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The *Bhikkhunī* Ordination Debate: Global Aspirations, Local Concerns, with special emphasis on the views of the monastic community in Burma[1]

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the recent events following the *bhikkhunī* revival in Sri Lanka, and looks at the position of the Burmese *Saṅgha*, which has traditionally seen itself as the custodian of an 'authentic' Buddhist legacy, thrown into a debate by the action of a Burmese *bhikkhunī* who was recently ordained in Sri Lanka. It introduces the early initiatives of revivalist monks in Burma as well as the viewpoints of Burmese *Saṅgha* and the nuns in regard to the *bhikkhunī* issue. Since most debate on the position of nuns take place without much reference to the local political contexts in which they stand, the state monastic organization in Burma is introduced to aid understanding of the framework in which the nuns operate today. At another level, the paper draws attention to the tension created between the international *bhikkhunī*s who promote liberal ideologies of gender equality, individual rights and universalism into a faith based community, and local nuns who adhere to the traditional norms of religious duty, moral discipline and service to the community, and questions the ultimate aim in endorsing such secular ideals.

BACKGROUND

In the Theravāda tradition in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, it is more than a millennium since the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* is believed to have gone extinct. Nonetheless, the international movement to revive the *bhikkhunī*s in traditions currently lacking them started in earnest in the mid-1980s and culminated in the first higher ordination in 1996. It was instigated by a group of Western Buddhist practitioners and feminist scholars who were concerned about the status disparities and une-

1. The first version of this paper, 'The *Bhikṣuṇī* Ordination Debate: The position of the Burmese Sangha', was presented at the annual conference of UK Association for Buddhist Studies on 15 July 2006. I would like to thank Ven. Khammai Dhammasami for his useful comments and insightful suggestions. I would also like to thank Maung San Myint Aung for his assistance and many useful discussions we have had.

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qual treatment of Buddhist nuns and founded an organization called Sakyadhita International.[2] At its first international conference in 1987, Buddhist nuns from many different countries and traditions came together to learn about issues concerning their practices and problems; the revival of the *bhikkhunī* lineage was one the underlying goals in the mind of its organizers.[3] Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, a Thai feminist Buddhist scholar, was one of several participants who advocated that Chinese *bhikṣuṇī*s were in a position to ordain the nuns and could revive the *bhikkhunī* lineage in the Theravāda tradition. That is, since they inherited the *Vinaya* rules brought to China by the Sinhalese *bhikkhunī*s in the fifth century CE, their ordination procedure in the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* was viewed as 'uninterrupted' from the time of the Buddha.[4] This led to an ambitious attempt to establish a new bridge between the Mahāyāna *bhikṣuṇī*s and Theravāda nuns.

The first higher ordination in 1996 was conferred on ten Sri Lankan *dasasilmātā*,[5] or ten-precept nuns, who became the first batch of *bhikkhunī*s in the contemporary Theravāda tradition. Despite its historical significance, however, some problems were noted as the candidates were asked to dress in 'Mahāyāna' (Korean) robes and undergo unfamiliar ritual sequences such as receiving the *Bodhisattva* vows.[6] A year and a half later, another higher ordination took place in Bodh-gayā;[7] this time it was 'dual' ordination, organized by Fo Guang Shan, an active Taiwanese Buddhist organization promoting humanistic Buddhism.[8]

2. For more information, see www.sakyadhita.org (accessed October 2007).
3. The proceedings are in Tsomo (1988).
4. If Chinese *bhikhṣuṇī*s had been following the Theravāda-derived *Vinaya* rules, Kabilsingh advocated that their qualifications should be acceptable for ordaining Theravāda nuns since that meant they had affiliated themselves with the 'original' *bhikkhunī* lineage brought to Sri Lanka in the third century BCE by Saṅghamittā, daughter of King Asoka. Buddhism that was originally introduced by her brother Mahinda came to be regarded as the orthodox in Sri Lanka due to the royal connections and his *upajjhāya* (preceptor) being Moggaliputta Tissa who convened what the Theravāda traditions sees as the Third Buddhist Council (see Yamazaki 1979, 123–4).
5. It was held in Sarnath on 8 December 1996 and the delegation was led by Kusuma Devendra. Ven. Mapalagama Vipulasara (President of Mahā Bodhi Society in India), Ven. Rastrapala (President of the International Meditation Centre), Ven. Inamaluwe Sumangala, etc., gave additional support to the ordination.
6. See the cover photograph of *Nibwa: Newsletter on International Buddhist Women's Activities* 50 (1997).
7. An elaborate ceremony conferring the higher ordination took place during the period of 15–23 February 1998 in Bodh-gayā. In terms of technicality, this was considered to be the most complete *upasampadā* performed for Buddhist women in recent years. Twenty Sri Lankan nuns had 'dual ordination' conferred on them, i.e. ordination by both *bhikkhu/bhikṣu*s and *bhikkhunī/bkikṣuṇī*s, alongside 134 nuns from 23 countries, among whom there were 13 nuns from Burma. For more details on the higher ordination conducted in Bodh-gayā, see Li (2000).
8. Fo Guang Shan was founded by a charismatic monk, Ven. Master Hsing Yun. The organization has a high international profile and there are more than a hundred branches worldwide. In December 1988, Fo Guang Shan conducted the first higher ordination for international Buddhist women at its branch temple, Hsi Lai Chinese Temple in Los Angeles, and since then the organization has been actively involved in the revival movement. See *Yasodhara: Newsletter on International Buddhist Women's Activities* 51 (1997), 9–12. On this occasion, 200 nuns from 19 coun-

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Many Sri Lankan monks, nevertheless, considered the ordination procedure to be 'not Theravāda enough', and those who became *bhikkhunī* in the Chinese Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* were re-conferred *upasampadā* according to the Theravāda procedure. Ven. Inamaluwe Sumangala was one of the monks who took the lead, and since 1998 he has been conducting regular higher ordinations for female candidates at his Rangiri Dambulla temple.[9] Nonetheless, opposition to the movement became more vociferous once it was conducted on Sri Lankan soil, and the *Saṅgha* became clearly divided on the issue. The opposition, led by high ranking monks of the Siyam and Amarapura Nikāyas, saw it as an act of challenge to the purity of their Theravāda legacy, and accused the supporters of allowing the newly ordained *bhikkhunī*s to 'violate' the consecrated spaces (*sīmā*s) of temples, as the rites were conducted within these.

