only married women, but also courtesans or widows. This meaning is again quite different from both, “current among householders” and “married”. Of the three possibly meanings, “married” is based on Chinese evidence only, which is many centuries later than the Theravāda Pātimokkha for nuns and therefore rather shaky. Moreover, the Chinese translations are by no means uniform and only a part points to this meaning.

When looking at the larger context in Pāli where we find the strange and difficult choice *purisantaragatā* in the explanation of *gihigatā*, we realize that the rules preceding and following the LXV<sup>th</sup> Pācittiya are part of a set regulating the ordination of nuns. The rule on the *gihigatā* is separated by the two preceding rules from the first two rules of the “paragraph on pregnant women”, that forbid accepting for ordination a pregnant woman (*gabbhinim*, Vin 317,19\*\*) and a nursing woman (*pāyantim*, Vin 318,14\*\*).

The sequence pregnant woman, nursing woman, non-virgin (*gabbhinī, pāyantī, purisantaragatā*) certainly does not look overly exiting. Therefore it never caught any attention. However, comparing this sequence to the paragraph on the practices of non-Buddhist ascetics, this changes dramatically, because an identical sequence using the very same terms is found there. Moreover, it is important to emphasize that this paragraph on non-Buddhist ascetics was well known to all monks, because it occurs in the Dīgha-, Majjhima- and Aṅguttaranikāya. Therefore it is likely that the explanation of *gihigatā* as *purisantaragatā* found in the canonical commentary to the rules of the Pātimokkha is ultimately derived from this *suttanta* text. If, however, the commentator transferred *purisantaragatā* rather mechanically, he most likely did not really know what exactly was meant by *gihigatā* and just made a guess. Consequently, the rule might have meant something totally different originally that is “a woman known to the householders for twelve years”. The original aim of the rule was most likely an attempt to bar alien wandering woman ascetics from ordination and to ensure that only those women known to the lay community for a certain period to guarantee their good reputation could join the order. If this is correct, it solves the problems of the rule and explains why a misunderstood rule never fit into the Buddhist legal system and, necessarily, created problems for later interpreters from ancient times to the present day.

As W. B. Bollée pointed out a pregnant (*guvvini*) and a nursing (*dāragam pejjamāṇi*) woman also figure in corresponding rules for Jinas. This, of course should alert our attention, because we now step beyond Buddhism and enter common ground of Buddhist and Jain concepts and vocabulary, if we try to explain the *gihigatā*-rule in its original context.

Starting to look that way, we at once perceive a second unusual expression besides *gihigatā* also used in the rules referring to the ordination of nuns, and again encountered only in the Pātimokkha rules. When a nun is ordained this is not expressed in the Pātimokkha by the well-known technical term *upasampādeti*, but by *vuṭṭhāpeti*. This technical word occurs in a series of rules as

given on the hand out. On the other hand, when the ordination of nuns is described in the Cullavagga of the Vinaya, suddenly *upasampādeti* is used exclusively and *vuṭṭhāpeti* disappears.

The verb *vuṭṭhāpeti* is as K. R. Norman demonstrated to be derived from Sanskrit *upa-sthā* and shows a development typical for the old Eastern language of early Buddhism, which nicely concurs with the assumption of word borrowed by Buddhists at an early period.

Following the results of Norman's investigations, *vupaṭṭhāpeti* is an intruder into Pāli. More important, it is the same technical term *upaṭṭhāveī* used by the Jainas for ordination and, consequently, again part of the common vocabulary current in eastern India at the time of the foundation of Buddhism and Jainism.

Pursuing this line of thought, attention may be drawn to the *pavattinī* "promoter" acting in the same way for Buddhist **nuns** as the *ācariya* does for **monks**. And again the Jainas know the term *pavattinī* for nuns side by side with a *pavattī* for monks alien to the Buddhists.

Moreover, Buddhism and Jainism agree in postulating some training before ordination, for which both religions use the same word *sikkhāpeti*. However, a period of training precedes ordination for **monks and nuns** in Jainism, but **only for nuns** in Buddhism.

Together with the suppression of *vuṭṭhāpeti* in the Cullavagga by substituting *upasampādeti*, these are surprisingly clear signals that the vocabulary of ordination of nuns must have been influenced from outside Buddhism.

However, does this assumption concur with the story of the foundation of the order of nuns?

