

The Unbroken Lineage of the Sri Lankan *Bhikkhuni Sangha* from 3rd Century B.C.E. to the Present

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Buddhism introduced into Sri Lanka

At the Third Buddhist Council held in India in the 3rd century B.C.E, nine missions were dispatched to several countries to spread Buddhism. One mission, headed by Thera Mahinda, son of Emperor *Asoka* of India, reached Sri Lanka while Theras Sona and Uttara were sent to Suvannadipa (gold island), generally believed to be lower Burma in Southeast Asia. Thera Mahinda, son of Indian Emperor Asoka introduced Buddhism to Sri Lanka during the reign of King Devanampiyatissa (250-210 B.C.E). The Bhikkhuni Sangha was introduced by Theri Sanghamitta, just six months after the introduction of the Bhikkhu Sangha (*Mahavamsa* XII).

Women were the First to gain Spiritual Attainments

It is significant that on listening to the Dhamma preached by Thera Mahinda after his arrival in Sri Lanka, the very first to attain *sotapatti*, the first stage of the Path were Princess Anula, wife of the sub king Mahanaga and the five hundred ladies of the court who formed her retinue.

“When they had heard that most excellent doctrine, princess Anula and her five hundred attendants, in whose mind faith has arisen, attained the reward of *sotapatti*, this was the first case of the attainment (of a stage of sanctification) which occurred in Lanka” (*Dipavamsa*, Oldenberg, Chap 12).

Sanghamitta introduced Bhikkhuni Order

A few days later, on attaining to the second stage *sakadagami*, Princess Anula and her companions expressed a desire to receive ordination. When King Devanampiyatissa conveyed this to Thera Mahinda, the latter pointed out that according to the rules of the Vinaya, it was not permissible for him to grant ordination to women and that the king should request his father Asoka to send his sister Theri Sanghamitta and also to bring with her a branch of the Bodhi Tree at Bodh Gaya under which the Buddha attained enlightenment. Anula and her companions observed *dasa-sila* (ten precepts) and lived in a nunnery, especially constructed for them, waiting for Sanghamitta to arrive.

Six months later, the Theri Sanghamitta, accompanied by sixteen other Bhikkhunis arrived and admitted Anula and the other women into the order. Sanghamitta and her companion Bhikkhunis taught the Dhamma and Vinaya to the Sri Lankan Bhikkhunis.

Bhikkhuni Sanghamitta initially lived in the Hatthalhaka nunnery along with the newly ordained nuns. As the numbers grew, she founded twelve other nunneries. In three of these buildings, the mast, rudder and the helm of the ship by which Sanghamitta arrived were kept as mementoes of her visit to Sri Lanka. These nunneries where these historical artifacts were preserved in the 3rd century B.C.E. can be described as the earliest museums in the world.

Sanghamitta's Lineage goes back to the Founder of Bhikkhuni Order

This lineage introduced by Sanghamitta to Sri Lanka goes back to the founder of the nuns' order, Pajapati Gotami, the Buddha's aunt herself. As illustrative of the correct continuation of this lineage, the *Dipavamsa* describes Sanghamitta's ordination ceremony and highlights the ecclesiastical roles played at this ceremony by the nun Dhammapala, her instructress (*upajjhaya*), and the nun Ayupala, her teacher (*acariya*).

The *Dipavamsa* also gives the names of the ten nuns (Ten is the number of nuns required by the Vinaya rules to grant higher ordination to women.) who accompanied Sanghamitta to Sri Lanka - Uttara, Hema, Pasadapala, Aggimitta, Dasika, Pheggu, Pabbata, Matta, Malla, and Dhammadasiya, and state that they taught in Anuradhapura, *Vinaya, Sutta* and *Abhidhamma Pitakas*.

Those who received ordination along with Anula included Saddhammanandi, Soma, Giridhi, Dasiya, Dhamma, Dhammapala, Mahila, Sobhana, Dhammatapasa, Naramitta, Sata, Kali and Uttara. At the beginning, the women who entered came from royal families, but gradually women from all social strata entered the order. Many women from various parts of the country too arrived in Anuradhapura and received ordination (*Dipavamsa* 18. 15-24).

