

# **Bhikkhunìs and Buddhist Nuns**

## **Bhikkhu Khantipálo**

History of Bhikkhunì—Sangha—Eight important points—dangers of sex and conceit—double ordination—novices—special rules—some Bhikkhunìs of the Buddha-time—Asoka's daughter a Bhikkhunì—bhikkhunìs in Sri Lanka to China—Are there bhikkhunìs now?—Upásikás (nuns) and their support—their life—westerners becoming nuns.

Now what is the history of the Bhikkhunì Sangha? The Commentaries say that when Prince Siddhattha left his palace at the time of his Great Renunciation, cut off his hair and donned yellowish brown robes, Yasodhara his wife, hearing that he had done these things, resolved to live in the same way in her palace. She shaved her head and wore rough patchwork robes, ate once a day from a bowl and slept on a low, hard bed. No doubt she strove also to develop her mind through meditation.

So even before there were any nuns formally ordained, Yasodhara out of devotion to the way shown by the prince, led a what may be called a nun's life. When the Buddha, a year after his Enlightenment, returned to Kapilavatthu at the request of his father,

Yasodhara had an opportunity to pay her respects together with the other Sakyan ladies, foremost among whom was Queen Mahápajápatì Gotamì , the Buddha's aunt and foster-mother. This lady became a Stream-winner upon hearing the Buddha's teaching while King Suddhodana won the third Path and Fruit—of Non-returning.

Four or five years then passed before the Buddha again visited the Sakyan people. This time he went there because his father was gravely ill, and he taught him Dhamma upon his deathbed so that the King attained to Arahantship.

At this time, Mahápajápatì Gotamì went to him and asked if women might also get the chance to go forth into homelessness. The Buddha's reply is interesting, as it is not a flat refusal, “Enough Gotamì, do not ask for the going-forth from home to homelessness in the Dhamma-Vinaya declared by the Tathágata.” And though she asked three times the reply was the same, so she thought, “The Exalted One does not allow it,” and she was sad and unhappy.

If the Buddha wished to prohibit the formation of the Bhikkhunì-Sangha, he could have used much more forceful language, such as, “It is impossible, Gotamì, it cannot happen that ...” All he told Mahápajápatì Gotamì was “enough, do not ask ...” and these words may be assumed to be a test of the sincerity of that

lady and her companions. The life led by Bhikkhus, at the beginning of the Buddha's teaching, was a hard one, hard even for the aristocratic men from the various princely and brahminical families who joined the Sangha then: how much harder would it not be for ladies from a sheltered palace life! Since the Buddha was aware of the intentions people had in their minds, he must have known that Mahápajápatì Gotamì intended to go forward with her idea, but as she had not yet demonstrated her unshakeable resolve, he did not grant permission.

We are told that after the Buddha left Kapilavatthu, he went to Vesáli, a distance of 200 or 300 miles. “Meanwhile Mahápajápati had cut her hair off and put on the yellow cloth. With a number of Sakyan women, she set out for Vesáli. On arrival there she went to the Peaked Gable Hall in the Great Wood, and she stood there outside the porch. Her feet were swollen, her limbs covered with dust, and she was sad and unhappy with tears on her face and sobbing. Sakyan ladies of rank were not accustomed to travel in this manner for they usually journeyed by palanquin or upon elephants.

Then venerable Ánanda, who was especially compassionate with the troubles of women, saw her and asked what she did there. She told him that the Exalted One had not allowed her to become a Bhikkhunì, so he offered to ask the Buddha again. The answer was

still the same but venerable Ánanda was not deterred by this and he thought, “But suppose I asked the Exalted One in another way?” So he asked if it was possible for women to attain to the noble Paths and Fruits after Going-forth? Could they attain Arahantship? The Buddha replied that it was possible for them to do so.

From this we can know that the Buddha saw nothing innately inferior in a woman's mind, though the Holy Life might have been more difficult for her physically. Then venerable Ánanda pleaded the case of Mahápajápatì Gotamì in these words “... (she) has been exceedingly helpful to the Exalted One when as his mother's sister who was his nurse, his foster-mother, his giver of milk, she suckled the Exalted One when his own mother died. Since that is so, Lord, it would be good if women could obtain the Going-forth.”

The Buddha then permitted women to become Bhikkhunìs, (because they could attain Arahantship, rather than just because of venerable Ánanda's plea), provided that certain points were accepted. Mahápajápatì Gotamì could count as her Going-forth and Acceptance the following eight important points:

1. “A Bhikkhunì who has been accepted even for a hundred years must pay homage to, get up for, reverentially salute and respectfully greet, a Bhikkhu accepted that day.” This means that a senior Bhikkhunì (a theri) must bow down thrice even to a newly

ordained Bhikkhu. This is not pleasing to some women these days whose idea is to be free from male domination, but when the Buddha laid down this rule, he knew that some principle of respectful relations must be established between Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunìs. Later, Mahápajápatì Gotamì requested that juniors, male or female, pay respect to senior Bhikkhus or Bhikkhunìs without distinction. The Buddha however, replied that no Bhikkhu should pay homage to a Bhikkhunì.

Certainly he had no feelings of male superiority or of female inferiority (which, after all, are just extensions of the basic conceit 'I am'), but he apparently took into account how this matter would appear to laypeople. In that early day and age, men in lay society hardly acknowledged female ability, and most certainly did not bow down to them! To permit this would have been too great an inversion of the social norm and could become a cause for the decline of the Buddhist religion.

The Buddha was already making a great innovation by allowing women to go forth but to allow equality of respect would be seen as too much for that time. In the Vinaya (the Lesser Chapter, Bhikkhunì-section), the Buddha actually refers to other religious groups and how they do not permit salutation of nuns by monks. This would seem to support the argument here. We shall return to the

question of conceit and humility below.

2. “A Bhikkhunì must not spend the Rains in a place where there are no Bhikkhus.” Bhikkhunìs were made dependent upon Bhikkhus in a number of ways as we shall see in the following points. This rule was also for the Bhikkhunìs' safety since unscrupulous men might molest a nun if she was alone, but they would think twice about it if she lived near to Bhikkhus.