It is noteworthy that the Sri Lankan monks who supported the *bhikkhunī* revival movement were mostly scholarly monks with a liberal mindset, who understood the need for modernizing an ancient monastic institution. On the other hand, there were those who actively aspired for structural reform, such as the above-mentioned Ven. Sumangala, who had broken away from the Siyam Nikāya to create a new ordination platform for low-caste monks. This issue of caste had already split the Sri Lankan *Saṅgha* into various *Nikāya*s, and his primary aim was to reform the *Saṅgha* from its 'caste-ridden' core (Abeysekara 1999, 259).[10] While endorsing gender equality in the *Saṅgha* by actively supporting the *bhikkhunī* revival movement, he promoted his own political agenda for legitimacy and leadership. As a consequence, he saw a meteoric rise in popularity and in 2005 was promoted to the position of Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka of the Dambulla Chapter of the Siyam Nikāya.[11] His ordination lineage, which Cheng described as 'indigenous' (2004, 56), has come to be referred to as a distinct Chapter for *bhikkhunī*s in Sri Lanka, and many who had previously been ordained elsewhere now visit his

tries including five nuns from Sri Lanka were ordained in the Dharmagupta tradition. However, I have been told that the first batch of these Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī*s did not survive due to the lack of both social awareness about their new ordained status and material support, as the general public in Sri Lanka did not consider them anything special in terms of their spiritual worth.

9. There were other Sri Lankan *bhikkhu*s such as Ven. Somalankara who paved the way by selecting female candidates who had already been trained as *dasasilmātā*s, and laid the foundation for instituting a revived *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* in Sri Lanka. See *Yasodhara* 54 (1998), 10–11.
10. Abeysekara explains that Sumangala, who started conducting higher ordination in 1985 for lower caste males at his Dambulla temple, did it without the authorization of the central establishment of Siyam Nikāya. He views this to have been part of Sumangala's broader attempt to redefine the monastic identity of the Dambulla temple and claim his legitimate ownership, however, this was initially contested by the Asgiriya temple that had traditionally asserted its power over this wealthy royal temple (1999, 271–2).
11. Among the three Nikāyas – Siyam, Amarapura, Rāmañña – the Siyam Nikāya has the largest number of monks. It is made up of eight Chapters: Malwatta, Asgiri, Ruhana, Kotte, Ruhunu, Kelaniya, Uva and Dambulla. Abeysekara states that there are approximately 43 *pārshava* (subfraternities) that hold separate higher ordinations for monks in Sri Lanka (1999, 259).

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temple to be re-ordained in order to come under his direct authority.[12] Whatever the affiliation and lineages, the number of *bhikkhunī*s in Sri Lanka has continued to rise in the past decade and as the number reaches almost 500 in 2007, these monastic women have come to be seen as a force to be reckoned with.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF *BHIKKHUNĪ*S

Sri Lanka is generally regarded as the only Theravāda country where the *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* once flourished; it disappeared in the middle of the eleventh century. Gunawardana is more specific in saying that it was during the reign of King Mahinda IV (956–72) that there is any specific mention of *bhikkhunī*s, and refers to the years of Cola occupation of the eleventh century as the period for their final disappearance (1979, 39). Although we may agree that much of their beginnings and demise are 'wrapped in mists' (Horner 1975, 102), there seems to be a general consensus among Burmese scholars that *bhikkhunī*s existed in Burma until about the thirteenth century (Than Tun 1959, 69; Pe Maung Tin 1935, 151–2). Luce points to sections in the Chinese chronicles that refer to Pyu people in Upper Burma as early as during the eighth to ninth centuries, and describes how these people who were Theravāda Buddhists sent not only young boys but also girls to monasteries (1937, 251).[13] After the early twelfth century, there seem to be numerous proofs of nuns being active in the Pagan stone inscriptions, however, Luce does not clarify whether they were fully ordained or not in terms of their religious status (1969, 101). Pe Maung Tin refers to one such inscription concerning an important ceremony for the dedication of a cave. Among the eight *Skhiṅ*s or 'Lords', there was a nun called Ui' Chi Taw who was 'accorded the same honour as monks on the occasion' (1935, 152).[14] Although he points out that there were clear distinctions between the titles of monks and those of nuns – the former were inscribed in Pāli, while the latter names were in vernacular language indicating the ambiguity in which these 'almswomen' were held – it is noteworthy that he

12. In 2005, the Thai *bhikkhunī* Ven. Dhammananda (ordained name of Chatsumarn Kabilsingh) visited Sri Lanka to go through a second *upasampadā* to become affiliated with the Dambulla Chapter of Ven. Sumangala, which has ordained almost 350 Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī*s to date (see *Yasodhara* 85 (2005), 4). Her intention was perhaps to undergo the procedure of *daḷhī-kamma*, the 'act of making firm': to strengthen her previous ordination without losing her position of seniority in the *Saṅgha* or cancel the validity of her previous ordination. However some Taiwanese Buddhists I spoke with perceived it as an act of undermining the 'Mahāyāna' ordination procedure.

13. 'When they come to the age of seven, both boys and girls drop their hair and stop in a monastery, where they take refuge in the Sangha. On reaching the age of twenty, if they have not awakened to the principles of the Buddha, they let their hair grow again and become ordinary townsfolk' (Luce 1937, 251).

14. Pe Maung Tin refers to another inscription that mentions a large sum of money donated by royal benefactors to her nunnery, and in that context, she is referred to as 'the Venerable Uiw Chi Tāw' (1935, 152).

