

Mahapajapati Gotami

Permission for Women to the Order as Nuns.



Introduction:

Many in Theravada community have no idea that there was a Bhikkhuni Order (Order of Nuns) at the time of Buddha, due to the fact that in Myanmar there never was and is the order of Nun in recent time, in the past century. I, for one thought that Daw Nyar Na Sar Yi name stands for Myanmar Bhikkhuni Order. That was not so; she was never an ordained Bhikkhuni, but a simple Silashin by the name of Daw Nyanna Sar Yi.

It is a very perplexing question, for a Theravadin like me to explain to my posterity that even though there existed the Order of Nuns (Bhikkhuni) at the time of Buddha, why did we Theravadin in Myanmar totally dropped this lineage, while Mahayana Sect continued on with the lineage. The question then is: - was it because we Theravadin consider women folks as a second-class citizen? Not capable of striving for higher holiness? I will leave this for time to tell the development of this issue to the future of Theravadins in the Gotama Dispensation.

I must present the historical facts for new generation of Theravadins to learn and understand the cause of our women folks that

was lost in the history of Theravadin's countries, specifically in Myanmar.

One prominent Concern was shortening of Gotama Sasana

Those who are opposed to the revival of Bhikkhuni order quote the concern that the Gotama Sasana could be shortened based on the statement:

*When the Buddha agreed to create the **Bhikkhuni Sangha**, he told Ven. Ananda that the Sasana would last only half as long because of this. Instead of lasting one thousand years, it would last five hundred years.*

*This concern was unfounded based on The commentary on the Abhidhamma text, **Dhammasangani**, says that when the **First Buddhist Council** convened by Ven. Maha-Kassapa rehearsed the Pali Canon, this **made it possible for the Sasana to endure for five thousand years.***

The commentaries on the *Vinaya Pitaka* and the *Anguttara-nikaya* say that the eight important rules, which the Buddha gave to the Bhikkhuni Sangha, will make his Teachings last for five thousand years rather than five hundred.

One paramount obstacle to the Revival of Bhikkhuni Order

Hence, the paramount obstacle was an artificial glass ceiling that was put there must be for cultural reason, rather than bending of the Vinaya rules. Both in India and South East Asian countries woman folks are being taken for granted as caring for the household rather than leading an independent life style, the Ascetic Homeless Bhikkhu or Bhikkhuni.

In the case of Mahayana Sect, there are many female Bodhisattvas, the prominent being **Kwan Yin**, the Compassionate

Goddess of Mercy to overcome this cultural obstacle. Hence, Bhikkhuni order continued to survive to this day.

The Procedure for Bhikkhuni Ordination

The Vinaya rules applied to Bhikkhu are pretty much similar to the rules applied to Bhikkhuni. One must first attain *Samaneri* (*Samanera-Ta ma ne* or *Ko Yin*) and progress on to become Bhikkhuni. *Samaneri* is the first admission to be a candidate for Bhikkhuni. At *Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara, Los Angeles, California*.ordination of *Samenari* and *Bhikkhuni* are being conducted routinely.(1847 *Crenshaw Blvd., Los Angeles, Ca. 90019-6038, USA. Tel. (323)-737-5084, Fax and email: - (323)-737-5084 - info@dharmavijaya.org*. Website

<http://www.dharmavijaya.org/contact.html>

Image Description

The Buddha was dwelling at Kapilavatthu in Banyan Park Monastery. Mahapajapati Gotami approached the Buddha along with five hundred women of the Sakya clan, and begged permission for women to be admitted into the Order as Nuns. The Buddha refused permission saying, 'Enough, O Gotami, do not ask that women be admitted into the Order as Nuns'. She went away sorrowful and sad.

Later, when the Blessed One was dwelling at Vesali, Mahapajapati Gotami had her hair cut off, put on yellow garments and with five hundred of Sakya women followed to Vaseli. She dared not enter the monastery grounds and stood outside the porch. Now the Venerable Ananda saw her standing there, and went to the Buddha and asked several times for permission to admit women into the Order as Nuns. At last, the Blessed One gave the permission and women were admitted to the Order. Thus, an Order of Nuns was founded.