3. “Every half-month a Bhikkhunì should expect two things from the Bhikkhu-Sangha: the appointment of the Uposatha-day each half-month and the visit for exhortation.” The Buddha-time was without calendars and almanacs, and it was learned Bhikkhus who calculated the phases of the moon and worked out when the Uposatha-days would fall. The visit for exhortation was in part a Dhamma-talk given by an eminent Bhikkhu to the Bhikkhunìs, (see the Exhortation by Nandaka to the Bhikkhunìs in the Middle Length Collection, Discourse 146) and partly an exhortation regarding these eight important points. The Bhikkhu who gave it had to be agreed upon by the Bhikkhu-Sangha, he had to be a Thera with twenty or more Rains, and he had to give the talk during the day, before the sunset. Otherwise, the Bhikkhunìs should not be approached by a Bhikkhu to teach them Dhamma, unless one of their numbers was ill. The Buddha while seeing that it was necessary that the Bhikkhunìs

depend somewhat on Bhikkhus, also saw the danger of too many contacts between the two Sanghas and so limited this. The fact that a great Teacher from among the Bhikkhus would give the fortnightly exhortation did not mean that the Bhikkhunīs had no Teachers among themselves. In this connection the section on the Bhikkhunīs who were declared 'foremost' in different abilities in the Book of the Ones, Numerical Collection, should be noted, besides which there are the many beautiful verses of the Enlightened Bhikkhunīs in the Therīgatha (Verses of the Elder Nuns). Discourses spoken by Bhikkhunīs, some of them Arahants, are found scattered throughout the collections of Discourses.

4. "At the end of the Rains a Bhikkhunī must invite the admonition of both Sanghas with regard to three matters; that is, whether any thing untoward in her conduct has been seen, heard or suspected." Bhikkhus have to invite admonition on the last Full Moon day of their Rains-residence (usually in October) from the rest of the Sangha. This ceremony is held in place of the recitation of the Pátimokkha wherever a minimum of five Bhikkhus have kept the Rains. If anyone among them has seen or heard or suspected that one of the others has done some wrong which has not been confessed he can speak at that time. It also means that Bhikkhus invite such admonition from other Bhikkhus for the future. They make

themselves 'admonishable' by doing so and know that their Teachers and friends will therefore help them with good advice. The bhikkhunìs have to make this declaration in the presence of both Sanghas, first to her own and then to the Bhikkhus. This is no doubt to help the restraint of the Bhikkhunìs and to assist the good government of the Bhikkhunì-Sangha.

5. "When a Bhikkhunì has committed an offence entailing initial and subsequent meeting of the Sangha, she must do the penance before both Sanghas."

This is a group of thirteen offences for Bhikkhus (already outlined in Chapter III) but for Bhikkhunìs they number seventeen. A number of these thirteen, as well as of the extra Bhikkhunì rules, concern sexual misconduct, and it would surely be a grave deterrent for a woman to have to confess them in the presence of Bhikkhus after she had done so in front of the Bhikkhunìs. Like a Bhikkhu, she has then to practise the penance for seven days plus a period of probation equal to the time of concealment if her offence has been deliberately concealed.

6. "A probationer who seeks Acceptance must do so from both Sanghas and after training in the six things for two years." A probationer (*sikkhamáná*) was a special kind of female novice (*sámaneri*). The latter has ten precepts just as a Sámaóera but on



reaching the age of eighteen, that is, two years under the age for Acceptance, the Bhikkhunì-Sangha could announce a motion to give her permission to train (specially) in the first six rules: not killing living creatures, not taking what is not given, no unchaste conduct, not speaking falsely, no intoxicants causing carelessness, and no eating at the wrong time (after noon until dawn). If during the following two years she does not break any of these six precepts then she can seek Acceptance by the Bhikkhunì-Sangha first. (If any are broken the two-year probation period has to begin again). Then she is taken to the Bhikkhu-Sangha who ordains her by proclamation and without investigation. She is then a fully ordained Bhikkhunì. But if she gets only the Acceptance ceremony from the Bhikkhus, or she gets it from the Bhikkhunìs and does not go to be re-ordained by Bhikkhus, then she is only a 'once-accepted-Bhikkhunì,' not fully-fledged according to the Vinaya. When twice ordained, however, she is called a 'both-accepted-bhikkhunì and fully-fledged. This has an important bearing on the present day as we shall see below.

7. "A Bhikkhunì must not find fault with or abuse a Bhikkhu in any manner at all." Here again the aim is to stop malicious gossip and promote concord between the two Sanghas. A Bhikkhunì could of course report a Bhikkhu to his Teacher or abbot if his actions went against the Vinaya and damaged the good name of the Sangha, but

she should not directly speak against that Bhikkhu to his face or behind his back.

8. “From today onwards it is not allowed for Bhikkhuniṅ to address discourses to Bhikkhus but it is allowed for Bhikkhus to address Bhikkhuniṅ.” As we have seen, a Bhikkhu was expected to exhort the Bhikkhuniṅ at least twice a month but a Bhikkhuniṅ should not teach Dhamma to Bhikkhus. No doubt this rule was also made to curb conceit in Bhikkhuniṅ and help them in their training.

The Buddha finished his eight points saying, “These eight things are to be honoured, respected, revered and venerated and they are not to be transgressed as long as life lasts. If Mahápajápati Gotamiṅ accepts these eight important points, that will count as her full Acceptance.”

Five of these eight points, if transgressed, are offences of expiation, which are righted by confession to another Bhikkhuniṅ.

Mahápajápati Gotamiṅ accepted these eight points joyfully and so became the first Bhikkhuniṅ. The fact that she did so joyfully shows her humility. Her wisdom led her to accept these points seeing that they would be helpful in Dhamma-training. This point should be carefully noted. On this occasion, the Buddha pointed out to venerable Ananda that since trouble could be expected when women were allowed to go forth, so he had appointed the eight

important points in advance to them that, "As a man might construct in advance an embankment so that the waters of a great reservoir should not cause a flood, so I too have made known in advance these eight important points for Bhikkhunīs not to be transgressed as long as life lasts."