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refers to her as '*bhikkhunī*' in this case (p. 52). Other scholars such as Ven. Ya Wei Htun claimed that Buddhist nuns in the Pagan period were not *bhikkhunī*, but *paribbājikā*, wandering female ascetics in the forest tradition such as had existed from before the Buddha's time in India (1965, 152–3). Meanwhile, the eminent historian Than Tun continued to refer to such 'female monastic' as '*bhikkhunī*' in his writings (1959, 53, 57).

ATTEMPTS TO REVIVE THE *BHIKKHUNĪ* LINEAGE

Burmese Buddhists retain a strong sense of pride in perceiving their Buddhist tradition to be the 'authentic' form of teaching from the time of Buddha, and obediently follow the viewpoint of the Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka (the supreme council of monks) of 47 senior monks. Most of the population are indifferent to the issue of *bhikkhunī* revival but, if prompted, they are uniformly conservative in their opinions giving the traditionalist standpoint that once the *bhikkhunī* lineage has gone extinct, its revival is non-negotiable. This view reaffirms a strict adherence to their historical legacy and the orthodox claim that there is no longer an authority that can revive the *bhikkhunī* Sangha. The recent case of Ma Thissawaddy, a Burmese nun who went to Sri Lanka to become ordained, has nevertheless opened up a whole new dimension to the debate on the issue.

The *bhikkhunī* revival movement may give the impression that it has been instigated in recent decades by Western Buddhist women, but several attempts were made in Theravāda Buddhist countries long before the issue gained the attention of Buddhists in the West. Many of these attempts were instigated by educated monks who wanted institutional reform and challenged the conservative stance of the *Saṅgha*. In Burma, there have been several attempts to revive the *bhikkhunī*s in the 1930s, 1950s, 1970s[15] and in recent years. Similarly, in Thailand, Narin Klueng, a local public servant, attempted to reintroduce the *bhikkhunī* lineage as early as the 1920s in his endeavour to reform both religion and society.[16] When the event caused much uproar in society, the supreme patriarch, the Saṅgharāja intervened, and in his quest to qualm potential unrest, he banned *bhikkhu*s from ordaining female candidates. This *Saṅgha* act issued in 1928 has remained an obstacle for any movement to revive the *bhikkhunī*s in Thailand.[17] In 2003, we also witnessed a major uproar and media attention that followed when a Thai Buddhist scholar Kabilsingh received higher ordination in Sri Lanka and became Bhikkhunī Dhammananda. As the issue is regarded to be potentially divi-

15. See Lottermoser (1991), who writes about the efforts of her own teacher to reintroduce the *bhikkhunī* ordination in Burma.
16. He set up a temple in Nonthaburi province and in 1928 his older daughter along with six other women were ordained as *bhikkhunī*s by single ordination from monks. However, all of them eventually disrobed when threatened with persecution. His daughter Sara was imprisoned and later kidnapped. See *Yasodhara* 87 (2006), 18–19.
17. See *Yasodhara* 82 (2005), 17.

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sive, the *Saṅgha* as well as the Thai government has been steadfast in refusing to recognize her *bhikkhunī* status.

In this section, I will focus on a revival attempt made in Burma in the 1930s by Ven. Adeiksawuntha (Pāli title: Adiccavamsa),[18] a monk scholar, and examine some of the contesting points and impact this attempt has had on wider society. Ven. Adeiksawuntha was a senior monk in Yangon whose religious interests extended beyond the narrow confinement of Theravāda Buddhist studies. In 1935, he published a book entitled *Beikkhuni Thathano Padeiktha*,[19] and challenged the widely accepted view that the *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* could not be revived in the Theravāda tradition. He drew attention to the ordination procedure conducted during the time of Buddha when 500 Sakyan women were ordained in a 'single' ordination procedure by the *bhikkhu Saṅgha* (i.e. the act that is seen to have initiated the *bhikkhunī Saṅgha*). Although there have been no other cases of 'single' ordination in the Theravāda tradition, his point suggested that there was already a precedent, thus their revival was possible only if the *bhikkhu Saṅgha* agreed. Nonetheless, the issue had become contentious even before the official publication of his book, and newspapers and magazines started to attack him for heresy. Although the title of the book was somewhat suggestive,[20] it was not the issue of *bhikkhunī* revival that attracted the attention of the general public, but they were alerted to the fact that seemingly he was trying to challenge the authority of the *Saṅgha*.

It appeared as if he was questioning the validity of the *Saṅgha* and even doubting the teaching of the Buddha. In particular, two passages in the book were taken out of context by his opponents. One asserts (in my translation), 'I believe that the Buddha has propagated a valuable teaching to help the people, but if the *Dhamma* was such a great teaching, why are there so few who attain *nibbāna* and why do so many go to hell?' (1935, 24). The other passage says,

> I have studied many other religious traditions and examined their religious teachings. So far I think Buddhism is the best and the most valid teaching of all. However, if I ever come across a better religion (than Buddhism) that conveys the ultimate truth, I am open minded enough to become a follower. (p. 26)

These rather naive passages were interpreted to imply that the author was in doubt of the *Saṅgha* authority, not to mention the effectiveness of the Buddha's *Dhamma*, and the act of 'open' questioning was the cause of so much furore.

18. In regard to names of Burmese monks and nuns, and titles of Burmese Buddhist books, I have used the local Burmese-Pāli transliteration and given a Romanized Pāli version in bracket. Burmese monks and nuns who live outside Burma commonly use the Pāli version for their names following the international norm, but people in Burma would not be able to recognize them if I followed that.
19. *An Overview of the Bhikkhunī Sāsana*. This book is now banned in Burma.
20. In fact, if one reads carefully, the main points in his book had little to do with the issue of *bhikkhunī* revival.

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His act was threatening because Adeiksawuntha was not any ordinary monk, but a senior teacher who had been a monastic for more than thirty years. He was also affiliated with a reputable monastery in Yangon. As the issue became more contentious, a group of Burmese Muslims responded by openly challenging the authority of Buddhist monks and stating that Islam was a better and more effective religion. Unrest and scuffles were reported to have taken place between Buddhist monks and Muslim agitators in Taungoo and other urban areas. The *Saṅgha,* fearing that any doubt regarding the effectiveness or validity of the *Dhamma* would eventually destabilize society and damage the *Sāsana*, responded by subjecting him to a prolonged period of isolation and he was excluded from all *Saṅgha* activities. However the damage was done. The force of opposition and the unsettling social consequences that were triggered out of his publication had sent a strong message to Buddhist liberals in the monastic community, and subsequently this muted all discussions on the issue of *bhikkhunī* revival until recently.