Among those who received ordination during the earliest phase, Dhamma, Dhammapala and Naramitta were experts in *vinaya* (*vinayavisarada*). Sata, Kali and Uttara were master instructors to nuns (*theriyovadakusala*). Sumana was an expert on Buddhist history (*saddhammavamsakovida*), Mahila was a practitioner of strict observances (*dhutavada*) and Sata was versed in the exhortations of Theris. Two of the nuns, Mahila and Sanha, were endowed with *Abhinna* (supernatural powers).

As stated above, the Chapter 18 of the *Dipavamsa* is replete with names of Bhikkhunis who had excelled in different sections of the *Tripitaka*, but the teaching of Vinaya is given the highest place. References to nuns teaching Vinaya are many more than those who were teaching other two sections of the *Tripitaka*, *Sutta* and *Abhidhamma*.

The *Dipavamsa* also provides a great deal of information, on the development of the nuns' order and its spread to other parts of the country. The names of nuns belonging to different social strata who came from Rohana (southern province of Sri Lanka) and

taught Vinaya Pitaka in Anuradhapura together with twenty thousand nuns, are mentioned, i.e. Mahila and Samanta, the daughters of King Kakavanna, Girikali, the daughter of his Purohita, Dasi and Kali, the daughters of a rogue. This indicates that the nuns' order was widespread geographically and popular socially, attracting different social strata (See for details, Goonatilake, 1997).

Pioneer Historiographers in the World

As mentioned earlier, the *Dipavamsa* records in detail the establishment of the Bhikkhuni order in Sri Lanka, the history of its development, its expansion to other parts of the country, and the spiritual and intellectual achievements of the nuns. In contrast, a later chronicle of the 6th century C.E. written by the monk Mahanama, the *Mahavamsa* (or Great Chronicle), though based on the *Dipavamsa*, totally ignores the story of the nuns except for the initial description of the establishment of the Bhikkhuni order and a few brief references in the later chapters. For this reason, it has been argued by some scholars that the *Dipavamsa*, the first historical record preserved in Sri Lanka, was a compilation by the community of nuns (Malalasekera, pp, 27). Thus these nuns can be described as the pioneer historiographers in the world. The later chronicle, *Mahavamsa* based on the *Dipavamsa* which provides only a 'male' history of the Theravada fraternity, appears to be a deliberate effort on the part of monk scribes to delegitimize the earlier contribution of the nuns. Thus the *Dipavamsa* chronicle, a fourth-century 'nuns' tale', is thus the earliest example of a

recorded 'her story' in Sri Lanka, and perhaps anywhere in the world (Goonatilake, 2002).

Unbroken Lineage through an Unbroken Succession of Vinaya Teachers

There is evidence to prove that the Bhikkhuni lineage that was inherited from Sanghamitta continued in Sri Lanka through the centuries through an unbroken succession of *Vinaya* teachers. (The original interpretation of the *Vinaya* for Bhikkhunis is retained in the *Cullavagga* in the *Vinaya Pitaka*, the earliest section of the Buddhist canon.) The succession of teachers among nuns had no links with the line of teachers among monks, as given in the *Samantapasadika*, a commentary on the *Vinaya Pitaka* written in Sri Lanka in the 5th century C.E by Buddhaghosa, a monk from South India. The line of teachers and the interpretation of the *Vinaya* as contained in the *Samantapasadika* is a modified code of conduct for monks, developed by the commentators. The *Samantapasadika*, which later became the authoritative guide for the interpretation of the *Vinaya*, is, in effect, the result of an attempt of a long line of commentators to develop a code of conduct for monks, with modifications to suit the changes in the environment over the centuries. The same principle has not applied here to the case of nuns: instead, the interpretation in the *Cullavagga* is retained with more reinforcement, which, in effect, presents a sharp contrast to the then social ethos (Gunawardana 1990).