These eight important points are compared by the Buddha to an embankment so we may ask what was the flood that he sought to prevent by means of it. If we examine these points, all eight have one thing in common: they deal with various sorts of contact between bhikkhunīs and bhikkhus, either as sanghas or individually. The flood that the Buddha tried to stem was probably that unregulated contact between members of the two sanghas could easily give rise to gossip and slander even when actions were innocent of any wrongdoing. In fact the Vinaya gives many examples of laypeople who were not Buddhists, exclaiming that the bhikkhunīs were obviously the bhikkhus' wives. This sort of misapprehension or slander, whichever it was, had to be avoided at all costs for the good name of both bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs. Opponents the world over of any religious movement have never hesitated to use the smear of sexual relations as the most potent method of discrediting celibates.

It appears too that part of the flood was conceit. Then it may be

asked whether women on the whole have more conceit than men and whether they are more in need of humility. Generalizations of this sort are difficult to make since some women have more humility than others, but woman's preoccupation with cultivating and preserving bodily beauty is evidence of conceit. Conceit in a Buddhist sense means how one conceives oneself, as superior to others, equal to them, or inferior. As far as beauty is concerned women like to be at least equal or superior to other women, an attitude which is rooted in attracting men and binding them by attachment. This conceit cannot be allowed to manifest in a celibate order, and there are actually many rules laid down by the Buddha about Bhikkhunis, that neither their persons nor their robes should be adorned in any way. Perhaps such restraint is more difficult for women than for men. A nun in Thailand in the present day has declared that she believes that women require the rules which are directed against conceit as aids for their own training.

After these digressions, we should continue to follow the history of the Bhikkhunis. Mahápajápati Gotami became the first of them just by accepting the Eight Important Points. Her first question to the Buddha was how the Sakiyan ladies who had accompanied her and who included Princess Yasodhará, the Buddha's former wife, should be given the Acceptance. The Buddha instructed that the

Bhikkhu-sangha should give them Acceptance as Bhikkhunìs. We know that a large number of this first group of Bhikkhunìs, including Mahápajápati Gotami and Yasodhará, became Arahants.

Later, when an applicant was questioned by Bhikkhus during the Acceptance-ceremony, she became shy and the Buddha then said that the Bhikkhunì-sangha should ordain the applicant first, asking the delicate questions, after which the Bhikkhu-sangha should give the Acceptance again without asking any questions. It seems likely that this dual acceptance would make more difficult the entry of undesirable elements into the Bhikkhunì-sangha.

As time went on, unruly elements in the Bhikkhunì-sangha did things which were unsuitable for the Holy Life so that the Buddha had to lay down rules of training specially for the Bhikkhunìs. Many of the Bhikkhus' training rules applied to them as well but they had also precepts which had no application to Bhikkhus, amounting in all to 311 training-rules, compared with the 227 for bhikkhus. These rules were recited at the Uposatha ceremony every lunar fortnight and constituted their basic rule. Together with the stories of how they originated and their elaboration, they constituted the second book of the Vinaya Basket, as we saw in Chapter IV.

A senior Bhikkhunì or theri, that is one who had spent twelve

Rains in the Sangha, was entitled to be an ordaining teacher but it happened that young Bhikkhunīs were not trained properly (which points out a lack of capacity for organization at that time) so that the Buddha had to limit Acceptance to one pupil every other year for each Bhikkhunī-teacher. There was no limit in the Bhikkhu-sangha.

This meant that the spread of the Bhikkhunīs was limited both by the above limitation and by their more difficult disciplinary code. No Bhikkhunī could live or travel alone but had to live, all the time, with a Bhikkhunī companion. Even their living places had to be limited to towns where they could be properly sheltered from molestation by violent men. Forest-dwelling Bhikkhunīs existed only in the earliest days and were later forbidden after the rape of the Arahant theri Uppalavannā.[3] She was one of the great Teachers in the Bhikkhunī-sangha and was praised by the Buddha as foremost in supernormal powers.

During the Buddha-time many thousand of women became bhikkhunīs from all levels of society. Here the verses of just ten of them, with their stories in brief, will be presented. Some of the verses of *Kisagotamī* Theri have been quoted already, while those of the venerables *Muttā* and *Rohiōī* will be given below. To begin with, here is the verse of the Arahant *Dhammadinnā*. She was born in a

wealthy family and married to Visákha, a leading citizen of Rájagaha. He heard the Buddha teach and attained the Fruit of Non-returning and so, having no sexual desire left at all, gave Dhammadinná the choice of remaining in the house and enjoying the wealth there, or of returning to her own family, but she chose to become a Bhikkhunì and soon reached Arahantship. Her verse was uttered before this, while she was still a Non-returner striving in a solitary place. Later, she was praised by the Buddha as "foremost (of the Bhikkhunìs) among the Dhamma-preachers."

One with a wish for the Final End,  
with a mind exhilarated,  
a mind unbound from pleasures of sense,  
an 'Upstream-goer'[4] she is called. (12)

Next, *Sakulá*, born in a brahmin family. She was also married and acquired faith in the Buddha, at the time when he accepted the Jeta Grove as a monastery. One day she listened to the teaching of an Arahant bhikkhu and was deeply stirred at which she requested the Going-forth. Later, as an Arahant, the Buddha assigned to her preeminence among those with the Divine Eye.

As I was living in my house  
I heard a bhikkhu teaching Dhamma,  
Dhamma I saw, stainless then—  
Nibbána, the unchanging state.

I left my son, my daughter too,  
my wealth as well, my stored-up grain  
and having had my hair cut off  
I went forth to the homeless state.

Then was I a probationer  
developing the path that's straight,  
I abandoned lust, aversion too  
and the pollutions linked to them.



Accepted as a Bhikkhuni

I remembered former births

having made pure the Eye Divine,

spotless it is and well-developed.