THE CASE OF BURMESE NUN, MA THISSAWADDY

In February 2003, a Burmese nun, Ma Thissawaddy (Pāli title: Saccavādī) became a *bhikkhunī* in Sri Lanka. The events that preceded her higher ordination and what followed afterwards reveal the general conservatism that rules in Burma today. The paranoid atmosphere that prevails within the country, and the sensitivity and suspicion towards the outside world as a result of constant criticism from the international community, seems to have heavily influenced the debate on the *bhikkhunī* revival. Burmese authorities see the revival movement to be strongly influenced by alien ideas and different cultural values, which are suspected to be instigated either by Mahāyāna Buddhists or Western feminists who do not, in their view, understand the importance of their historical monastic legacy.[21] The discussion (behind closed doors) that followed her higher ordination showed the main concern raised by the monks: that she was backed by agitators in the international community who were primarily intent on causing unrest inside Burma.

Ma Thissawaddy was born in 1965 into a middle class family in Yangon, and she became a nun after she graduated from Yangon University at the age of 22. She was bright and stood first in the state canonical exams, *Patama-nge* and *Patama-gyi*, in 1988 and 1991 respectively. She went to Sri Lanka to study for a master's degree in Buddhist Studies and became involved in the movement to reinstate the *bhikkhunī*s as it unfolded in front of her eyes. She first became a *sāmanerī* in February 2002, and in the following year became *bhikkhunī* before completing her probationary training. The Burmese *Saṅgha* was initially not certain about their official position regarding the *bhikkhunī* issue and many monks were not aware of its seriousness. However, senior monks were forced to clarify their viewpoint as they started to

21. The authorities generally consider any influence from outside Burma to be 'bad influence' (see Houtman 1999, 165).

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receive more information about Ma Thissawaddy's activities in Sri Lanka. A few months prior to the event, Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka members who were informed about her decision to go through the ordination procedure issued a statement saying that they were opposed to her ordination as it was initiated without their prior knowledge and conducted by Buddhists from the Mahāyāna tradition. Ma Thissawaddy was asked to come to the Burmese Embassy in Colombo to explain her position, but she defied the authorities and went ahead with the ordination regardless. She was ordained on 28 February 2003 at Thaponayon Monastery in Colombo by Ven. Talalle Dhammaloka, who acted as her *upajjhāya*, and *bhikkhunī* preceptors Ven. Bhikkhunī Khemacari and Ven. Bhikkhunī Kusuma.

A few months after the ordination, however, she sent a letter to the Burmese *Saṅgha* criticizing the senior monks for their conservative stance on the *bhikkhunī* issue.[22] The confrontational manner in which the letter was written infuriated them, as they were already unhappy to be dictated to by a young Burmese nun from abroad. It also left a strong impression that she was openly defying their authority and she came to be regarded as a 'troublemaker'. Two weeks later, senior monks of the Burmese Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka made a request to the Ministry of Home Affairs to stop her from entering Burma in her new status dressed as *bhikkhunī*, and all media reporting on her ordination was stopped. On 7 June, a committee of monks was appointed to conduct research on the *Vinaya* to examine the validity of a revived *bhikkhunī* ordination in the Theravāda tradition, the results of which were reported at the meeting of Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka on 17 September.[23] This resulted in the publication of *Beikkhuni Wínísaya Satan*, which will be examined in a later section of this article. In the following year, the Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka issued an order stating that any movement to revive the *bhikkhunī* lineage went against the historical tradition of Burmese Buddhism, which brought a close to the discussion.

However, the matter did not end there. In December 2004, Ma Thissawaddy returned to Yangon to attend the World Buddhist Summit and remained there to care for her ailing father. In May 2005, she was summoned by the monastic authorities for questioning, and was reprimanded for being disrespectful as she tried to undress in front of senior monks.[24] Although there are no legal provisions to imprison a *bhikkhunī* in Burma and the authorities cannot technically do so,

22. In a letter dated 7 May 2003, addressed to the Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka, Ma Thissawaddy asked the monastic authorities whether they thought international *bhikkhunī*s (including herself) residing outside Burma were validly ordained or not. She also enclosed her photograph taken with a friend in Long Beach, California; see *Beikkhuni Wínisaya Satan* (2004, 20).
23. The monks on the research committee were Magwe Sayadaw (Ven. Bathanda Kumala), Pakoku Sayadaw (Ven. Bathanda Wisara) and Tipitaka Sayadaw of Maha Gandayon Yangon Monastery (Dr Ven. Thumingala Lingala).
24. I was told by a senior Burmese monk who wishes to remain anonymous that when she was asked to change back to the *thilashin* robe worn by Burmese nuns, she tried to undress in front of the members of Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka. This was seen not only as offensive but also as an open defiance of their authority; some monks' interpretation of her behaviour was that it was intended to humiliate the members of Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka.

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her peculiar behaviour was regarded as something close to blasphemous. She was imprisoned on 27 May 2005 under the section 295 and 295(a) of Burma's criminal code for abusing the *Sāsana* and desecrating a religious space. After three months in prison, she was finally released and allowed to return to Sri Lanka.

The real tragedy of this case was that Ma Thissawaddy received little support from the Burmese nuns or lay congregation in Burma.[25] While Burmese monks and nuns support each other in a close network of regional ties and scholastic lineages, she had left the country before becoming incorporated into the local monastic infrastructure and had not affiliated herself with the nuns' lineage that is essential for their well-being, sense of community and survival. Now cast as *Bhikkhunī* Saccavādī, her status on the international platform has ironically further marginalized her from her own nuns' community in Burma.