Evidence for the existence of different traditional versions of the *Vinaya Pitaka* of the Theravada, other than the only one available to us today, can be found in the *Samantapasadika* as well as in the *Vamsatthapakasini*, (ed. Malalsekera) the commentary on the *Dipavamsa*. The controversy between the Mahavihara and the Abhayagiri monasteries in relation to a punishment given to a nun, as it appears in *Samantapasadika*, is directly relevant. The Mahavihara version of *Cullavagga* has it that when the nun Mettiya falsely accused the monk Dabba Mallaputta of having violated her chastity, the Buddha inquired from the monk, and, on his order that Mettiya be expelled from the order. The Abhayagiri version has it that the nun was expelled on the basis of her own confession, not just because of the monk's denial. The importance given to this issue of ecclesiastical justice is seen from the fact the *Samantapasadika* records that the king at that time, Bhatika Tissa (143-67 C.E.), commissioned the official Dighakaranaya to hold an inquiry, and the verdict given was in favour of the Mahavihara.

Independent Vinaya Tradition and Its Interpretation

The *Vamsatthapakasini* provides evidence for the fact that different schools had their own versions of the Vinaya. The Abhayagiri monastery and the Jetavana monastery had distinct accounts, together with their own interpretations, and these were criticized by the Mahavihara. Based on this evidence, it has been suggested that the nuns had their own version of the *Vinaya*, together with a distinct tradition of its

interpretation. The information discussed above and the lineage of *Vinaya* teachers given in the *Dipavamsa* reveal the fact that there was a long line of *Vinaya* teachers coming down from the time of Sanghamitta, and that it had no link with the line of teachers among monks, as given in the *Samantapasadika*. This evidence suggests that the nuns inherited a line of *Vinaya* teachers which was independent of the order of monks.

Were the Nunneries affiliated to Different Monasteries or Nikayas?

King Mahasena (277-304 C.E.) who was an opponent of Mahavihara and founded the Jetavana vihara built two nunneries called Uttara and Abhaya. These nunneries could have been affiliated to another monastery other than the Mahavihara. It is possible that these two nunneries were affiliated or had some connection with the Abhayagiri vihara which was also known by the two names Abhaya vihara and Uttara vihara.

There is reason to believe that the Sinhalese Bhikkhunis who went to China in the 5th century C.E. were affiliated to the *Abhayagiri* monastery, an emerging centre of *Mahayana* activity at the time. By the 5th century C.E., the rivalry between the Mahavihara school, founded in 3rd B.C.E and other schools such as *Abhayagiri* (1st century B.C.E.) and Jetavana (3rd century C.E.) had become more pronounced. The first group of Sinhalese nuns arrived in Nanjing in 429 C.E., about ten years after the

Chinese pilgrim Fa-hsien left Sri Lanka, having stayed there for two years; both events took place during the reign of King Mahanama (410-31 C.E.). Fa-hsien stayed at the Abhayagiri monastery where 2,000 monks resided, and obtained copies of the *Vinaya Pitaka* of the Mahisasaka school and several other schools (Beal, Vol. I. p. 48.) This is confirmed by archaeological excavation. A number of copper plaques containing quotations from the *Prajnaparamita* slabs bearing Tantric formulae and other records referring to the rite of *abhisheka* found at the site of the Abhayagiri monastery reveal that it had become a centre of Tantric practice in the 9th and 10th centuries C.E.) It is also to be noted that Fa-hsien on his return, took residence in Nanjing; and undertook the translation of Sanskrit manuscripts — especially the Vinaya literature — into Chinese. It is probable, although not recorded, that he took the initiative in bringing the mission of Sinhalese nuns to China. Fa-hsien's records (Beal, Vol. I) mention a Chinese merchant who made an offering to the Abhayagiri monastery, and it is to be noted that the Sinhalese nuns left for China in a merchant's ship. Another fact that supports the close connection between the Abhayagiri monastery and China is that King Mahanama (Mo-ho-non) sent a letter to the Chinese emperor along with a model of the Shrine of the Tooth Relic in 428 C.E., and the Shrine of the Tooth Relic was under the care of the Abhayagiri monastery at the time (Goonatilake 1974)