The conditioned as other[5] having seen,

arising causally, dissolving away,

the pollutions all I abandoned then,

Quenched, I have become quite cool.[6]

(97-101)

*Soná* was also born into a good family and eventually became the mother of ten sons and daughters, so that she was known as 'the many-childrened.' After her husband had become a bhikkhu, she gave over the wealth of the family to her children, keeping nothing for herself. But soon her children ceased to show her any respect, so she went forth among the Bhikkhuni, thinking, 'I have gone forth in my old age, I must make great efforts.' So she practised all night, every night and became known for her energy. The Buddha one

night projected a vision of himself and spoke these words:

Though one should live a hundred years  
not seeing the Deathless State,  
yet better is life for a single day  
seeing the Deathless State.

At these words, she attained Arahantship. The Buddha one day declared her to be "foremost among Bhikkhunis who strive energetically." Reflecting one day upon her experience she spoke these verses:

Ten children having borne  
from this bodily congeries,  
so I, now weak and old,  
approached a Bhikkhuni.

The Dhamma she taught me—  
groups, sense-spheres and elements.[7]

Her Dhamma having heard  
I shaved my hair, went forth.  
Then a probationer  
I purified the Eye Divine,  
former lives I knew  
and where I lived before.  
One-pointed, well-composed,  
the Signless[8] I developed—  
immediately released  
unclinging now and quenched!  
The five groups knowing well,  
exist, their roots are cut,  
unmovable am I  
on a stable basis sure,  
now rebirth is no more.

(102-106)

Reborn in a brahmin family, *Somá's* father was officiating priest to King Bimbisára. While still in her own house she came to have confidence in the Buddha, and hearing Dhamma her mind became deeply stirred so that she became a Bhikkhunì. Thus she did not marry. After practising for some time she attained Arahantship. Then dwelling in the bliss of Freedom she went one day after the almsround to the Dark Wood and sat there in solitude. Then Mára (the personification of evil) spoke these words to her:

That which sages may attain,  
the Firm State very hard to reach,  
a woman with two fingers' worth  
of wisdom cannot win.

And she replied with these verses showing how she could not be shaken:

What's it to do with a woman's state  
when the mind is well-composed

with knowledge after knowledge born  
sees into Perfect Dhamma clear?

For who indeed conceives it thus:

a woman am I, a man am I

or what indeed then am I—

it's worthwhile Mará's speech.

(Saíyutta Nikaya Collection, Section with Verses Chapter V, 2).

*Ubbiri* was reborn in her last existence in the family of an important citizen of Sávatthì. She was extremely beautiful and so was invited to the palace of King Pasenadi of Kosala. After some time a daughter was born to her whom she named Jivá and when the king saw the child he was so pleased that he had Ubbiri raised to the status of a queen. But the little girl died and the mother went daily to the burning ground in grief. Near there the Buddha met her and told her that innumerable daughters of hers (in past lives) had been burnt there and pointing out the places where this one and that one had been cremated or cast away, he spoke as follows:

Mother! you who wail in the wood,

come to yourself, O Ubbiri!  
Eighty-four thousand daughters of yours  
all with the name, Jivá,  
have been burnt in this funeral fire,  
for which of them do you wail?

Then and there because she had the requisite conditions, she attained  
Arahantship and replied in these verses:

Truly has he removed the dart,  
hard to see, that nestled in my heart,  
Grief for my daughter he drove away  
in me who was overcome by grief.

Now is the dart plucked out by me.  
not yearning now and fully quenched.

To the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha too

to the Wise One I for refuge go.

(51-53)

Then there was another mother, *Vasitthi*, who for grief of her dead son went quite mad. Born in a good family and married to a young man of equal status, she lived happily with her husband and bore one son. When able to run about he died, and while relatives were consoling the father, *Vasitthi* ran away raving and wandered about until she came to Mithila. There she saw the Buddha and at the sight of the Great One, regained her normal mind. Hearing Dhamma in brief, she asked to become a *Bhikkhuni* and soon after, she became an *Arahant*. Reflecting on her attainment, she exulted in this way:

With my mind deranged, crazed by grief

for my son and out of my senses,

naked, with dishevelled hair

I wandered here and there.

On heaps of rubbish from the streets,

on charnel-grounds and chariot-roads,

there I lived for three long years  
given over to hunger and thirst.  
Then I saw Him, the Sugata,[9]  
come to Mithila's city  
the tamer of the untamed,  
Enlightened, without fears at all.  
Having then regained my mind  
I bowed to him and sat nearby  
and out of compassion did Gotama  
teach me Dhamma, which having heard  
I went forth to the homeless state.  
Devoted to the Teacher's word  
I realized the State Secure,  
all griefs completely cut right out,  
abandoned, brought to an utter end,  
for known to me are the causes



from which all griefs are born.

(113-138)

Due to her past bad kamma, *Vimalá*[10] was born to a prostitute and herself followed that trade when she grew up. One day she saw the left-hand chief disciple of the Buddha, venerable Mahá-Moggallána, walking for almsfood in Vesali. Feeling desire for him she went to his dwelling and tried to seduce him. She could not succeed as he was an Arahant, but he succeeded in humbling her pride of beauty with verses ending with this one:

See this body beautiful,  
a mass of sores, a congeries,  
much considered but miserable  
where nothing is stable, nothing persists.

She was ashamed of her actions and became a lay-follower, later a Bhikkhunì who after effort and striving won Arahantship. Her verses of exultation are as follows:

Proud of my good complexion and figure,

my beauty and my fame as well,  
haughty because of my youth  
other women I despised.

Having adorned this body,  
well decorated, deceiving fools,  
at the brothel door I stood  
like a hunter laying a snare,  
showing off my attractions,  
much of my secrets revealing,  
various jugglery I performed  
and many people laughed loud.

Today for almsfood having walked  
shaven-headed, wrapped in my robe,  
sitting down at the foot of a tree

I have obtained the non-thinking mind.[11]

All ties completely cut away

Whether for gods or men  
and all pollutions having destroyed,  
quenched, I have become quite cool.

