TO BE BUDDHIST AND EQUAL

Elizabeth Harris

The distinction between the person who renounces lay life for a path of intensified religious effort and the one who persists with lay responsibilities has always been an important one within Buddhism. The original call of the Buddha was a simple one. "Come, O monk, live the life of brahmacariya in order that you may put an end to suffering".[1] In the Buddha's lifetime, this call was eventually offered to both men and women, although it increasingly meant adhering also to a weighty body of disciplinary rules as the Sangha became institutionalised. The Pali texts give examples of respected and gifted nuns;[2] the *Therigatha* shows the Buddha urging nuns to achieve the highest in Buddhist religious terms:

> Come, O Dhira, reach up and touch the goal
> Where all distractions cease, where sense is stilled
> Where dwelleth bliss; win thou Nibbana, win
> That sure Salvation (yogakkhema), which hath no beyond.[3]

How does the Buddhist woman renounce lay life today? If she lived in Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan or China she would receive full ordination. If she were a western woman, there would be several options, but most include training in a Buddhist country of her chosen tradition and then being ordained in one of the above countries, often Taiwan, although in recent years, ordination has also become possible in the United States. Several, for instance, have trained as *Sil Maniyos* in Sri Lanka and then travelled to Taiwan for ordination. Even more have chosen the Tibetan tradition, where women can be ordained as novices but not as bhikkhunis and have made the same journey to Taiwan at the appropriate time. A woman born in a Theravada country such as Sri Lanka rarely has such freedom. Not only is higher ordination denied her but even ordination as a novice. She could take the robes of a *Sil Maniyo* or *dasa sil mata*, the more usual name, but would be recognised as following only ten disciplinary rules rather than the entire *Bhikkhuni Vinaya* of 311. As such, she could find herself accused of having no right to wear orange, although she had renounced home, family, property and the right to earn her own income.[4] In addition she would no doubt be aware that the Pali Canon also contained words of a deeply misogynist nature reflecting the popular tradition that to be born a woman was a proof in itself of bad karma. In the following, the woman is declared a wile of the devil, in words attributed to the Buddha:

> Monks, a woman, even when going along, will stop to ensnare the heart of a man; whether standing, sitting or lying down, laughing, talking or singing, weeping, stricken or dying, a woman will stop to ensnare the heart of a man. Monks, if ever one would rightly say: it is wholly a snare of Mara - verily, speaking rightly, one may say of womanhood: it is wholly a snare of Mara.[5]

Many have accepted these limitations and become *Sil Maniyos*. Among these have been those who have believed in an unbridgeable gulf between bhikkhu and *sil maniyo* and have considered this natural given woman's inferior karmic status. Others have denied any such inferiority but, placing emphasis on inner holiness, have felt that the religious life can be lived with earnestness in spite of societal restrictions and lack of public esteem. A limited number sincerely yearn for the privilege of following the entire bhikkhuni discipline, as the Buddha first designed it.

In the early centuries of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, the Bhikkhuni Order was active and prestigious. The Venerable Sanghamitta not only brought from India a sapling from the Bodhgaya Bo Tree but also ordination for women. In 429 AD and 433 AD, according to the Chinese work *Pi-chu-ni-chuan* (The Biography of Bhikkhunis), groups of nuns travelled to China from Sri Lanka and gave ordination to several hundred Chinese women, thus revitalising and restoring the Order in that country. Although the *Mahavamsa* gives scant recognition to the ongoing existence of bhikkhunis, the *Dipavamsa* accepts nuns as part of the Buddhist hierarchical structure and shows them in positions of responsibility.[6] It has even been argued that the *Dipavamsa*, of the 4th century AD and predating the *Mahavamsa*, was the work of bhikkhunis.

Historical records do not mention active bhikkhunis after the eleventh century. It is probable that socio-economic and political pressures made it impossible or dangerous for women to renounce. The Order, therefore, lost its capacity to provide the obligatory number of nuns to ordain new recruits.[7] No attempt was made to gain help from another Buddhist country. China, as far as we know, was never approached. It would appear that the now male-dominated Buddhist hierarchy was content to accept the dying of a female monastic presence. In times of political instability and economic hardship, the role model imposed on women was more likely to be that of home-preserver and mother of sons then that of religious leader. In addition, it is not impossible that friction between the Mahavihara and the Abhayagiri Nikaya and the eventual ascendancy of the former could have also contributed. Although there were nuns in both sections, those who went to China were from the Abhayagiri Nikaya, deemed heretical by the Mahavihara because of their openness to non-Theravada thought. It is a subject which merits more research.

