

Open letter to the venerable

Bhikkhu Thānissaro
Metta Forest Monastery
P.O. Box 1409
Valley Center, CA 92082, USA

18th May 2017

Dear bhante,

my respectful greetings.

With this letter I am sending you a recently published article on the “The Validity of *bhikkhunī* Ordination by *bhikkhus* Only, According to the Pāli Vinaya”, which has just come out.

As also briefly mentioned in this paper, the position I took in my article “Women’s Renunciation in Early Buddhism”, originally written for a conference held in 2007, was based only in part on my own research, but in part also on summarizing current academic consensus. One piece that resulted from such summarizing was the impression that the *garudhammas* must be a later addition. In the course of conducting my own research, however, I eventually found out that this assessment, although affirmed by many academics, does not stand up to closer scrutiny and therefore I had to abandon it, as mentioned explicitly in a monograph I published last year.

In the attached paper “The Validity of *bhikkhunī* Ordination by *bhikkhus* Only...”, I make three main points. The first is that all rulings on *bhikkhunī* ordination serve to facilitate such ordination and not to prevent it. The second concerns an apparent reference to *bhikkhunīs* taking part in ordinations before the rule on dual ordination. The third concerns the need to find a way of interpreting the promulgation of *garudhamma* 6 that is respectful to the Buddha. Regarding the second point, I admit being still somewhat puzzled by the grammar (see notes 15 and 18). It will be interesting to see what your take on it will be. But even if you should find this point less convincing than it appears to me, the third point on the need to take *garudhamma* 6 seriously can hardly be doubted. It will not do to treat it as just a meaningless promulgation of something that never had any function whatsoever. Once this much is granted, I think it follows that all subsequent rulings on *bhikkhunī* ordination need to be considered in relation to this basic pronouncement of the Buddha on how such ordination should be done. Thus each of the subsequent rulings is an adaptation of this basic principle to a particular situation. This then implies that **the permission for *bhikkhus* to ordain *bhikkhunīs* has not been rendered invalid** by subsequent rules.

Besides this article, another article is at present forthcoming on the question of the significance and function of origin stories in the Vinaya (mentioned in note 11 of “The Validity of *bhikkhunī* Ordination by *bhikkhus* Only...”). Once this is out, I will send it to you. In addition to the points made in these two articles, in what follows I would like to reply to a few issues you raised in two papers that were posted on a blog and entitled “On Ordaining Bhikkhunīs Unilaterally” (2015) and “Postscript” (2016).

1) Case Law

Thank you for the detailed exposition on case law, much of which was new to me. On following up I found that there are distinct understandings of the term “case law” in UK and US usage, and the German usage is still different, the last being the basis for my comments. Not being a native speaker of English, I used a term that called up connotations that I did not intend, and it is good that you have pointed this out. The error I made does not have any impact on the rest of my discussion, however, as I am nowhere suggesting that there is another authority for promulgating rules, apart from the Buddha himself.

2) Legal and Historical-critical Readings

The distinction I draw between these two types of readings has led you to feel that “one has to question that person’s honesty” (2016: 2). Allow me to explain, the point I make is that what is relevant to academics when reading the Vinaya is not the same as what is relevant to Buddhist monastics when reading the Vinaya. The former want to understand the evolution of a text that has no practical impor-

tance for them, whereas the latter want to understand the practical implications of the text they use as a guideline for their behaviour. The two have different concerns and different aims.

What I mean by a “historical-critical reading” is the academic approach, typically by using parallel versions and comparing them with each other, in order to determine what is early and what has been added later. What I mean by a “legal reading” is when monastics wish to understand and follow the Vinaya, which does not require a study of the parallel versions. Instead, as monastics we just rely on the texts of the tradition in which we were ordained, which in our case is the Theravāda tradition. For Theravāda jurisprudence, only the Pāli material is relevant, not the texts of other Buddhist traditions. This has nothing to do with “asserting that texts such as the Canon have no inherent meaning” (2016: 3), an assertion I have never made and would never make.

In short, I only say that, for the purpose of understanding Theravāda jurisprudence, I focus just on the Pāli texts and leave aside the comparative study that I usually do when my aim is to understand the evolution of a text. The distinction between a legal and a historical-critical reading is meant to acknowledge that the type of comparative study done by academics has no legal relevance for a Theravāda monastic. **Instead of being a form of dishonesty, this is just common sense.**

3) Quoting out of Context

In your first paper you quote my discussion of SN 16.13 and come to the conclusion that what I did was “to quote Dhamma out of context to create a false impression”, this being “in and of itself an act of disrespect for the Dhamma” (2015: 18f). The passage you quote from my earlier discussion reads like this: “According to a discourse in the Saṃyutta-nikāya, such a decline can be prevented when the members of the four assemblies, including bhikkhunīs, dwell with respect for the teacher, the Dhamma, the Saṅgha, the training, and concentration. Here the bhikkhunīs actually contribute to preventing decline, rather than being themselves its cause.”

You comment that “if Bhikkhu Anālayo had given more complete citations from SN 16:13, AN 5:201, AN 6:40, and AN 7:56, it would have been clear that they do not support his conclusion that the mere existence of an order of bhikkhunīs would help prevent the decline of the Buddha’s teaching.”

In my reply in the article “The Cullavagga on Bhikkhunī Ordination” (2015 note 4) I point out that I had never intended to take the position that the *mere* existence of *bhikkhunīs* prevents decline. My point is rather that in order for the *bhikkhunīs* to be able to dwell with respect, they of course need to exist first of all. In fact on continuing to read my article with the discussion of SN 16.13, one next comes to this part: “these passages clearly put the responsibility for preventing a decline of the teaching on each of the four assemblies. It is their dwelling with respect towards essential aspects of the Buddha’s teaching and each other that prevents decline.”