THE VIEWPOINT OF THE BURMESE *SAṄGHA*

The official position of the Burmese *Saṅgha* was made clear in the *Beikkhuni Wínísaya Satan,* published in 2004 by the Burmese Ministry of Religious Affairs. This starts by acknowledging the importance of the four components of *Sāsana* – *bhikkhu*s, *bhikkhunī*s, laymen and laywomen – in which the first two are understood to be essential components for it to prosper, and the preservation of which is stated to be the utmost priority for the Burmese *Saṅgha*. As we have already seen, Burmese monks on both sides of the debate have been united in their view that *bhikkhunī*s cannot be reinstated by reintroducing the Dharmaguptaka procedure preserved by a Mahāyāna tradition. In this, the anti-revivalists base their argument on the official teaching that once the *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* was extinguished, its revival is not possible. The pro-revivalists, though, insist on the possibility of reinstating the *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* through the 'single' ordination procedure that could be done without any outside interference.

The main discussion in *Beikkhuni Wínísaya Satan* focuses on the nature of the *garudhamma* rules and examines whether these are *mūla-paññatti* (a major rule, weighty regulation) or only *anu-paññatti* (a minor rule, supplementary regulation). The inconsistencies regarding the *garudhamma*s have been pointed out by scholars and we are aware that these rules are viewed by many to be a later addition after the time of the Buddha.[26] However, the discussion that takes place among Burmese monks does not question the authenticity of *garudhamma*s as

25. She comes from a different background compared to most Burmese nuns; she is an English-speaking urban woman with army connections, while most nuns come from agricultural communities in rural Burma.

26. Hirakawa claims that the *garudhamma* rules were established quite early on, at least before the first schism (1998, 58). He bases his claim on the consistency of their contents in the six extant *Vinaya*s: Dharmagupta (only in this Chinese tradition did the ordination lineage of *bhikṣuṇī*s survive), Mahīsāsaka, Dasabhāṇavāra, Theravādin, Mahāsaṃghika and Mūlasarvāstivādin (Tibet, Mongolia). Regarding inconsistencies, Bhikkunī Kusuma raises the question as to why

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Buddha-vācanā, words of the Buddha. Hence these rules are authoritative and accepted as an essential provision for the monastic community to safeguard and preserve the longevity of the *Sāsana*, which is also said to have been shortened by bringing women into the *Saṅgha* (Vin.II.253–5).

The discussion spends much time on the examination of the sixth of *garudhamma* rules (*Beikkhuni Wínísaya Satan* 2004, 13): *dve vassāni chasu dhammesu sikkhitasikkhāya sikkhamānāya ubhatosaṃghe upasampadā pariyesitabbā* (Vin. II.255), 'When as a *sikkhamānā*, she has trained for two years in the six rules, she is to ask for the higher ordination from both *Saṅgha*s'. The Burmese *Saṅgha* holds that this is a major ruling, which is binding, and therefore the 'dual' ordination stipulated in it has to be adhered to at all costs.

The document also lists the three types of ordination regarding the female monastics that have been undertaken during and since the time of the Buddha:

(1) The first occurrence is when Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī became the first woman to be accepted as a *bhikkhunī*. She was accepted on the condition that she simply followed the eight *garudhamma*: *yadagenna Ānanda Mahāpajāpatigotamiyā aṭṭha garudhammā paṭiggahāttā, tad eva sā hotu upasampannā'ti*' (Vin.II.257), 'At the time, Ānanda, when the eight important rules were accepted by Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī , that was her ordination'.

(2) The second type is a 'single' ordination that took place when five hundred Sakyan women were ordained by *bhikkhu*s. It is recorded in *Cullavagga* that soon after she was accepted by the Buddha, Gotamī questioned him about the status of those Sakyan women who had come with her: *kathāhāṃ bhante imāsu Sākiyanīsu paṭipajjāmī'ti* (pp. 256–7), 'Then Lord, what should I do with these Sakyan women?'. In reply, the Buddha gave *bhikkhu*s permission to confer higher ordination on these women: *anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetun'ti* (p. 257), 'I permit, *bhikkhu*s, that *bhikkhunī*s be ordained by *bhikkhu*s'. Hence 'single' ordination took place, and *bhikkhu*s on this occasion were authorized to ordain the Sakyan women, nevertheless, the two years' probation period was not observed by them.

(3) Once the *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* came into existence, the third type, 'dual' ordination, became an essential requirement for a female candidate who had to undergo the ordination procedure conducted by both *Saṅgha*s after observing two years' probationary training period as *sikkhamānā*. On this, the story of Princess Anula's request is mentioned from the *Dīpavaṃsa*, to describe how King Devanampiya Tissa of ancient Sri Lanka invited King Asoka's daughter Saṅghamittā Therī for the purpose of giving her ordination. This is noted as the beginning of *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* in Sri Lanka, establishing the tradition of 'dual' ordination for a female candidate.

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the usual procedure of stipulating a *Vinaya* rule, laid down after an incident of wrong doing, was not applied to the *garudhamma*s (2000, 8–9).

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The document also mentions the fourth possibility when a *bhikkhunī* is produced, that is, a *bhikkhu* can become *bhikkhunī* when a biological sex change takes place. In such case, a *bhikkhu* does not lose his monastic status by becoming a woman and becomes *bhikkhunī* without undergoing re-ordination.[27]

To summarize, the Burmese *Saṅgha* in the document stipulates that the *garudhamma* rules are imperative and therefore a female candidate has to go through the designated procedures conducted by both *Saṅgha*s. It is stated that 'single' ordination took place once during the time of the Buddha,[28] but that was directly authorized by him. Hence unless the female candidate follows the procedure in (3) and is interrogated first by *bhikkhunī*s concerning female impediments, she cannot, in their view, proceed to the next stage of ordination conducted by *bhikkhu*s. Consequently, *bhikkhunī*s cannot be reproduced in the Burmese monastic tradition any longer, as *bhikkhunī*s of this tradition no longer exist.