Another *nikaya* the nuns were affiliated with was Sagalika *nikaya*, another name for Jetavana *nikaya*. Three hundred monks wanting to dissociate themselves from the Vetullavada broke away from the Abhayagiri monastery and took up residence in a

new monastery in 249 C.E. They became also known as Sagalika because a monk among them by the name of Sagala gained fame as an expounder of the Dhamma. Susequently, King Mahasen (276-303 A.C.) built the Jetavana monastery together with a stupa, the largest ever built in Sri Lanka and bestowed it to the Thera Tissa of this *nikaya* (*Mahavamsa* 37.32-5). It was during the reign of Moggallana I (497-515 C.E.) that a nunnery was built for the nuns of the Sagalika *nikaya*, “Having built a shelter for Bhikkhunis called Rajini, the wise (king) made it over to the Bhikkhunis of the Sagalika school.” (*Culavamsa* 39, 43).

Bhikkhuni Sangha continued up to the 11th Century

References to Bhilkhunis, though less in number continued to appear in the chronicles through the centuries. During the reign of Aggabodhi IV (663-683 C.E.), Bhikkhunis were greatly patronized.

“The highly virtuous Mahesi of the king, Jettha by name built the Jettharama as as abode for the bhikkhunis and granted it two villages in the Pattapasana domain and the village of Buddhabelagama as well as a hundred monastery helpers” (*Culavamsa* 46, 27-28).

The next reference occurs when Mahinda II (777-797 C.E.), also known as Silamegha placed a Bodhisatta statue made of silver in the Silamegha nunnery for Bhikkhunis (*Culavamsa* 48, 140). The gift of a Bodhisatta statue may imply that the

nunnery was affiliated either to Abhayagiri or Jetavana. The queen of Mahinda II's successor (Udaya I (797-801 C.E.)), built a new nunnery for the same Bhikkhunis, probably because it had gone into decay.

“... she built a home for Bhikkhunis called Silamegha, and gave it to the (former) home for Bhikkhunis called Silamegha” (*Culavamsa* 49, 25).

Some nunneries were assigned especially with the function of taking care of the sacred Bodhi tree by offering water etc. Mahakalattava Pillar Inscription records that seven leading nuns from the nunnery Nalarama built by a royal official during the reign of Kassapa IV (898-914 C.E.) were assigned with the daily duty of taking care of the Bodhi tree. These nuns are referred to as *meheni-vathambuvan*, feminine form of *vat-himi* (Sanskrit: *vastu svami*, a person of very high honour). The term indicates that these nuns were held in the highest esteem. The village of Gitelgamu was donated to meet the cost of providing these nuns with their daily requisites (*EZ* Vol. V, pp. 339-340).

The nuns of another nunnery named Tissarama, built by another royal official of Kassapa IV were entrusted with the care of the Bodhi tree in the Maricavatti Vihara, affiliated to the Mahavihara (*Culavamsa* 54, 24). The Ayitigeveva Pillar Inscription of Kassapa V (913-923 C.E.) records the grant of immunities of lands donated to this nunnery (*EZ* II, 1985, pp.19-25).

The nuns appear to have received special patronage in the tenth century. The Anuradhapura Slab Inscription of Kassapa V, forbids royal officers to take away anything belonging to the lands in the vicinity of a nunnery which stands in the complex of viharas. Vajira, the wife of Sakkasenapati, son of Kassapa V had a nunnery built in Padalanchana and granted it to the “Bhikkhunis of the universally revered Thera school.” (*Culavamsa* 52, 63).

The Kukurumahan Damana Pillar Inscription of the 10th century records that there was a hospital (*vedha*) in front of the nunnery known as Mahindarama on the High Street (*mahaveya*) of the inner city of Anuradhapura, the then capital of Sri Lanka (*EZ* II, pp. 19-25). The nuns were perhaps closely associated with the hospital or managed it.

The last reference in the chronicles occurs towards the end of the Anuradhapura period about the time the Colas were troops were creating chaos. Mahinda IV (956-972 C.E.),

“... had built a a home called Mahamallaka and made it over to the bhikkhunis proceeding from the Thera School” (*Culavamsa* 54, 47).

