

might have been for this development, as a form of nationalist assertion under British rule, no longer exists. Social groups in the past have expressed their aspirations in part by creating new religious sects.

The emergence of Syndicated Hinduism is different both in scale and scope and is not restricted to the creation of a new sect but a new religious form seeking to encapsulate all the earlier sects. The sheer scale as well as the motivation call for considerable caution. Syndicated Hinduism claims to be re-establishing the Hinduism of pre-modern times; in fact it is only establishing itself and in the process distorting the historical and cultural dimensions of the indigenous religions and divesting them of the nuances and variety which was a major source of their enrichment.

Attempts to insist on its legitimacy increase the distance between it and the indigenous religious articulations of Indian civilisation and invest it with the ingredients of a dangerous fundamentalism. With each aggressive stance, based on the false alarm of Hinduism in danger (as when five hundred 'Hindu' untouchables were converted to Islam at Meenakshipuram out of a population of five hundred million 'Hindus'), this Syndicated Hinduism forces a particular identity on all those who are now technically called Hindus. But not all would wish to participate in this identity. There is something to be said for attempting to comprehend the real religious expression of Indian civilisation before it is crushed beneath the wheels of this new Juggernaut bandwagon.

## REVIVAL OF THE ORDER OF BUDDHIST NUNS THE DEBATE AND ARGUMENTS

Senarath Wijayasundara

**T**he followers of the Buddha's teachings constitute Buddhist society and that society, as enunciated by the Buddha, consists of the following four components: i) Monks, ii) Nuns, iii) Laymen, and iv) Laywomen. Out of the two Buddhist traditions into which Buddhist society is divided, Mahayana alone has all these four components even to the present day whereas Theravada had lost the order of Nuns some time back. This places the female members of Theravada Buddhist society at a spiritually disadvantageous position for no fault of their own.

The origins of the order of Buddhist Nuns is well known, as also the fact that, as natural in the male dominated world, it was won with much difficulty. It was inaugurated thanks to the intelligent handling of the matter by Ananda Thera. Here the position of the Buddha must be understood clearly. Writing a well documented book under the title *Women Under Primitive Buddhism*, Miss I.B. Horner has the following:

I hope to show that he (Buddha) did not, as is usually said of him, grudge women their entry into the Order, but that his compassion for the many-folk included, from the beginning, women as well as men and animals. He saw the potentially good, the potentially spiritual in them as clearly as he saw it in men. Hence, were their life spent

in the world or in the religious community, he spared himself no trouble to show them the way to happiness, to salvation, a way which they might train themselves to follow by self-mastery.<sup>1</sup>

At the third Buddhist Council held in India in the 3rd century B.C. it was decided to despatch nine missions to different places for the spread of Buddhism.

One mission headed by Mahinda thero reached Sri Lanka. The tremendous success achieved by this mission was such that, within a few days, there was a request from a group of five hundred ladies led by Anula to make room for them to join the Order. Mahinda's sister Sanghamitta was invited to Sri Lanka to initiate the Order of Nuns. In Sri Lanka both Orders grew in strength and popularity.

However, by the turn of the tenth century, Buddhism was being seriously affected by invading non-Buddhist rulers; thus at the turn of the eleventh century the country was under a South Indian ruler. When the invaders had been successfully repelled, the new King was keen to revive Buddhism which had fallen into a pathetic state. It was brought to his notice that there were no members of the *Bhikkhu-Sangha* (nuns). So he sought assistance from Burma (Myanmar) to restore the order of monks. But there is no mention of reviving the Order of Nuns. If during this period of political dependency the male members of the *Sangha* (monks) had suffered so much as to cause the Order to become extinct, there is hardly any doubt about the plight of its female members. But there is no record that the King tried to revive the order of nuns.<sup>2</sup>

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Even though the Order of Nuns had disappeared, the desire for spiritual awakening among Buddhist women did not die down altogether. It gave rise to some rather unusual steps on the part of women in Thailand and Sri Lanka.<sup>3</sup>

In Thailand there are several groups of women who have come forward to participate in religion more than is allowed to ordinary laywomen. There is a group of Mae-jis whose status is far from satisfactory. So, not being pleased with their condition, there has evolved a group known as *Silacarinis*, begun in 1957 with the ordination of five women who observe the ten precepts. Their centre is in Bangkok and they have a separate nunnery. They wear brown robes. There is still another group wearing dark brown robes and living under the guidance of a self-ordained monk named Bodhiraksa who initiated the ordination lineage himself. There is yet another group whose head, Ven. Voramai Kabilsingh, began as a *Mae-ji*. She received her full ordination in Taiwan. Her temple is away from Bangkok and members of the group wear light yellow robes. This group, I think, will have the opportunity of catering to the needs of Buddhist women who choose to lead a life of renunciation.

