

IN PRINT

THAI WOMEN IN BUDDHISM, Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, Parallax Press, U.S.A. (1991)

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Dr. Kabilsingh's work is relevant not only to Thailand but to every country where Buddhist women face discrimination. A lecturer in Religion and Philosophy at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Dr. Kabilsingh has been vocal about the problems facing Thai women since the early 1980s, both with a deep personal commitment to Buddhism and a willingness to risk rebuke.

Her book is a collection of papers stretching over seven years and covering four main areas: historical perspectives on Buddhism in Thai history and the place of women within it; feminist reading of the Pali Buddhist texts; the contemporary situation for women who renounce lay life to become 'nuns' in Thailand; social issues such as prostitution. Although most sections could stand alone, they have been welded into a coherent whole with minimal repetition. It is a pioneering work. Its themes call out for further research and have considerable relevance to Sri Lanka.

In some aspects, the history of Buddhism and of women in Thailand is distinct from that of Sri Lanka. Whereas Buddhism in Sri Lanka stretches back at least to the 3rd Century A.D. Buddhism was not consolidated in Thailand as part of an emerging and distinct Thai culture until the 13th Century A.D. Whereas Sri Lanka enjoyed a *Bhikkuni* order for over a thousand years, no Order of fully ordained nuns has ever existed in Thailand. Whereas women in Thailand did not begin to receive university education until 1929, women in Sri Lanka were training as doctors by the end of the nineteenth century. Yet the two situations touch at several levels as the twentieth century closes. Neither country recognizes full ordination for women. Sri Lanka allows women to become *Sil Maniyos*, who follow ten rules, wear orange and live in community. In Thailand, there is an order of *Mae Jis* — women who shave their heads and live in monastic communities like Sri Lankan *Sil Maniyos* but wear white and follow only five or eight precepts. Both groups hover precariously between lay and ordained life, having given up family commitments yet not gaining the support and respect given to men who similarly renounce but who receive full ordination. Both countries suffer because Buddhist teaching is usually mediated through men alone rather than a mutually supportive union of male and female spiritual leaders. And in both societies, women are the

victims of national and international forces arising from tourism, social change and, in the case of Sri Lanka, militarization.

In this context, Dr. Kabilsingh challenges us all both in her appeal to the Buddhist textual tradition and in her vivid portrayal of the contemporary commitment of Buddhist women. I could have wished her chapter on Buddhist texts from a Feminist Perspective to be a little longer — it is a mere 13 pages — yet important points are made, beginning with the simple but often neglected observation that, although there were respected Buddhist nuns at the time of the Buddha's death, the tradition implies that none was invited to the First council afterwards, suggesting that the *Bhikkhu Sangha* was prejudiced against women from the outset, at variance with the Buddha's stance. Given this, Dr. Kabilsingh argues, it is hardly surprising that the Pali texts, recorded and mediated through monks, contained misogynist statements. It is the influence of Indian brahminical values that she blames for this, perhaps masking a more complex historical situation. Central to this analysis is a distinction between core Buddhist doctrines and those which are affected by social context. The former, she insists, are liberative to women in that they declare women and men to have equal potential to transcend suffering; the latter often derogatory, reflecting the restrictions of cultural context and leading to Thai women believing they are born such because of their bad *kamma*.

It is a hazardous undertaking to fly in the face of relativism to draw out the core of a religion from its social context. The two are bound with almost unbreakable cords. Yet there is no doubt that distinctions can be made between religious teachings which are able to stretch across centuries with the ring of positive truth and those which address or indeed succumb to more limited social concerns and prejudices. Dr. Kabilsingh is right to stress that Buddhism's misogynist texts belong to the latter and that there is another strand which strengthens and affirms women. Her plea is that women should claim their right to question and re-interpret texts long withheld from them if they are to free themselves from an inferiority complex imposed by male dominated hierarchies which have denied the textual evidence that women themselves can be mediators of the Buddha word.



On the question of the *Bhikkuni* Order, Dr Kabilsingh shows a sensitive awareness of the Thai situation born of a lifelong association. When she was 10 years old, her mother, Voramai Kabilsingh, renounced lay life and established a temple for Buddhist women. She eventually travelled to Thailand to gain full *bhikkuni* ordination, the first Thai woman to do so. Her story — an excellent paradigm of struggle and social awareness — is told in the book together with that of the *Mae Jis* and others who have attempted to go further than the white robe. Unequivocally, Dr. Kabalsingh voices her view that the denial of *bhikkuni* ordination is denial of the Buddha's teaching, a refusal to allow women "to express their spiritual lives to the fullest". As Sara, a woman who attempted to become a Bhikkuni in Thailand is reported as saying, "we should mend whatever is incomplete — a chair with a broken leg must be fixed. The Buddha established four groups of Buddhists: bikkhus, bikkhunis, laymen and laywomen. As the Bhikkuni Sangha is now missing, we have to reestablish this for the sake of completion".

A definite way of achieving this is suggested, through a weakness in the usual argument of the *Theravada* tradition that the Order cannot be re-activated because there are no *Theravada bhikkunis* to fulfill the require-

ments of the ordination ceremony laid down by the Buddha. And this lies in Sri Lankan history. In 433 A.D. historical records show that a group of Sri Lanka nuns travelled to China to give ordination to Chinese women. Dr. Kabilsingh's argument rests on the fact that this ordination would have been within the *Theravadin* tradition and that, although China eventually veered towards *Mahayana*, the order of bhikkunis continues in an unbroken line following *Vinaya* rules which, in essence, are *Theravadin*. Such an argument gains added weight from her doctoral thesis — *A Comparative Study of the Bhikkuni Patimokkha* (1984 Varanasi Chaukamba Orientalia) which clearly shows the similarities between the Chinese and the *Theravadin* monastic traditions. Surely there should be no objection to an unbroken Order created by Sri Lankan Bhikkunis reactivating that same present Order, Dr. Kabilsingh implies!

The plea is not a militant one. It grows out of a deep Buddhist spirituality and the awareness that Buddhism will suffer if it does not recognize the potential of its women, that it will alienate women born Buddhist who are alive to feminist issues. Buddhism in Sri Lanka has already suffered in this way. Her voice is a careful one and needs to be heard in the ongoing debate.

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