Until the twentieth century therefore there is no mention of Buddhist nuns in the writing of Sri Lankans or European imperialists. William Knighton, British planter and later journalist, writes in 1854:

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> In Ceylon and India, the order of priestesses does not appear ever to have been numerous, and in both countries they are now extinct, but they exist, although not very numerous, in Burmah, Siam and China, (1854: Volume II 32/33)

Bishop Reginald Copleston, Anglican Bishop in Sri Lanka from 1875-1902, also implies the Order was never strong and claims:

> There are, so far as I know, no places named after nuns; no stories about famous nuns; none of their dwellings or halls, so far as we know, remain. (1892: 249 f)

Yet, later, in the context of words concerning the Revival, he refers to devotees of "Ten Obligations" or *dasa sil upasikas* who shaved their heads and wore a special dress. He further writes:

> There are very few men of this profession; but a considerable number of such women, generally old, are to be seen about the temples, especially in Kandy, or on the way to Adam's Peak. They usually carry bowls as if for begging, and their shaven heads and dirty white dresses give them a pathetic aspect; and one who had read the books would naturally suppose them to be nuns. Female mendicants they are; but they have not been admitted to a Community, and therefore are not called 'bhikkhunis' but only 'upasikas'. (1892: 471-472)

It was these *upasikas* who formed the seed of the present *Sil Maniyos*. Their status has been raised since Copleston's time.[8] Yet, they are still perched between lay and ordained life. Having renounced as much or may be more than the monk in terms of physical comfort and public respect, they are faced with difficulties of security, education, accommodation and financial resources. The Ministry of Buddha Sasana does provide means for many to attend dhamma studies and to take the same examinations as monks. Voluntary teachers involved report that enthusiasm is often higher among nuns than monks, who often prefer a university education. For the nun to be respected in Sri Lanka, however, more than education is needed. A revolution in how the feminine is viewed within religion is needed.

In November 1988, 200 bhikkhunis were ordained at Hsi Lai Temple in Los Angeles. Among them were Koreans, Japanese, Nepalese, Sri Lankans, Thais, Tibetans, Vietnamese and West Germans. In other words women from both Theravada and Mahayana traditions were present and the combination of traditions was also mirrored in the members of the bhikkhu Sangha participating. Of eleven *Sil Maniyos* from Sri Lanka who travelled to Los Angeles, five persisted with the rigorous preparatory training and received full ordination. Their presence was made possible by Buddhist lay women with international contacts. Back in Sri Lanka, however, they are not recognised and do not even possess a copy of the *Bhikkhuni Vinaya* in Sinhala.

One argument which can be brought against these Sinhala bhikkhunis is that the ordination ceremony was based on the Chinese tradition, a Mahayana one, although Theravada bhikkhus took part. The cleavage between Theravada and Mahayana is usually cited when the question is asked: Why can't bhikkhuni ordination be restored through China or Taiwan? In the eyes of some members of the bhikkhu Sangha, the Mahayana tradition supports married priests, lax social practices and unnecessary ritual! However, in the last decade, several women have argued that the *Bhikkhuni Patimokkha* (rules of discipline) is very similar in the two traditions and that, since ordination is primarily an entry into living this discipline, there would be no loss of Theravada identity if Mahayana nuns were asked to renew the Order.[9]

Two international Conferences have recently been held drawing Buddhist women from Asia and the West: the International Conference on Buddhist Nuns held at Bodhgaya in February 1987 and the First International Conference on Buddhist Women held in Bangkok in October 1991. Both highlighted the possibility of solidarity among Buddhist women and nuns worldwide, the need for research into issues of common concern and the question of how the religious life is to be lived by nuns in societies where their dignity is not recognised and where men are the main mediators of Buddhist teaching to the people. Western nuns have joined with Asian women to challenge the present situation.

Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo, an American Bhikkhuni trained in the Tibetan tradition, was one of the organisers of the Bodhgaya Conference and became Secretary of *Sakyadhita*, the International Association of Buddhist Women which emerged from the Conference. At the Bangkok Conference, in an interview with the Press, she voiced her position thus:

> It is not that we want to compete with the *Sangha*. But we want to improve the status of women and give them more opportunity to study Buddhism.