In Sri Lanka there is no record of active participation of Buddhist women in religious matters, apart from the traditional role, after the disappearance of the *Bhikkhuni* order until the latter part of the 19th century as part of the Buddhist resurgence.

The origin of the *Dasa-Sila matas* is to be traced to the pioneering role played by Sudhammacari (1885-1937) whose lay name was Miss Catherine de Alwis Gunatilaka. She was born into a Christian family in Bentota. But as time went on she became interested in Buddhism and wished to become a Buddhist nun. But, as there were no nuns in Sri Lanka and no monk would administer the ten precepts, she had to go to Burma (Myanmar). There she underwent a course of training and was given ordination by Dow-Ni-Chari with the name Sudhammacari. She returned to Sri Lanka in 1903 and founded the Lady Blake Nunnery at Katukele (Kandy). Many women from various parts of the country came to her to receive the precepts. Thus the present Dasa-Sila Mata movement was born.

The movement commands respect from the lay community; the Ministry of Buddhist Affairs recognises them and is organizing programmes to help them with their educational and material needs. It must be said that some members are satisfied with the ten precepts as they accept the traditional interpretation given to the eight Garu-Dhammas. But most of them are hopeful of becoming fully ordained nuns in the near future either within the Theravada tradition or a non-Theravada Buddhist tradition.

Almost all the heads of the *Nikayas* (chapters of Buddhist monks) in Sri Lanka are against such a move and

maintain that it cannot be granted within their Vinaya (disciplinary) tradition; quite unjustifiably, they are also against getting ordination from other Buddhist traditions. Fortunately, there are some leading educated members of the Sangha who are of the opinion that these women could receive ordination from a country like China, Korea and Taiwan where the lineage has been maintained without a break. A considerable numbers of laymen and laywomen are also in favour of such a step and in fact support their cause.

The opposition on the part of some Buddhists to the revival of the Order of Buddhist Nuns seems to run counter to the spirit as well as the aims of Buddhism. Here I wish to draw your attention to two significant statements from two authoritative *suttas* which indicate how important is the presence of the nun in the religion of the Buddha and how much is lost in her absence.

The first is from an important discussion between the Buddha and a sympathetic wanderer (*Paribbajaka*) Vacchagotta by name.<sup>4</sup> Acknowledging that the Buddha has been successful in the realization of his aims, Vacchagotta asks whether the same success can be asserted on behalf of his followers. The Buddha answers in the affirmative and says such disciples are many. It is interesting to note that Vacchagotta divides the Buddhist community into six components namely

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|----------------------|-----------------------|
| i. Monks             | ii. Nuns              |
| iii. Celibate laymen | iv. Celibate laywomen |
| v. Ordinary laymen   | vi. Ordinary laywomen |

In the discussion it is assumed that all the six components are expected to realize their respective ideals according to the status of each one. Monks and Nuns are supposed to realize the same ideal. This shows that Buddhism is a living religion in the sense that both men and women are treated equally and expected to lay claim to the same ideal. So both these components must exist together.

The other statement is from the answer reported to have been given by the Buddha to Mara.<sup>5</sup> Mara comes to the Buddha and reminds him of an announcement made on a previous occasion to the effect that he would not pass away unless the four components of Buddhist society namely i) Monks, ii) Nuns, iii) Laymen, and iv) Laywomen had become eligible for salvation by cultivating necessary qualities. Here too the nun is a component that cannot be left out of consideration.

Theravada Buddhism is thus now incomplete; it is only by the revival of the Order of Nuns that it can become complete.

In such a situation, what is the position of these women in Theravada tradition who aspire to join the order to practise Buddhism and to realize fully its ideals? Their





counterparts in Mahayana tradition face no obstacles in their way as the order of nuns is open to them.

Sri Lanka is the only Theravada country that had the Order of Nuns to begin with but lost it later, depriving women of the most effective opportunity to realize the ideals of Buddhism. So let us learn from the history and experience of the Order of Nuns in Mahayana countries.

## Mahayana Tradition

Historians believe that Buddhism reached China around the first century A.C. But it took some time even for the Order of Monks to appear there.<sup>6</sup> How much more difficult would it have been for the nuns to establish an Order for themselves?