(72-76)

*Vaddhamátá*, the name means Vaddha's mother—parents often being nicknamed after their children, was born in a good family in the town of Bharukaccha (Bharoch). When married, she bore one son who was known as Vaddha. After hearing a Bhikkhu teach Dhamma she handed her child over to relatives and became a Bhikkhunì. Afterwards she won Arahantship, and in due course her son became a Bhikkhu, learned and eloquent in preaching. One day, negligently, he went alone with only his upper and under robes to see his mother.[12] She rebuked him for both these things so that he returned to his own quarters and sat in meditation there, attaining Arahantship.

This incident is interesting in view of the prohibition on Bhikkhunìs instructing Bhikkhus (see above, Eight Important Points, 8), but perhaps this prohibition only covered formal sermon-type instruction and not more informal conversation of this sort:

*Vaddha's mother:* Do not, Vaddha, ever get entangled  
in jungle-lusts[13] regarding the world!

My son, do not again and again  
become a sharer of dukkha!

Happy indeed are the Wise Ones, Vaddha,  
having no craving, cut off doubt,  
become quite cool, taming attained,  
unpolluted now they live.

The way that Seers have practised  
for attaining insight,  
for putting an end to dukkha,  
that, Vaddha, you should develop.

*Vaddha:* You have spoken confidently to me

concerning this matter, mother.

I think, indeed, my mother,

no jungle-lust in you is found.

*Vaddha's mother:* Whatever conditioned elements are,

whether middling, low or high[14]

for them not a speck, even an atom,

of jungle-lust in me is found.

My pollutions, all destroyed

by meditating diligently,

possessed of triple knowledge

done is the Buddha's Sásana.

*Vaddha:* Splendid is the goad indeed,

these verses on the Highest Goal,

which out of her compassion  
my mother has applied to me.

Having heard her words,  
the instructions of my mother,  
I was aroused in Dhamma  
to reach security from bonds.  
I resolved to exert myself,  
unrelaxing, day and night;  
incited by my mother  
I touched the Peace Supreme.

(204-212)

As a result of pride in former lives, *Puóóiká* was born in the household of Anáthapióđika, to a domestic slave. After hearing a discourse by the Buddha called the (Lesser) Lion's Roar (Middle Length Collection, Discourse 11), she became a Stream-winner. After the incident described below, Anáthapióđika freed her so that

she could gain Acceptance as a bhikkhunì. In no long time she attained Arahantship and one day reflecting on this attainment, uttered these verses of exultation:

*Puóóiká:* I am a water-carrier who,  
even in the cold, goes down into the water  
fearful of ladies' blows,  
harassed by fear of blame.

What is it, brahmin, that you fear  
always going down into the water?

Why with shivering limbs  
do you suffer bitter cold?

*Brahmin:* Already you know, Miss Puóóiká,  
the answer to what you ask:  
Making wholesome kamma  
while annulling evil kamma.

Whoever, whether young or old,  
evil kamma makes,  
even he from evil kamma's free  
by baptism in the water.

*Puóóiká:* Who has told you this,  
O ignorant of the ignorant—  
that truly he's from evil kamma free  
by baptism in the water?  
If this is so all turtles, frogs,  
serpents, fish and crocodiles,  
all that live in the water,  
all will go to heaven!  
Butchers of sheep and swine,  
fishermen and trappers,  
robbers and murderers too,



all who make evil kamma,  
even they by water-baptism  
will be free from evil kamma!  
And if these streams could bear away  
the evil formerly done by you,  
then your merits they'd bear away  
leaving you stripped and bare!  
That of which you're frightened,  
and so go into the waters,  
that thing, brahmin, do not do;  
let not the cold pierce your skin.

*Brahmin:* From the practice of the wrong path  
to the Noble Path you've led me!  
This cloth for water-baptism  
now I give to you.

*Puóóiká:* Let the cloth be yours,  
no desire for cloth have I.  
If you are afraid of dukkha,  
if dukkha is not dear to you,  
then make no evil kamma  
either openly or in secret.  
But if you make, or you will make,  
all kinds of evil kamma  
then you'll not be free of dukkha,  
even by flying or running off.  
If you are afraid of dukkha,  
if dukkha is not dear to you,  
go to the Buddha who is 'Thus'[15]  
as refuge, to Dhamma and Sangha too,  
undertake the training-rules,

for your benefit that will be.

*Brahmin:* I go to the Buddha who is 'Thus'[15]  
as refuge, to Dhamma and Sangha too;  
I undertake the training-rules;  
for my benefit that will be,  
Formerly 'Brahma's kin,'  
today a brahmana true,[16]  
possessed of triple knowledge,  
learned and washen pure.

(236-251)

The brahmin became a Bhikkhu and shortly afterwards an Arahant when he repeated joyously these verses.

*Sumangalamátá* (Sumangala's mother) is the last of the Bhikkhunìs whose stories and verses are given here. She was born in a poor family and in due course, married to a rush-plaiter. Her first child was called Sumangala who grew up, became a Bhikkhu

and attained Arahantship, while she became a Bhikkhunì. One day, reflecting on her sufferings as a lay-woman, insight quickened and she attained Arahantship, afterwards exclaiming:

Well freed am I, well freed indeed,  
thoroughly free from my pestle,  
from my shameless man, the sunshade maker,  
from my poverty and cooking pots.  
I live with lust and aversion completely cut off  
and having gone to the foot of a tree  
meditate on this happiness—  
'Ah! happiness indeed!'

(23-24—Numbers following verses refer to numbers in  
(The Verses of Elder Nuns).

We do know that the good name of the Bhikkhunìs lasted far beyond the Buddha-time, supported by the "embankment" that he had constructed. There were many Arahants among the Bhikkhunìs and some of their discourses survive in the Basket of Suttas. Their

inspired poems spoken often at the moment of Enlightenment have also survived in Páli. How these were included in the Canon is not clear since there is no mention of Bhikkhunìs taking part in the First Council: only five hundred Arahants are mentioned and they are all said to be Bhikkhus. But perhaps some Bhikkhunìs did participate, for the records of both first and second Councils are lacking in details.