THE VIEWPOINT OF REVIVALISTS

Those who attempted to revive the *bhikkhunī*s in Burma such as the previously mentioned Adeiksawuntha did not see the *garudhamma* rules as binding since these were, in his view, only *ovāda*, 'instructions', or even a kind of a provisional code that was drawn up before any problem had actually come about. His view regarding the *garudhamma*s may resonate with the remark made by Beyer that 'Buddhist monastic law is casuistic', and 'it enunciates no broad principles from which individual rules are derived, but rather seeks to make an exhaustive listing of individual cases' (1974, 69). Furthermore, even if the procedure stipulated in the sixth rule was not followed, Adeiksawuntha stated that there was no *Vinaya* injunction forbidding this omission. In the question and reply section of his book, he affirms for the second time that it is possible to reinstate the *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* (1935, 77-8): *bhikkhunī*s could be created by *bhikkhu*s since there was no injunction to suggest otherwise, and it was ultimately possible if the *Saṅgha* authority endorsed this view. Nonetheless, he stressed that a female candidate had to be well qualified and trained properly, with a *sikkhamānā* having to be trained for two years and to have fulfilled all monastic requirements so as to be eligible to become *bhikkhunī*.[29]

Another Burmese monk, Ven. Bathanda Manita Biwuntha (Pāli title: Bhaddanta Manitabhivamsa) emphasized the importance of understanding the original intention of the Buddha. He stated that the *garudhamma*s were originally meant to pre-

27. *Beikkhuni Wínísaya Satan* (2004, 18); Hirakawa (2000, 116).
28. Although *Therīgāthā* (v.109) has Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā ordained by the Buddha simply by saying 'Come, Bhaddā' (as discussed at Williams [2000, 172–3]).
29. The candidate should have spent two *vassa* (rain retreats) of training during which time she has observed the six rules, which included not eating solid food in the afternoon and adhering to a celibate life.

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vent the 'rot' spreading from within the *Saṅgha*, which could lead to the decline of *Sāsana* (2005, 6). He also drew our attention to the features of *upasampadā kammavaca*, the Pāli inscription read at the ordination ceremony, in order to state that a female candidate had to use a scriptural formula that was used to ordain a male candidate (p. 9).[30] Thus the issue seems to boil down to whether the male formula could now be used in a 'single' ordination for a female candidate. However, this is not resolved, pointing to the ambiguity of her ceremonial status and an unspoken agreement about her institutional dependence on the monks. Ven. Manita Biwuntha, although unknowingly, took the same view as Ven. Adeiksawuntha, in saying that the *garudhamma* rules were only 'instruction' given by the Buddha, and viewed their characteristics to be representative of the monastic protocol observed at the time of the Buddha to safeguard harmonious relationships in the community. On the other hand, he did not see why a female candidate could not answer the questions regarding her impediments (*antarāyika*s) in front of the male monastics since the wordings were quite formalized. After all, the Buddha, in his interpretation, did not state that *bhikkhu*s could not question a *sikkhamānā*, therefore, it was not seen as technically impossible.

THE VIEWPOINT OF BURMESE NUNS

Nuns in Burma are generally resolute in their belief that it is impossible to revive the *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* within the Theravāda tradition. Even those who are aware of the recent *bhikkhunī* revival in Sri Lanka downplay its historical significance by emphasizing the impossibility of such an event being valid. Their conservative stance reflects their traditional position in relation to the male *Saṅgha*, in which nuns have always looked to the authority of senior monks for guidance when problems arose concerning communal matters or religious affairs. Western feminists might argue that these nuns, in the process of submerging their own interests for the common good, have become subordinated in the institutional hierarchy to the male *Saṅgha*. It could also be said that their present religious position, which is ambiguous,[31] has led them to seek acceptance from society by merging their interests with that of the monastic authority. Nevertheless, Burmese nuns regard the authority of male *Saṅgha* as imperative in their religious life, and acknowledging it forms the foundation of their whole religious orientation.[32] We also have to understand that these nuns represent the most conservative component of the monastic community in Burma, and they come

30. On this point, Dr Ann Heirman, a specialist on the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, stated that a 'single' ordination can never be 'normative' (private conversation).
31. See Kawanami (1990) for their 'ambiguous' religious position.
32. Their responses indicated similar results to the findings of Harris regarding the conservative end of the spectrum of Buddhist women whom she interviewed in Sri Lanka (1995, 62). She said that these women showed strong respect for the monks and were unwilling to criticize them in any way, and the same orientation was observed among most Burmese Buddhist nuns.

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from a much more traditional religious background compared to most Western women who become Buddhist nuns today. It has also been suggested that those nuns who oppose the reinstating of the *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* do so because they are reluctant to lose their freedom and an autonomous way of life, as *bhikkhunīs* are formally dependent on *bhikkhu*s in various respects.[33] However, actual interviews with Burmese nuns suggested otherwise, as most of them were happy with the *de facto* supervision and control that senior monks already had over them.

The Burmese nun teachers I interviewed did not perceive the recent revival of the *bhikkhunī* lineage as something positive that might bring new openings and affect their future in a better way.[34] Most saw it more as a challenge to the overall unity of the Theravāda tradition and many perceived it as threatening to what they had already achieved in society. Meanwhile, some did not relish the possibility of 'Mahāyāna' influence on their religious practice, as it was considered that they were lax in discipline.[35] This point is especially relevant for the Burmese nuns, since they regard monastic discipline to be most important prerequisites in their religious life, and being called *thilashin* (keepers of the *sīla*), they simply could not comprehend how anyone could be a monastic without observing the fundamental vows that were taken for granted in their own tradition. For example, one nun was flabbergasted in hearing that Chinese *bhikkhunīs* ate in the afternoon![36] Others viewed the status and power oriented attitude of some Western *bhikkhunīs* to be disconcerting, and did not appreciate the emphasis on equal rights and personal achievements as much as they did, seeing such aspiration for status as 'self-serving' and even 'self-obsessed'. One nun commented that it was an attack on their carefully cultivated image of humility and moral purity, and saw it to go against her fundamental values and training that enhanced 'selflessness' and service to the community.