It appears that there was a good deal of discussion among the Buddhists in China over the establishment of the Order of Nuns. Some maintained that it was not possible without the participation of nuns. Some said Chinese women could get only the initial ordination. Yet others maintained that the Vinaya rules concerning full ordination could be so interpreted as to allow monks to ordain women, even in the absence of nuns.

At last the problem of full ordination was referred to Gunavarman of Kashmir by Hui Kuo who herself was an expert on *Vinaya* (monastic discipline). She asked him whether it was legitimate for women to receive full ordination without the participation of nuns. Gunavarman said that there was nothing wrong. Then she asked whether it would be wrong on the part of monks to grant full ordination to women without nuns. He maintained that no fault would lie with them. Then he went on to explain that monks would be deemed to be at fault only if they had given full ordination without nuns when the latter were available.

This was a wise solution within the limits of *Vinaya*. But Gunavarman who was an ardent propagator of Buddhism did not stop at that. He worked very hard to get down to China a sufficient number of nuns for full ordination. In 429 A.C. some nuns from Sri Lanka arrived in China, but they were not numerically sufficient. Later another group of nuns headed by Devasara reached China in 438 A.C. By that time Gunavarman had passed away. Thoughtful as he was he had left detailed instructions with a Sinhala monk named Sanghavarman.<sup>7</sup> The two groups of nuns from Sri Lanka got together and conferred full ordination on the applicants. It is said that "...more than 300 Chinese nuns received their full ordination from Sinhala *Bhikkhunis*."<sup>8</sup> But strangely enough no Sri Lankan chronicle mentions this important event. It comes to us only from Chinese sources.

The Order of Nuns was then spread from China to neighbouring countries such as Korea and Taiwan. At a well-attended ceremony held to bid farewell to a group of five Chinese monks who had completed their education

in Sri Lanka, Prof. W. Rahula referred to this fact and suggested that Sri Lankan *Dasa-Sila Matas* could receive their full ordination from one of these countries.<sup>9</sup>

The *suttas* discussed earlier clearly show that the absence of the component of nuns renders Theravada tradition defective in its own eyes. Dr. Senarat Paranavitana is reported to have said that without the *Bhikkhuni Sangha*, the present day male *Sangha* in Sri Lanka cannot be called the *Mahasangha*. In addition, its inability to meet the legitimate demands of women to practise Buddhism on an equal basis with men makes Theravada vulnerable to criticism.

Therefore, it is up to Theravada to stand up to this serious challenge and open its door to nuns. The following are six possible ways of overcoming the present situation.

The first three were presented by Prof. G. P. Malalasekera, founder of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, when he called for the restoration of the Order of Buddhist Nuns in 1934 in the *Ceylon Daily News, Vesak Number*.

## Possibilities

I. According to the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, the Buddha on his death-bed is said to have told Ananda that his *Sangha*, if it so desires, may on his death abolish lesser and minor rules. Professor Malalasekera concluded: "That then is the first possibility - the decision by a representative assembly of the *Sangha* to dispense with the traditional ceremonial in the ordination of nuns." Making use of this concession the *Sangha* can take a decision to restore the *Bhikkhuni* Order without the participation of nuns.

II. There is another means which in his opinion may be less objectionable. That is to use an injunction issued by the Buddha which stipulates "I permit you, monks, to confer full ordination on nuns".

There are instances where some regulations have been amended, altered or abrogated by the Buddha on various occasions under different conditions. But this injunction has never been changed. Therefore, its validity stands even today. This should be sufficient authority for monks to ordain nuns with their consciences clear that no transgression of rules has been committed.

III. The third possibility follows from special practices followed in Buddhism. Mahapajapati Gotami and her companions took the precepts and ordained themselves.

Ordination is not something which someone can give to another. It is something which one undertakes to keep and has to be observed by one personally according to one's motivation. The ordination of a Buddhist monk or nun essentially consists of taking upon oneself voluntarily the observance of certain precepts. It is essentially different from the ordination of priests in religions where priests



are regarded as intercessors between man and god. There is no delegation of authority and no question of acting as representative on earth of some divine ministrant. Just as a Buddhist layman undertakes to observe the eight or ten precepts on a Poya day by reciting the precepts at a shrine, women can undertake to observe the precepts for initial or full ordination. This kind of self-ordination is one to which there cannot be any serious objection.

If anyone of these suggestions of Prof. Malalasekera is accepted, it would be possible to restore the Bhikkhuni Order within the Theravada tradition. What is required here is to understand the spirit rather than the letter of the Vinaya regulations.