In the reign of the Emperor Asoka the Bhikkhunìs must have had a good name both in learning and in practice, for the Emperor's daughter, Sanghamitta, joined their Sangha. Later, she embarked with many Bhikkhunìs for Sri Lanka bearing the southern branch of the Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha's Enlightenment took place. This was reverently planted in the capital of Anuradhapura and, still, more than two thousand years later, is accorded great devotion.

The Bhikkhunì-sangha continued to flourish in Sri Lanka for many centuries and the construction of nunneries by various Sinhalese kings is recorded in the Great Chronicle (Mahávamsa), even up to the reign of Kassapa IV (898-914 C.E.). Bhikkhunìs were treated with respect as the king's wards and in Sri Lanka their nunneries were in the Inner (Royal) City. This fact may have led to their disappearance during the conquest of the island by the Cholas, from south India in the tenth century. The Bhikkhu-sangha could

survive as it was scattered over the whole land but the Bhikkhunīs, concentrated in a few cities and towns, would have been vulnerable to destruction. When peace later returned to Sri Lanka the kings of those times were either not interested in restoring the Bhikkhunī-sangha, or more likely, were unable to do so for lack of pure Bhikkhunīs. There is even less record of the history of the Bhikkhunīs in India, and we do not know now whether their sangha perished before its extinction in Sri Lanka, or continued right up to the final end of the Buddha's teachings there.

However, long before the lineage of the Bhikkhunīs died out in Sri Lanka, their sangha was established in China, as recorded in the Chinese work, *Lives of Bhikkhunīs*:

"In the sixth year of Yuan Chia (429 C.E.) the foreign ship-owner Nandi arrived from the Lion Country (Sri Lanka) bringing with him some Bhikkhunīs.[17] They went to the Sung capital (Nanking) and lived in the Ching-fu Convent. After a time they asked the (partly-ordained) nun Seng-kuo[18] whether any foreign Bhikkhunīs had ever come. "Then how did previous nuns manage to have Bhikkhunīs as well as Bhikkhus to conduct their ordination (acceptance)?" asked the Bhikkhunīs from Ceylon. "We were ordained by a senior Bhikkhu," said Seng-kuo. "Any woman whose nature prompted her to take the vows was accepted. The earnest

desire of the candidates gave rise to this expedient, which is in some measure justified by the case of (the Buddha's aunt) Pajāpati, who was admitted to the Sangha on the strength of her Eight Declarations Of Reverence, and afterwards she in turn acted as Sīla-upadhyā (preceptress in the rules) to five hundred ladies of the Sakya clan."

Such was Seng-kuo's reply. But in her heart of hearts she was not very happy about the situation and consulted the Master of the Three Baskets Gunavarman, who supported her contention. She also asked him if it was possible for nuns who had been ordained already (only by a Bhikkhu-sangha) to be re-ordained (with a Bhikkhunī-sangha). "Morality, Meditation and Wisdom", he said "are all progressive states. If an ordination is repeated, so much the better."

In the tenth year (433 C.E.), the ship-owner Nandi came again to China bringing the Sinhalese Bhikkhunī Tessara and ten other Bhikkhunīs from Ceylon. The Bhikkhunīs who had arrived previously could now speak Chinese. They asked the Indian bhikkhu Sanghavarman to reordain them with their assistance three hundred Chinese nuns .... at the Southern Forest Monastery (at Nanking), receiving them in batches. (Takakusu, *Lives of Bhikkhunīs*, 939).

This brings us to the question of whether there are Bhikkhunīs in the present day. If you ask a Chinese Buddhist from Taiwan,

Hong Kong or a Korean from the South, or a Vietnamese, they would reply, "Yes, there are Bhikkhunīs." These ladies are certainly nuns for they keep the Holy Life. They have their own nunneries as the Bhikkhunīs of ancient times had their upassaya, the special name for their vihāras. Their Dhamma-study of course, as they come through the Chinese tradition, is largely of Mahayana texts, as their dress is in Chinese-style robes.

But they are not judged to be Bhikkhunīs by this or that style of robes but according to the lineage of their Acceptance. It seems these days that such Bhikkhunīs, wherever they are ordained, take Acceptance only from the Bhikkhu-sangha. They do not have the dual Acceptance laid down in the Vinaya which means that they can be counted, at best, as 'once-accepted-Bhikkhunīs.' Then the question arises whether such partial Bhikkhunīs can rightly be called 'Bhikkhunī' for they are not passing on their lineage through ordination at all. This 'Bhikkhunī-sangha' is being constantly re-created by the Bhikkhu-sangha. In fact, their position is not much different from the nuns of Theravāda Buddhist countries who are also given their precepts by senior bhikkhus, though not as an act of the Sangha.

There have been a few westerners ordained as 'Bhikkhunīs' in this way but in the light of strict Vinaya practice they could well



doubt their true status. Then someone might ask, 'Well, will it ever be possible for women to become Bhikkhunīs in Theraváda lands? It is difficult to see how this could be done. A Sangha of bhikkhus led by responsible theras would have to recognize that the Bhikkhunīs are perhaps not quite extinct and then reordain them in the Theraváda tradition. Many problems would arise since there have been no Bhikkhunīs for such a long time and ways of doing things have been forgotten. More serious than this, however, would be the danger of causing a schism in the Sangha. In fact, the Bhikkhunī-sangha could only be restored properly by majority approval of the theras in Theraváda countries of the Sangha. In northern Buddhist lands, a different attitude could be taken to this question.

[Editor's note: This book was published in 1979, so the above information is not up to date, but it is interesting to see what the author, Bhikkhu Khantipálo, was thinking given the situation at that time. Readers are advised to research what Bhikkhuni Dhammananda has done for Bhikkhuni Ordination in Sri Lanka and Thailand. Her story could fill a separate volume on its own.]