THE PRESENT POSITION OF BURMESE NUNS

Although there is no *bhikkhunī Saṅgha* in Burma, there have been political initiatives in recent decades to incorporate both monks and nuns into the state monastic organization. Its blueprint was originally introduced and partially implemented under the *Mahsalat* or Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) in the early 1980s,[37] and later revised in 1992 under the State Law and Order Restoration

33. See Bloss (1987, 19). For views of Thai and Sri Lankan nuns on becoming *bhikkhunīs*, see Lindberg-Falk (2000, 46, 55), Bartholomeusz (1994, 136–7).
34. I interviewed 18 Burmese nuns in 2004, all of them *Dhamma* teachers in their role as state certified *Dhammācariya*s.
35. Gombrich's introduces the view of Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka who state that 'Mahāyāna tradition may be lax in discipline' (1988, 19).
36. Burmese nuns do not eat sold food after midday until the sunrise of the following day and this vow is essential in providing the foundation for their monastic identity.
37. After the coup d'etat in 1962, U Ne Win seized power and imposed military dictatorship during

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Council (SLORC).[38] In 1982, the state introduced a system of formally recognizing monks and nuns, and it became compulsory for all monastic members to be registered with the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs, which issued them a special identification card that safeguarded their monastic status.[39] In the same year, a national committee of Buddhist nuns (Thilashin Ahpwe Asi) was established, which was meant to be the highest representative body for Buddhist nuns in Burma, and intended to provide them with a national forum to discuss their day-to-day affairs that could not be dealt with by monks. However, this was never meant to be an independent body for nuns with a separate decision-making function, and its duties and obligations were stipulated by appointed senior monks. As a matter of fact, it did not develop beyond the initial consultation stage, and the state forum for nuns never played an active part at the national level; it was eventually phased out in the new organizational scheme for monastic members implemented in the early 1990s.

Although the nuns' national committee did not materialize, nuns are active at the state/divisional and township committees; their representatives are elected at these levels, at the second and third tiers of the state monastic organization. Nuns are especially active in the township committees, liaising closely with senior monks in the locality as well as government officials of the township councils who are sent to oversee monastic affairs that have direct impact on the local infrastructure. Nun representatives are elected on the basis of their monastic education and qualifications, so all of them are scholarly nuns who are principals of nunnery schools. They exercise their authority by granting permission to new nun entrants, overseeing nunneries in the area, supervising monastic exams, and take overall responsibility for the general welfare of nun residents in the locality.

THE MONASTIC CODE FOR BURMESE NUNS

In the absence of an operating *bhikkhunī Vinaya*, Burmese nuns have long followed a communal code of practice that has been developed out of practical necessity, and this has governed every aspect of their activities. The original aim of the nuns' code was to maintain order and communal harmony, and many of these customary rules, if examined, are not so different from those in the *bhikkhunī-vibhaṅga*. They were compiled and written down, and subsequently became widely accepted as a code of practice for Burmese nuns, commonly

the period 1964–1988.

38. In 1997, the ruling military junta changed its name from SLORC to SPDC (State Peace and Development Council).
39. Monastic identification is required in Burma to purchase any tickets on public transports, which are bought at a reduced price for monastics, and, more importantly, to transport donations in the form of rice and grain back to their monastic residence without having them confiscated.

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known as *Thilashin Ubadei Kyingan*. In 1994, the State Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka officially endorsed *Thilashin Kyinwut* as a communal guideline for the nuns, and the Sagaing codebook became the benchmark in compiling a national code of practice for the Burmese nuns.[40]

The original codebook stipulates more than 300 customary rules that are applicable to the nuns in their daily situations. These provide a clear guideline as to their monastic duties, obligations and responsibilities in relation to other nuns in the hierarchy according to where they stand in the community. There are detailed stipulations concerning deportment and language, clothing, manner of food intake, bathing and going out for alms, as well as acceptable practices for monastic transactions. Responsibilities for those in a position of authority are stated, and practical measures are spelled out to deal with situations when a violation takes place. Traditional values such as obedience, discipline and mindfulness are emphasized throughout, and respectful manners towards senior members are stressed. It also stipulates that nuns must have a permanent institutional affiliation, and those who do not have one are not issued a monastic identity card.

Punishments following rules violations are vaguely specified, but the role of enforcing them is reserved for the principal nun or her deputy. Should a nun commit an offence, it is customarily settled by nun mediators within the institution; a senior monk is summoned from the locality if the offence cannot be dealt with by the nuns themselves. Serious disputes are resolved by resorting to the communal jurisprudence of the monastic community. This implies that, despite the government's best efforts to oversee their activities, monks and nuns have followed the traditional procedure of conflict resolution within the community, and maintained a degree of autonomy in conducting their local affairs. In most monastic institutions we see an internal system of 'checks and controls' in place, implemented through their intricate web of mutual supervision, which aims to deal with possible infringements at an early stage. All new entrants are closely monitored by senior nun members to minimize problems and unforeseeable events and, if any offence comes to light, collective responsibility first obliges her preceptor/supervisor to be punished on the grounds of neglect of duty, and ultimately the responsibility falls on the institutional head.

Although the Burmese nuns are not *bhikkhunī*s, they have followed these customary norms and maintained a similar protocol stipulated in the *garudhamma*s in their dealings with the monks. For example, it is customary for Burmese nuns to have a senior monk(s) who acts as *Ovādācariya* or Counsel for the nunnery. In his position as *Ovādācariya*, he offers them regular admonition and intervenes in

40. Based on *Thilashin Ubadei Kyinkan*, which was originally meant for the nuns living in the monastic community in Sagaing Hills, *Thilashin Kyinwut hnin Nyunkya-hlwa*, the 1994 code, was accepted by the State Saṅgha Council on 22 March 1994. The monastic code is memorized by nuns affiliated with nunnery schools and its regular recitation is incorporated as part of the educational curriculum to remind them of the importance of discipline, order and harmonious relationships in the community.