When Gotamī returns for a second attempt she does so in the garb of an ascetic now:

"Having cut the hair and donned yellow robes together with numerous Sākya women"

*kese chedāpetvā kāsāyāni vatthāni acchādetvā sambahulehi Sākiyānihi saddhim*, Vin II 253,12.

When the ordination of nuns is finally permitted, the Buddha does not ordain any nun himself, quite in contrast to the ordination of the first monks, but delegates the ordination of nuns to the monks from the very beginning. Even Mahāpajāpati Gotamī receives her ordination in front of Ānanda (Vin II 255,36 f.) not of the Buddha. **The Buddha is nowhere and at no time immediately involved in the ordination of any nun.**

Moreover, Gotamī and all the Sākiyānis look like a group of woman ascetics with their leader, when they approach Ānanda. In the same way the three Kassapas join the Buddhist community together with their pupils and change their religious affiliation. If this is correct, the particular vocabulary in the rules for nuns can be explained easily as remnants of the peculiar linguistic usage of these woman ascetics in their own rules at the time before they converted to Buddhism. In this respect, the somewhat surprising LXXVII<sup>th</sup> Pācittiya for nuns finds an easy explanation:

"If any nun having said to a trainee 'If you, noble lady, will give me a robe, then I will ordain you', yet if she is not afterwards prevented, should neither ordain her nor make an effort to get her ordained, there is an offence entailing expiation".

*yā pana bhikkhunī sikkhamānaṃ sace me tvaṃ ayye cīvaraṃ dassasi evāhaṃ taṃ vuṭṭhāpessāmīti vatvā sā pacchā anantarāyikini n'eva vuṭṭhāpeyya na vuṭṭhāpanāya ussukkaṃ kareyya pācittiyam*, Vin IV 332,17\*\* -20\*\*

This was always understood with considerable bewilderment as an attempt to bribe a nun. However, seen in a late Vedic context, this is most likely nothing else but the gift to a teacher, which was normally not solicited and made at the end of the time as a student during the *samāvartana* ceremony. Making a gift in advance instead at the time when approaching the teacher was frowned upon in the *dharmasāstra* and consequently not altogether unknown. The group of woman ascetics joining Buddhism evidently knew a practice similar to the Vedic custom to offer a gift to the teacher, and preserved it. There is no corresponding rule in the Pātimokkha for monks.

Moreover, the *samgha* of nuns never accompanies the Buddha, as the former *jaṭilas* do immediately after ordination.

Still more remarkable, the Buddha is never mentioned as talking to any nun in the texts of the Suttapīṭaka, while he converses of course frequently with monks, laymen or with laywomen, even with Mahāpajāpati Gotamī when she still as an *upāsikā* offers him an extraordinary robe. When the Buddha dies, no nun is present, only monks and gods.

Thus while the Buddha only talks **about** nuns or receives reports **on** nuns occasionally, and mentions individual nuns, he never talks **to** nuns, while Māra on the other hand does in the Bhikkhunīsaṃyutta (S I 128-135) and so does, in contrast to the Buddha, the monk Ānanda occasionally.

When Mahākassappa reluctantly accompanies Ānanda and preaches in the nunnery (Kassapa-samyutta: S II 214-222), the nun Thullatissā shows her discontent and anger against Ma-

hākassapa by saying “How could the noble Mahākassapa think that he should teach the *dhamma* while the noble Ānanda is present? This is like a vendor of needles who thinks that he should sell needles in the presence of a needle maker.” When Ānanda tries to defend this somewhat rude nun by saying: “excuse (her). Women are stupid” (*khamatha bhante Kassapa bālo mātugāmo*, S II 216,11”), Mahākassapa gives Ānanda a rather stern warning not to side with the nuns against him, who was introduced by the Buddha himself to the *saṃgha*, while Ānanda was not. Hearing all this a disgusted Thullatissā leaves the order of nuns for good (S II 217,21).

A second story follows which underlines that Ānanda quite evidently was not on good let alone on friendly terms with Mahākassapa, the leader of the order after the Buddha’s death.

With the very rare presence of individual nuns in the *suttanta* texts and the astonishing absence of any *suttanta* mentioning the Buddha talking to any nun directly and personally, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that there was only the order of monks during the lifetime of the Buddha. This is the situation as reflected in the *suttantas*.