Meanwhile, though there were no Bhikkhunīs in Thai Theraváda, today there are ladies who live the Holy Life as nuns. This has been the case since the Bhikkhunī-sangha disappeared and since there was no sangha for them to join, they have lived with the Eight or Ten precepts as their rule. They shave their heads and wear

robes of differing colours according to their country of ordination—white in Thailand[19], yellow in Sri Lanka and pinkish-brown in Burma. Generally they live in special sections of viháras though in some places they have established their own nunneries. Such independence usually indicates the presence among them of learned nuns, or those highly developed in meditation.

The Páli name for these nuns is 'upásiká.' This word means literally '(a woman) who sits down near to (a Teacher)' but as this is a word used also for laywomen devotees living the household life, the word 'nun' will be used here. And this is how many nuns come to be ordained, having been attracted to the Dhamma taught by a famous Bhikkhu-teacher. In Thailand they are called *Mae chee*, literally 'mothers (an honorific for 'women') who are ordained.' In Burma, they are known as *Thila-shin*, literally 'possessors of the precepts,' while in Sri Lanka they are called *Silmatavaru* (lit. 'mothers (honorific) observing the precepts).'

Their status in Buddhist countries now does not usually approach the esteem in which Bhikkhus are held by most people. In the popular way of thinking, Bhikkhus have 227 precepts but nuns only eight; therefore, Bhikkhus are more virtuous! Sometimes it is considered that a lax Bhikkhu can be excelled in both learning and practice by a diligent nun. And no one has thought that as a

Bhikkhunī had 311 precepts, she was, therefore, much more virtuous than a Bhikkhu! Popular estimation of the worth of nuns is based on their usual lack of Buddhist education in the past. In some places the nuns were pious ladies who had finished with family life and wished to devote the rest of their existence to making merits.

This meant that they cooked food and offered it to the bhikkhus there, swept the temple compound and made various decorations for the shrine. They were not expected to study or to be learned and their practice would be limited generally to keeping their eight or ten precepts pure and some devotional chanting twice a day. And where younger women shaved their heads this was not always for the highest reason—poverty or the desire for a quiet uncomplicated life were (and are) sometimes causes. (But such reasons apply to some Bhikkhus too).

This brings us to consider how a nun is supported. Bhikkhus usually do not have too many difficulties here as robes are offered, food comes from the almsround or from invitations, dwellings are given and medicines provided, all by generous lay-supporters. But nuns are rarely supported in this way, and while a few may have laypeople who guarantee support, most of them must rely upon small alms from their families or upon their own savings.

It is true that in some country areas (in Thailand) nuns do go

upon almsround with bowls just as Bhikkhus do, but this is the exception rather than the rule. The writer remembers seeing a small group of nuns who used to do this in Bangkok and how their mindfulness contrasted with some rather distracted looking Bhikkhus! Materially, therefore, the life of a nun can be more difficult than that of a Bhikkhu.

This is not always a disadvantage, especially if a nun has just enough. She will not suffer at any rate as some Bhikkhus do, from excess of support and too much attention from wealthy laypeople. While a Bhikkhu may be spoiled by this, a nun need not be in the limelight and so not involved with the dangers to the Holy Life which this entails. Another of these 'negative' advantages is that nuns have fewer possibilities for their livelihood if they disrobe, than Bhikkhus. This fact and perhaps the generally stronger faith-element in women makes disrobing among them much less frequent than it is with Bhikkhus.

The popular reason why nuns get less support is based on the misapprehension of numbers of precepts mentioned above. The fruit or result of kamma made by giving to a Bhikkhu is thought to be greater than can be expected from gifts to a nun. This could be quite wrong, for instance if the Bhikkhu is not careful with his Vinaya while the nun is pure-hearted, even a Stream-winner or more.

These attitudes are beginning to change as a result of more attention paid to nuns and their education. In some places they have their own institutions and organizations...

Now we should say something about the life of nuns in Thailand, the country most familiar to the writer. A nun there can either engage in studies in a town vihára, or meditate with a Teacher in the forest.

It is not necessary to describe her daily life in detail, as it will to some extent resemble that of bhikkhus but with the addition of such work as food preparation and gardening. Recently, another kind of livelihood has opened for nuns: teaching and other social services. More will be said about this below.

Nuns, wherever they stay, in town or country, live usually in special compounds within the vihára grounds. In the towns, these have fences and gates surrounding the nuns' kutis, sálá and gardens, but in the country a line of trees and bushes separates these quarters from the rest. In some viháras a certain amount is charged for food each month and nuns must be able to find this in order to stay there. Other viháras give them the second choice of the bhikkhus' pióđapáta food after the latter have taken what they want.

As the almsround usually produces more than enough, the nuns may be quite well provided for. However, when all food

requirements are taken care of there still are other expenses. Some viháras provide the area for the nuns while the kutis that they live in have been erected by generous laywomen. In other viháras, nuns must pay for the construction of their own kutis. As my informant says after commenting on nuns and how they must be self-supporting: "However, there are still stationery expenses, books, soap, washing powder, etc. to buy ..." Elsewhere she remarks that nuns have a *little* help from their families, but —"It is not a life of comfort for nuns."

This brings us to consider a western woman becoming a nun. There are now only a very few by comparison with the number of western men who join the Bhikkhu-sangha. What are the reasons for this? One factor, financial support, has been mentioned already. "However as far as western women are concerned they have generally cut themselves off from their families, or have been cut off by their families, so they have no income on which to subsist, so they have no means to live if they become nuns. After all, one must eat, wash and so on."

Another difficulty is the differences between western and eastern women who become nuns. The former are "independent types, already well-travelled, often well-educated, worldly, etc." But often Asian women who become nuns in Buddhist countries may

have a poor education and very little experience of the world as they will have led a much more sheltered-life. It is difficult for people so different to relate to one another, and the only way of doing this is through the common interest in Dhamma. Even here, the meeting-ground can be narrow enough because a western woman will have an enquiring attitude to Dhamma while many Asiatic Buddhists have a more traditional approach. Great patience and perseverance, as well as adaptability, are needed by a western woman to succeed as a nun in Asia.