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times of internal disputes. Nonetheless, such monks are not imposed on them but chosen by the nuns themselves, and sometimes a relationship with a specific monk or monastery is passed on from their nun predecessors in the nunnery. Having said that, it is noteworthy that their communal code is fastidious about the acceptable mode of conduct in their relationship with monks, wherein a possible situation of difficulty is outlined and accordingly the correct conduct is stipulated.[41] In this way, Burmese nuns have endorsed the *Saṅgha* authority and come under the protection and supervision of senior monks without losing their autonomous spheres of influence in their monastic life.

CONCLUSION

So what has happened to the debate in regard to the *bhikkhunī* revival since 1996? In Burma, the insistence on the Theravāda 'purity' in the debate does not seem to abate as Burmese Buddhists have inherited a strong sense of pride in which they perceive themselves to be the custodian of an 'authentic' religious legacy, the closest to that established by the Buddha himself, and this cannot be changed.[42] This has led to statements uttered by senior monks who continue to discredit the ordination procedure that has involved Mahāyāna monks and nuns. Furthermore, leaders of the Burmese *Saṅgha* have, in the past few years, become increasingly resolute in their opposition to the revival movement, at a time when senior monks see themselves as being forced into a tight corner by the action of a Burmese nun, who is, in their view, under an 'alien' type of influence coming from the international community. Subsequently, the revival movement has come to be viewed not only as an attack on their religious authority, but also a threat that could tarnish the purity of their heritage and eventually destroy the *Sāsana*.

The contemporary controversies also show that some monks and Buddhist organizations that support the revival movement have attempted to appropriate the issue of gender and other status disparities in the *Saṅgha* to further their own political agenda, and the *bhikkhunī* issue has come to be used as leverage in their quest for hegemony and power. In many ways, the movement has opened a can of worms, since it allows every participant to try to negotiate their boundaries and establish a new realm of authority in the Buddhist world. Furthermore, as the movement becomes more politicized in recent years, we can no longer discount the possibility, which was already predicted early on, that the downside of

41. This reflects the apprehension on the part of senior nuns of their innate vulnerability and there are rules aimed at safeguarding them against compromising their religious position.
42. In the political history in Burma since the eleventh century, and in the process of establishing their hegemony, the Burmese authorities have succeeded in building a strong Buddhist identity, which emphasizes the notions of purity and authenticity: a self-perception that views their Buddhist tradition to be the closest to that of the Buddha.

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the *bhikkhunī* revival movement could result in dissension or *saṅgha-bheda*, which implies actual schism in the monastic community.[43]

What we see in Sri Lanka today is that the movement has started to divide the *bhikkhunī*s into groups based on whether they had been ordained by the Korean or Taiwanese, as these compete for legitimacy.[44] We also notice a wide disparity that has emerged between ordained nuns and non-ordained nuns. This manifests in the division between English-speaking *bhikkhunī*s who have connections with supporters in the international community, and non-English-speaking *dasasilmātā*s who are mostly from rural backgrounds and who continue to serve their local community by conducting *pūjā*s and providing care. Meanwhile, not all *dasasilmātā*s aspire to become *bhikkhunī*s; especially those who practise *vipassanā* meditation, as they are not interested in types of activities that could distract them from their main spiritual practices. Western Buddhist nuns have also promoted their own political agenda for equal rights and empowerment for nuns through their active involvement. However, their enthusiasm, based on liberal values in line with those of the tradition of European Enlightenment, is not shared by many Asian Buddhist nuns, whose priorities lie in fulfilling their religious duties and serving the community.

In Burma, the nuns have adopted a pragmatic attitude in their dealings with the *Saṅgha* and political authorities by positioning themselves conveniently within the monastic hierarchy, and negotiated their religious position so as to remain a non-threatening force. More importantly, it is noteworthy that the tremendous efforts made by these nuns in the past century have resulted in the tenfold increase of the number of state certified *Dhammācariya*s (*Dhamma* teachers) and the expanding network of independent nunnery schools all over the country. The present system allows them to study Pāli scriptures, including the *Vinaya*, and many nuns have pursued a scholastic career in order to become more worthy of respect in the eyes of their lay benefactors. Under such circumstances, their more immediate concern is about uplifting the standards of their monastic education and not jeopardising what they have already achieved in their society. As Burmese nuns perceive themselves to have become credible monastics in their own milieu, there should be more understanding about their aspirations and future prospects within their local contexts.

Many of the early initiatives to revive the *bhikkhunī*s have been instigated by educated monks and ambitious individuals who saw the need to introduce modern values of equality, justice and progress, so that the monastic institution they viewed as out of touch with modernity could be reformed to fit modern times. However, we have seen how the discrepancy created in Sri Lanka and Burma, between those who want reform and those who adhere to the status quo, has brought about tension and division, and subsequently widened the gap between those who endorse the liberal ideologies of feminism, equal rights and individual-

43. See Khantipalo (1979, 183).
44. See Cheng (2004, 304).

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ism, and those who adhere to traditional notions of duty, service and community. The problem is that the former ideas are innately secular, and although they may appear liberal and universal, they do not take into consideration the immediate needs of faith-based communities that operate on values and priorities that are not the same as the outside world. It has also been a major challenge for many Asian Buddhist nuns who, having been trained to respect seniority and experience, as well as to become 'selfless' in their religious vocation, are now encouraged to fight for equal rights in competition with the monks and their teachers. This has been very alien to their Buddhist teaching in which they see gender as ultimately irrelevant in their spiritual practice and aspire to become free from such worldly concerns.

The question ultimately boils down to: who decides their future and to what end? The ideals of justice and equality we take for granted in the Western world are useful as a means of attaining better treatment and improve living conditions for the nuns. However, we also need to question whether these values are ultimately relevant in their monastic life as they practise the *Dhamma* and aspire to become enlightened. If we went back to the original intention of the Buddha, *garudhamma* rules were meant to safeguard a harmonious cohesion of the *Saṅgha*s in which a corporate environment overrode any individual interests or desires. The present movement to revive the *bhikkhunī*s can be a symptom of secularization that is sweeping the globe. Nonetheless it seems to me that too much emphasis on modern liberal values would not foster the *Sāsana* but eventually lead to its decline.

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