Here the ‘Thera School’ denotes the succession that comes from the initiator of the Sasana in Sri Lanka Thera Mahinda, and in this case, from Theri Sanghamitta. The term ‘theriya’, however goes back to the First Council where after the Buddha's

death, his disciple Mahakasyapa convened a council of 500 *arhats* to collect and preserve the Buddha's teachings (*Mahavamsa*, 3,40). It should be noted that the Bhikkhunis were not invited to participate at this most important event.

The Bhikkhuni order that flourished in Sri Lanka through the centuries became defunct during the Cola occupation when both Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni sangha disappeared. Mahinda V (982-1029 C.E.) was the last king to rule at Anuradhapura. He was captured by the Colas in 1017 and died in captivity in South India. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume the Bhikkhuni Sangha survived until around 1017. It was King Vijayabahu I (1055-1110 C.E.) who expelled the Colas and re-established the monks' order with the help of Sri Lankan monks who had resided in Burma during the Cola occupation. There is no mention of any effort to revive the Bhikkhuni order, probably because the Bhikkhuni order did not exist in Burma (Goonatilake, 1988).

First Missionary Nuns in Foreign Lands

The *Dipavamsa* also mentions Sivala and Mahaniha as nuns who propagated Buddhism in Jambudipa (India) during a period of unrest in Sri Lanka in the 1st century B.C.E. (A Sanskrit inscription assigned to a later period (3rd and 4th centuries C.E.) (*Epigraphia Indica* 20 p. 22) and found at Nagarjunakonda, a well-established centre of Mahayana learning in South India, refers to Sinhalese nuns from Tamrapanni (Sri Lanka) who carried out missionary work. The *Dipavamsa* further

mentions that the first group of nuns to resume the task of teaching the Vinaya after the troubled period included the names of Mahasona, Datta, Sivala, Rupasobhini, Dhammagutta, Dasiya, Sapatta Channa, Upali, Revata, Mala, Khema and Tissa. After the situation became normal, they had returned to Sri Lanka at the orders of the king, and resumed their teaching work. The king received advice from these learned nuns and provided them with whatever they wished for during this time.

The most significant foreign travel undertaken by Sri Lankan Bhikkhunis was in the 5th century. This travel to China is perhaps the longest recorded travel by women anywhere in the world up to that time (See below). In the 11th century C.E., the Sri Lankan Bhikkhuni Chandramali went to Tibet and translated six Tantra texts from Sanskrit to Tibetan which have been included in the Tibetan *Tripitaka*, the *Kanjur*.

Sri Lankan Lineage passed on to Chinese Nuns

We have observed above that the Bhikkhuni lineage continued without a break and flourished until 1017 C.E. It was this lineage that was passed on by the Sri Lankan Bhikkhunis to the Chinese nuns in 433 C.E. This event of great significance is not mentioned in any of the Sri Lankan records. The *Pi-chiu-ni-chuang* ('Biography of the Nuns') compiled by Pao-chang in 520 C.E., and biographies of Gunavarman and Sanghavarman give detailed accounts of how the Chinese Bhikkhuni order was established. Soon after Buddhism arrived in China, a number of Chinese women

evinced an interest in becoming nuns. It was, however, Ching-chien, the daughter of the Governor of Wu-wei being desirous of becoming a nun had her head shaved and the ten main rules administered to her by a monk instructor Venerable Gnanagiri who had come to China circa 313 C.E. from Kashmir in India. Then she and twenty-four of her followers founded the Bamboo Forest nunnery at the western gates of the Palace Precincts. Later Ching-chien with three other women took their full Bhikkhuni vows from a senior monk on a floating platform in Loyang. Thus Ching-chien was the first Chinese nun. But the proper administration of vows of full ordination remained a problem for a long time. When Hui Kuo, herself an expert in Vinaya consulted Bhikshu *Gunavannan* of Kashmir as to whether it was acceptable for women to receive full ordination without the participation of nuns, *Gunavarman* responded by saying that there would be nothing wrong with such an ordination as there were no Bhikkhunis in China at the time. In 429 C.E., eight nuns from Sri Lanka brought by the ship owner Nandi arrived in China, and lived in the Ching-fu nunnery in the ancient Sung capital, Nanjing. On hearing that the Chinese nuns had received ordination only from monks, the Sinhalese Bhikkhunis sent back Nandi to bring another team of Bhikkhunis as eight were deemed insufficient in number to perform an ideal dual ordination. In 433 C.E., Nandi returned to China bringing the nun Tie-so-ra Devasara and ten other nuns. The nuns who had arrived previously had by then mastered the Chinese language. Prior to his death, *Gunavarman* had thoughtfully left instructions for performing the dual ordination with a Sinhala monk, Sanghavarman. Thus, the two groups of Sri Lankan Bhikkhunis conferred the dual