I think this makes it clear that I did not fail to point out that it is the proper behaviour of all four assemblies that prevents decline. In your second paper, you note that I nevertheless come to the conclusion that the four assemblies are a requirement for the flourishing of the Buddha’s dispensation (2016: 1). This is indeed the case and, since you refer to my article “Women’s Renunciation in Early Buddhism” (2015: 5), you must be aware of the various canonical passages that led me to this conclusion (see the long discussion under the header of the “four assemblies”). But the point at issue at present is that, in relation to SN 16.13, I did not arrive at that conclusion by quoting out of context. This is why I say in my footnote: “The accusation of quoting out of context to create a false impression thus falls back on the accuser” (2015 note 4). This problem remains, in that I am being accused of doing something which I did not do, and the very accusation involves doing precisely what it criticizes, namely quoting out of context. The issue at stake is not my final conclusion, but how I arrived at it. I did not arrive at it by quoting from SN 16.13 out of context with the intention of creating a false impression. **Intentional quoting out of context is something that I would not do; to do that would go against my sense of personal integrity and my practice.**

Thus it is not correct to speak, in evident reference to me, of “scholarly bhikkhus [who] feel free to adopt mutually contradictory positions to serve various aims, and to cherry-pick the Dhamma and Vinaya as they like, taking it out of context and so showing disrespect for the Dhamma” (2015: 20).

Would it not be preferable if we could engage in discussing points of Vinaya without recourse to such allegations? I take it that we are both sincerely convinced of our respective positions and that we feel we have good arguments for being so convinced. Such arguments should be sufficient in themselves. This would be in keeping with the spirit of the Dhamma and the Vinaya, which requires oppo-

nents in a discussion to try **to communicate honestly, non-violently, and without misrepresenting the other.**

4) Elephant Simile

In my article I had compared the situation in the Theravāda tradition to an elephant with one leg crippled, suggesting that the restoration of the *bhikkhunī* order, so as to have all four assemblies, would be comparable to healing the crippled leg. In your first paper (2015: 20), you changed the simile in this way: “A more accurate analogy would be this: The religion is like an elephant with a severed leg. A doctor wants to reattach the leg, even though it has long been dead, and his tools for doing so are contaminated. If the operation goes forward, it will hasten the elephant’s death.”

My intent throughout is to ensure the longevity of the Theravāda tradition. The crippled leg in my simile represents the eight and ten precept nuns, who live a semi-monastic life and are a substitute for the missing *bhikkhunī* Saṅgha in the Theravāda tradition. I consider them to be like a crippled leg, since the limitations they live under do not allow them to function in a Theravāda society in a way comparable to *bhikkhus* or *bhikkhunīs*. But I do not think we can consider them to be dead. They do exist, they live and practice, and they do make a substantial contribution to the Theravāda tradition. The only problem is that this contribution is hampered by their ambivalent standing. For this reason their situation is comparable to a crippled leg that requires healing.

Keeping in mind that these nuns are not dead but alive helps to clarify another objection you made, namely that there is nobody to train a revived *bhikkhunī* Saṅgha. This seems to me not to take fully into account the reality on the ground in Theravāda countries. The revival has already happened nearly twenty years ago and this revival began with senior and well-trained nuns taking *bhikkhunī* ordination. This is one of the reasons why the revival has been so successful. The whole problem of how to train a *bhikkhunī* Saṅgha lacking a living tradition has already been solved by relying on the living tradition of the eight and ten precept nuns and the compassionate guidance of those *bhikkhus* who supported and continue to support them.


Thus when you speak of “the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha that he would like to reinstate” (2015: 20), then I like to point out that this is already a past event. Well after that had happened, I received a request by *bhikkhunīs* from Sri Lanka, who asked me to clarify their legal situation. Some *bhikkhus* are also worried that the controversy around this issue will foment schismatic tendencies. Thus my writings are an attempt to clarify something that has already happened. This attempt is **motivated by the wish to avoid that misunderstandings lead to divisiveness and conflict in the Order.**

In my writings on *bhikkhunī* ordination I have been at pains to rectify the mistaken impression among considerable parts of the general public that resistance to the revival of the *bhikkhunī* Saṅgha is simply an expression of misogyny by chauvinist *bhikkhus* who are only concerned with clinging to their power and position. I have explained in detail why such a revival by relying on ordination carried out by members of a different tradition, who follow a different Vinaya, is problematic and that this needs to be honestly recognized rather than just be brushed aside as vain excuses. I have also tried to clarify that feminist values are not of direct relevant to Vinaya matters and that, from the very same viewpoint of discrimination, it is not really acceptable to turn a blind eye on the right of a religious tradition to maintain its customs and observances.

My discussion of the option of “ordaining Bhikkhunīs unilaterally”, as you call it, offers a way out of the dilemma. It shows that such a revival does not conflict with principles of traditional Theravāda jurisprudence in the way these are enshrined in the Pāli Vinaya. I have spent time in researching and writing about this because my concern is the Theravāda tradition as a whole. I sincerely believe that the solution, already proposed in the 1940ies by the venerable Narada Mahāthera, is the way forward in the present situation.

Even if the solution proposed by the venerable Mahāthera should remain unacceptable to you, perhaps the two of us can at least “agree to disagree” in a spirit of mutual respect.

With mettā



Bhikkhu Anālayo
Barre Center for Buddhist Studies
149 Lockwood Road
Barre, MA, 01005, USA