The absence of nuns in older Buddhist texts is all the more conspicuous when looking beyond Buddhism and comparing the very different attitude to nuns reflected in Śvetāmbara-Jaina texts, where the nuns are firmly rooted in the community, according to tradition even since the time of Pārśva, the assumed predecessor of Mahāvīra. And Mahāvīra himself personally communicated with the chief nun Candāṇā. Consequently, in contrast to Buddhism, there is neither any trace of reluctance to accept nuns in Śvetāmbara-Jainism nor are there separate sets of rules for monks and nuns. Moreover, the order of nuns is almost of the same standing as the order of monks. As tradition has it and as the figures of today confirm, nuns outnumbered monks in Jainism from the very beginning. Thus the nuns constitute a most important part of the Jaina community, while they were, as it seems, never really welcome to and somewhat badly integrated in the Buddhist community.

This remarkable difference between Jainism and Buddhism could be explained, if the Buddhists constituted themselves originally as an order of monks only, but might have had to give in to some sort of social pressure and were forced at an early date to establish an order of nuns, if only for the reason not to be disadvantaged against other religious movements such as Jainism and perhaps also the Ājīvikas. This may well be the message only slightly covered by the story of the Buddha’s reluctance to accept nuns: The unsuccessful attempt of one faction of early Buddhists to ward off what was unwanted, but had to be conceded in the given social and religious environment at the time.

Still the acceptance of nuns remained controversial enough within the Buddhist community to be mirrored in our texts. Ānanda stands for the pro-*bhikkhunī* faction, and Mahākassapa for his opponents. Ānanda is criticised first of all during the first council presided over by Mahākassapa as the most prominent monk after the Buddha’s death, for having committed five bad mistakes among them his support of the nuns. All this points do a deeply rooted dissension, perhaps as bad as the (earlier) conflict with Devadatta.

This is the result if an attempt is made to convert the information contained in these ancient texts of the Suttapiṭaka and in the slightly later formulated Vinayapiṭaka into an historical account. Historical events such as the foundation of both communities, monks and nuns, could be transmitted to later generations only by the means of expression available at the time. Even if based on historical memory, however strong or faint, the events had to be adjusted to the then current literary form of a *suttanta* or a Vinaya text, allowing only for certain well-known protagonists to act.

In the same way as the ideas about the formation of texts and the compilation of the canon could be clad only into the garb of a council, the foundation of a new Buddhist community of ascetics, the order of nuns, had to be connected to the Buddha in one way or the other.

This was achieved in a really ingenious way by introducing Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and Ānanda to win over the Buddha, who, after having permitted the acceptance of nuns, withdraws and is above all controversy and quarrel. The prominent monks, on the other hand, Ānanda as the favourite of the Buddha, and Mahākassapa as the most venerable monk at the time of the *nirvāṇa*, may be considered as the heads of two conflicting currents within the *saṃgha* of the monks. The “Ānanda faction” was strong enough to prevail against their opponents and push through the acceptance of nuns, but not strong enough to prevent the “Mahākassapa faction” from expressing their misgivings in the texts: It would have been perfectly easy to cancel all attacks on Ānanda. This, however, was, luckily for us, not done. For the rift in the community was, again

luckily for us today, so deep that it could not be covered up by perfectly simple means of redaction.

It is well known of course that the opponents, Ānanda and Mahākassapa, survived the Buddha. Some of the relevant *suttanta* texts are even taken by the tradition to describe events **after the death of the Buddha**, and most likely rightly so. Therefore, taking all the evidence together and taking into account the means of expression available to those who formulated our texts, it is not easy to avoid the conclusion that the introduction of the order of nuns was an event at the end of the period of early Buddhism, not too long after the death of the Buddha, – after all the Therīgāthās are rightly considered as part of the oldest texts – and, moreover, that the controversy on the admission of nuns might have been – speaking in modern historical terms – between two factions, whether or not to accept a group of woman ascetics and their leader, who when they finally joined Buddhism succeeded in preserving parts of the language used in their original rules still dimly visible in the terminology of Bikkhunī-Pātimokkha here and there.

If all this is correct that our sources tell us that the very first nuns were ordained by monks only, with monks acting even as *raho-anusāsaka* and *upajjhāya* instead of the then not yet, and today no longer existing nuns required here by the rules laid down in the Vinaya, there is nowhere any shade of an obstacle in sight, which might prevent the monks of today to act in exactly the same way again, and to revive the ordination of nuns from within the Theravāda tradition without any help from outside being required or necessary.

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