ordination to three hundred Chinese nuns in the year 433 C.E. at the Nanjing temple (Goonatilake 2002).

Sri Lankan Lineage given Back to Sri Lanka

Several efforts had been made by Sri Lankan monks over the decades to confer Bhikkhuni ordination on Sri Lankan *Samaneris*. The most significant initiative was the one made in 1996 by Ven. Mapalagama Vipulasara Thera where Bhikkhuni Kusuma became the first to receive *upasampada* in Sarnath, India from a team of Korean Bhikkhunis. Bhikkhuni Kusuma and nine other Bhikkhunis who received *upasampada* there remained in India for missionary activities.

In February 1998, the Buddha's Light International Association of Fo Guan Shan, Taiwan organized an international dual ordination ceremony in Bodh Gaya, India. By this time, twenty *Samaneris* were being trained by the *Bhikkhuni* Educational Academy in Sri Lanka under the guidance of Venerable Sumangala Thera of Rangiri Dambulu temple. These twenty *Samaneris* got the opportunity to receive higher ordination in Bodh Gaya along with other international *Samaneris* and *Samaneras*. Six months later, Sumangala Thera conducted a ceremony for these twenty Sri Lankan Bhikkhunis to confer higher ordination to another twenty two *Samaneris* who had been trained.

The *upasampada* ceremony held on the Sri Lankan soil after nearly one thousand years, was conducted at the ordination hall (*sima-malaka*), of the 2,200-year old Rangiri Dambulu temple, which was up to then used exclusively for *Bhikkhus'* ecclesiastical activities. Thus the Bhikkhuni ordination was re-established in Sri Lanka after nearly one thousand years. It was history unfolding.

It is important here to underscore the objective of organizing the international dual ordination ceremony held at Bodh Gaya, as stated in fliers and banners for the event,

"In gratitude in having received the *Bhikkhuni* lineage from Indian and Sri Lankan missionaries, the Chinese feel that it is their duty to return the lost *Bhikkhuni* lineage to the ancestral lands..."

Thus the higher ordination received in Bodh Gaya by the nuns from Theravada countries was in accordance with one of the original traditions, *Dharmagupta*, an early branch of the *Theravada*, which continued with an unbroken lineage in China after *upasampada* was conferred on Chinese nuns by Sri Lankan Bhikkhunis headed by Devasara in 433 CE.

It should also be noted that the *Dharmagupta Bhikkhuni Vinaya* rules as they function in China, Taiwan and South Korea today are the same as the *Theravada Bhikkhuni Vinaya* rules, although the rest of the Chinese *Tripitaka* differ substantially from that of the Theravada. Our studies as well as studies conducted by other scholars confirm

that the *Dharmagupta Bhikkhuni Vinaya* contains additional twenty five minor rules that reflect the local needs of a social and climatic nature more than in the Theravada (Goonatilake 1993).

Conclusion

We have seen above the Bhikkhuni lineage that began with Prajapati Gotami's ordination by the Buddha himself continued up to the time of the Emperor Asoka, and that his son Thera Mahinda took the initiative to introduce the Bhikkhuni ordination through his own sister Sanghamitta in the 3rd century B.C.E. We have also seen that the same lineage continued through the centuries up to the 1017 C.E. when it totally disappeared along with the monks' order.

The Bhikkhuni ordination introduced by Sri Lankan Bhikkhunis to China in the 5th century, spread from China to Korea and to Japan. After one thousand years, the Sri Lanka nuns received higher ordination back from the Chinese Bhikkhunis living in Fo Guan Shan monastery, and thus the same unbroken lineage continues at present in Sri Lanka.

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