If monks were not willing to afford women equal status, she realised women would have to wait until attitudes have changed. Yet, she emphasised that the issue of women in Buddhism was:

> an issue of social justice. There exists a situation of grave inequality between the rights and opportunities of male and female Buddhists. Whereas the teachings of Buddha are universal and equally applicable to all human beings, the practical reality is that conditions for men and women in Buddhism, especially the conditions of monks and nuns are very different.
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> It is not a case of different but equal, it is a case of different and very unequal. Until women are accorded equal opportunities that reflect their capabilities and commitment, Buddhism will not progress and the world will be poorer.[10]

Buddhist women worldwide are therefore presenting the challenge that, for its own health, Buddhism needs to recognise the spiritual potential of its women as nuns, teachers and counsellors. They assert that any religion is poorer if mediated solely through a masculine hierarchy, affirming that the perspective of women is essential for a religion's well-being. And in saying this, they would insist that they are not calling for anything new but only for a recognition of the original affirmation given to women by the Buddha.

The challenge for Sri Lanka is how it responds to this crucial issue. Buddhism is now a world religion and no Buddhist country can isolate itself from the voices of the worldwide Buddhist community. Will the true message of the Sanghamitta mission be re-discovered? Will the dilemmas of the Buddhist woman who wishes to renounce continue?

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Notes

1. See, for instance, *Vinaya*.1:12.
2. Reference can be made to Dhammadinna, who becomes the spiritual director of her former husband (*Majjima Nikaya*, I: 304-305) and Khema, who adivissa King Pasenadi (*Samyutta Nikaya*, IV X I).
3. *Therigatha*, Verse 6.
4. Ven. Walpola Rahula at the BMICH in July 1991, during a ceremony in his honour, claimed that dasa sil matas were not qualified to wear a yellow robe, since they were, in fact, still lay people. *The Island*, 25 July 1991.
5. *Anuguttara Nikaya*, V VI 55.
6. Nuns are particularly prominent in *Dipavamsa*, chs. 17 & 18.
7. The Buddhist rules of discipline state that a bhikkhuni must be ordained by both bhikkhunis and bhikkhus.
8. At the beginning of the 20th century, an educated Sri Lankan woman, Catherine de Alwis travelled to Burma, received training and ordination there, and returned to promote renunciation among women.
9. Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh's translation of the different *Pattimokkhas* (1991) shows that there is a striking uniformity between Theravada and those schools which formed the source of Mahayana development. Differences between Theravada and the Mahasanghika occur mainly in the Pacittiya & Sekhiya sections, in each case the latter having more rules than the former.
10. To be Buddhist and Equal' - a report of the Conference by Suwana Asavaroengchai in *Focus*, 28 October 1991.

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The Printer, the Police and the Penalty.

The sealing of the *Navamaga* Press and the destruction of its machinery and equipment by the Police, the fundamental rights application filed by the owner of the press and the judgement of the Supreme Court thereon are events relevant to the freedom of expression in Sri Lanka; they have, nevertheless received scant attention so far.

Since these events have not been adequately publicised in the English press, let us begin with a chronological narration of the events.

The *Navamaga* Press, located at 334, Galle Road, Ratmalana, a suburb south of Colombo, was first searched by the Police on September 18, 1991. Two press workers were taken into custody by the police who made one of them take the police to the residence of the owner of the press, Kelly Senanayake. Two policemen were stationed there till nightfall; the two workers were taken to the police station at Dehiwala. Mr. Senanayake reported to the police next morning, where he was asked to make a statement on work undertaken by him as a printer. The workers were later released.

The *Navamaga* Press is a commercial printing establishment undertaking work of a varied nature; it was also, at this time, the registered printer of *Yukthiya*, a fortnightly newspaper published by the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality. This was probably the main concern of the police as a good part of the questioning centered round it; the lay-out artist who prepared the pages of *Yukthiya* for the press was also questioned by the police at the same time.

Police officers attached to the Mount Lavinia police searched the press again on October 4, 1991; it is alleged by the owner and some workers that they took away material, including work that was on the machines at the time and placed seals on both the front and back doors. Two armed policemen were placed on guard at the front entrance on Galle road.

Mr. Senanayake filed a fundamental rights application before the Supreme Court on October 8, 1991. The petition alleged that the police action was unlawful and illegal; since it was done in the purported discharge of their duties and as agents of the Republic of Sri Lanka, their conduct amounted to executive or administrative action in terms of article 126 (2) of the Constitution. The petition claimed that in these circumstances the petitioner's fundamental rights to

(a) the freedom of speech and expression including publication, guaranteed by article 14 (1) (a) of the Constitution and

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