And humility is very important too. "Another point about western women is that there are 'womens'-libber' types who are definitely not happy in the East where women are subservient to men. For myself, I take the attitude that there is nothing in the world except *nāma* (mind, mental states) and *rúpa* (body, material qualities) and, therefore, if offence arises at having to pay respect first to a man, then it is only because of the ego that is offended or unhappy. With such an ego attitude, no progress will be possible, whether for a Bhikkhu or for a nun.

One of the dangers of a nun's life, a feature unlikely to appeal to westerners, has been mentioned already—'holy domesticity.' Having given up household life, shaved the head and put on robes, a large part of life can still be household chores. Bhikkhus are precluded

from such involvement by their rules, but nuns have their own food to buy and prepare (in some viháras) and gardening to do—they raise some of their own vegetables and provide flowers for the temple and do cleaning work—all of which can distract the mind far from Dhamma. The bhikkhunīs of olden times were glad to be rid of their household burden. Here is the venerable Arahant Muttá Theri's verse:

"O free indeed! O gloriously free  
am I in freedom from three crooked things:  
from mortar and pestle, from my crooked lord.  
Free am I from birth and death!  
What leads to becoming is destroyed!

(Elder Nuns' Verses 11)

It is easy to go from one sort of bondage to another but hard to go from bondage to real Liberation, to ownership of nothing at all, even of mind and body ...

To close this chapter, here are the verses of the Arahant Rohini Theri who recollects how, before her Enlightenment, she explained



to her unbelieving brahmin father the virtues of samanas, meaning Bhikkhus here. Her father was so moved by her praises that he both permitted her to become a Bhikkhuni and became a Buddhist himself, later being accepted as a Bhikkhu and attaining Arahantship.

*Father:* "See the samanas, lady, you say,  
you want me to know these samanas,  
only samanas do you praise,  
perhaps a samana you will be?

On these samanas you bestow  
very abundant food and drink,  
I ask you, Rohini, therefore,  
why are samanas dear to you?

Lazy and not liking work

and living off others' gifts,  
hopeful, desiring delicacies,  
why are samanas dear to you?"

*Rohini:* "For long indeed, father, you have asked  
me about these samanas,  
now shall I commend to you  
their wisdom, virtue and energy.

Not lazy they, but liking work,  
doers of the noblest work—  
lust and aversion they forsake,  
hence are samanas dear to me.

They remove the three Evil Roots  
making all pure within,

abandoned all their evil,  
hence are samanans dear to me.

Pure are their bodily kammass,  
just the same their kammass of speech,  
their mental kammass too are pure,  
hence are samanans dear to me.

Spotless as the mother of pearl,  
purified both within and without,  
full of radiant qualities,  
hence are samanans dear to me.

Deeply learned Dhamma-experts,  
Noble, those who Dhamma live,  
the Goal and Dhamma do they teach,

hence are samanās dear to me.

Deeply learned Dhamma-experts,

Noble, those who Dhamma live,

mindful, with one-pointed minds,

hence are samanās dear to me.

Deeply learned Dhamma experts

wise their words without conceit,

the end of dukkha that they know,

hence are samanās dear to me.

When they walk the village street

they gaze at nothing longingly,

wishless, they go walking on,

hence are samanās dear to me.

keeping nothing in a storeroom  
neither in basket nor in jar,  
their quest is for the Final End,  
hence are samanans dear to me.

No silver do they grasp at,  
neither at gold nor yet at coin,  
supporting themselves with present things,  
hence are samanans dear to me.

From various families they Go Forth,  
coming from various countries,  
still each to the other one is dear,  
hence are samanans dear to me."

(Elder Nuns' Verses, 271-285)

**Notes.**

[1] The Laws of Manu (*Manavadharmasastra*), Ch. IX, 3.

[2] See, *Brahmanism, Buddhism and Hinduism*, Wheel 150-151 BPS

[3] See her story in the Dhammapada Commentary (Buddhist Legends Vol. II, p.127f.). King Pasenadi of Kosala urged that nuns should live in cities where they could be protected from such violence.

[4] One who goes against the stream of birth and death, a Non-returner to human birth but sure to attain Arahantship in the Pure Abodes.

[5] Having seen mind and body both conditioned, as not self or 'other.'

[6] *Pollutions* (see last note, Ch. II) *abandoned*, *quenched* (see under Vira, Ch. II) and *quite cool* all signify attainment of Nibbána and Arahantship.

[7] The five groups (or aggregates), the twelve sense spheres and the eighteen elements—see *Buddhist Dictionary* B.P.S. Kandy, for definitions.

[8] One of the three Gates to Freedom, the other two being the Desireless and Emptiness. See *op. cit.*

[9] The Well-farer, one whose going was always auspicious, in this

world and beyond all worlds.

[10] Ironically her name means 'pure'—which of course she was, eventually.

[11] The attainment of the 2nd Concentration (jhána) in which thought processes are completely stilled.

[12] A bhikkhu must take a companion when going to see the bhikkhunìs, and on a journey he must not be separated from his three robes. Vaddha had left his outer double-thick robe behind.

[13] One word in Páli means both jungle and lust and refers generally to the tangle of sexual passions.

[14] This world, all worlds, everything known through the senses and the mind, is conditioned. The Unconditioned is Nibbána.

[15] See Ch. II under Brahmadata.

[16] Brahmins boasted that they were the kin of Great Brahma but the Buddha taught that a true brahmin is one who is rid of defilements.

[17] The translation of this passage (from *Buddhist Texts through the Ages* Bruno Cassirer, Oxford, translated by Arthur Waley) has 'nuns' but as bhikkhunìs are meant here, in order to avoid confusion with the partly-ordained Chinese 'nuns', this substitution has been

made.

[18] This nun and others like her had only Acceptance from a Bhikkhu-sangha headed by a senior bhikkhu. It is for this reason that the question arises of 'reordination' (really completing the Acceptance) with the real Bhikkhunì sangha.

[19] There are also small groups using dark brown and yellow robes.

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From

Chapter VII

## BANNER OF THE ARAHANTS

Bhikkhu Khantipálo

Buddhist Monks and Nuns from the Buddha's time till now

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