Apart from these, there are three other options available, which came to light in public discussions on this issue.<sup>10</sup>

IV. In recent years it has become known that the *Bhikkhuni* Order taken to China by Sinhalese nuns and continues to exist in China, Korea and Taiwan in unbroken pupillary succession.

It is therefore possible to re-introduce the *Bhikkhuni* Order to Sri Lanka from one of these countries. Either we have to get down a chapter of *Bhikkhunis* from one of these countries or else we can send a group of applicants to have them ordained there. The second approach is better because they will get an opportunity to understand the operation of the Order.

This step proposed is not one unknown or strange to us. During the reign of Kirti Siri Rajasinha, a delegation came to Sri Lanka on invitation and re-established the *Bhikkhu Sangha* in 1773. Thus began the Siamese Sect. Then again another two groups of monks went to Amarapura and Ramanna in Burma and received full ordination there. On their return they founded the *Amarapura* Sect in 1803 and the *Ramanna* Sect in 1864 respectively. It is known that Sri Lanka had earlier helped Thailand and Burma to organize Buddhism in those countries. Therefore, there is nothing wrong in seeking foreign assistance to restore the Order of Nuns.

V. If the Ven. Mahanayakas of the Theravada Tradition in Sri Lanka are not prepared to admit the *Bhikkhuni* Order in China or in any other Mahayana country as acceptable, Sri Lankan Buddhist women would be free to seek ordination in any Buddhist tradition.<sup>11</sup> Nuns so ordained should be recognized as *Bhikkhunis* without any discrimination. The option to renounce the worldly life and practise the holy life, as recommended by the Buddha is an inalienable right of all Buddhist women. Those who say that there is no room or possibility for women to join the Order (i.e. Theravada Buddhist Order) should not deny them the right to do so according to some other Buddhist tradition where this is available. To adopt such a stand would be both un-Buddhistic and in violation of a human right.

Prof. Gunapala Dharmasiri has pointed out that the tradition of ordination is the same for both Mahayana and Theravada and can be borrowed from where it is preserved.<sup>12</sup> Dr. Wellawatta Ananda Thera holds a similar view. So the problem of validity does not arise at all in this matter.<sup>13</sup>

VI. There is the possibility of forming a Special Body constituted by leading members of the International Sangha Community representing several traditions all over the Buddhist world. Sri Lankan candidates can be given initial and full ordination by this Body.

Recently an International Buddhist Organization was formed at the BMICH in Colombo. Therefore, convening an International Body of Monks and Nuns will not be a difficult task.

If Buddhists in Sri Lanka act with foresight and dedication we will be able to preserve the services to Buddhism initiated by Mahinda. It will also be a tribute to the memory of his sister Sanghamitta who dedicated her life to inaugurate and establish the *Bhikkhuni* Order here.

In an era in which those who dedicate their life to spiritual values are rare, the Dasa Sila Matas are women who have voluntarily dedicated their lives to tread the path to Nirvana as nuns. Helping to promote their aspiration and activities will be an encouragement to them. It will be an important step taken to advance the welfare of Buddhism as a whole. Keeping this problem unsolved only helps to continue the frustration and dissatisfaction of Buddhist women.

Prof. Jotiya Dhirasekera has said that Buddhism has contributed much to the emancipation of women.<sup>14</sup> The truth of this is impaired and vitiated by the opposition shown by certain Theravada leaders in Sri Lanka to the revival of the *Bhikkhuni* Order. Some Buddhist leaders get up on platforms and proudly assert that from its inception Buddhism has stood for the liberty of womankind. Their words are rendered an idle boast in the face of the opposition to the revival of the *Bhikkhuni* Order. Therefore we should no longer delay fulfilling the most socially significant aspirations of our women Buddhist devotees. Taking steps to revive the *Bhikkhuni* Order is also a move in the direction of granting women's rights as declared in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

#### Notes

1. I. B. Horner, *Women Under Primitive Buddhism*, "Introduction", p. xxiv.
2. R. L. H. Gunawardana provides some evidence to prove the existence of Buddhist nuns in Burma when the Sri Lankan king sought the assistance of Burmese monks for the revival of the order of monks. "Owing to the inadequacy of information bearing on this problem, it is not possible to give a satisfactory explanation of their surprising lack of clerical or lay interest in reviving the order of nuns" (Gunawardana, *Robe and the Plough*, p. 39).