FIRST ORDINATION OF BHIKKHUNIS

by

MINGUN SAYADAW

Edited and Translated by

Professor U Ko Lay, Yangon, Myanmar

Permission given for ordination of women at the request of stepmother Mahapajapati Gotami.

Step-mother Mahapajapati Gotami had approached the Tathagata since the time of Buddha's first visit to Kapilavatthu with a request for admission of women to the Order by formal ordination; she had made the requests then for three times repeatedly and the Tathagata had rejected her request every time.

The reason for such rejection was that the Tathagata had decided to grant admission of women to the Order not easily but only after pains-taking efforts on the part of women to gain permission for ordination. Only then would they realize that becoming a bhikkhuni in the Dispensation was a thing difficult of attainment and would safeguard their bhikkhuni status with constant vigilance. The Tathagata wished them to cherish the hard won admission to the Order obtained after a great struggle.

Thus when the step-mother *Mahapajapati Gotami* made her first request repeated three times to the Tathagata at the Nigrodha monastery of Kapilavatthu, her request was rejected by the Tathagata for reasons as stated above. Mahapajapati Gotami had to abandon her hope and return to the royal palace for three times in the past.

Now an opportunity had presented itself for her to make another attempt when the Tathagata had taken up residence at Vesali to keep the fifth vasa.

As stated in the previous chapters, those five hundred bhikkhus of royal blood prior to their attainment to *Arahatship* had messages sent to them by their former spouses, requesting them to return and live a household life again. These ladies made their earnest appeal again sending messages as before to the five hundred bhikkhus who had become Arahats now. But the Arahat bhikkhus sent the reply, "We are no longer in a position to lead a worldly life".

The five hundred deserted wives considered that 'it would not be appropriate to seek for new married life' and decided unanimously to go to Mahapajapati Gotami to appeal to her 'to obtain permission from the Tathagata for admission to the Order as bhikkhunis.' Accordingly, they went in a group to the stepmother Mahapajapati Gotami and made their, appeal to her.

Their request reminded her of her failure to obtain permission for the women to receive ordination when the Tathagata was taking up residence at Nigrodha monastery on a previous occasion and so she caused a hair-dresser to shave their heads, including that of her own, and asked the ladies to wear dyed clothes to assume the form of bhikkhunis while they were still in the royal palace. Then they made arrangements to set out all together for Mahavana forest of Vesali where the Tathagata was then residing.

The distance between *Kapilavattu* and Vesali was fifty *yojanas*; and when Sakyan and Koliya royal families considered arrangements for their journey, they concluded, 'It would not be possible for these princesses and royal ladies brought up so regally and gently to make the journey on foot' and they arranged to provide them with five hundred sedans to solve the problem.

The five hundred women agreed amongst themselves that such a mode of traveling might be tantamount to an act of disrespect to the Tathagata and they therefore made the journey of fifty one yojanas on foot. Royal families of both countries arranged for regular provision of food at every stop and sufficient number of escorts for their security en route to Vesali.

Having made the difficult journey of fifty yojanas, their delicate feet were swollen with boils that took turns to rise and burst, looking as if they were covered with seeds of clearing-nut, *Strychos potato rum*. All the five hundred fair ladies headed by Mahapajapati Gotami who arrived at Vesali with swollen feet, bodies besmeared with dirt and dust, with tears streaming down their cheeks and in sore distress, stood in a group at the gate of the Kutagara monastery in the forest of Mahavana. (They dared not enter the precincts of the monastery at once).

Step-mother *Maha Pajapati Gotami* thought to herself that she had taken on the dress of a bhikkhuni without the permission of the Tathagata and the news of her action had already spread through out the land. It would be well if the Tathagata would be pleased to admit her into the Order; but failing that, she should have to stand reproached. That was the reason why she stood bewailing at the gate without daring to seek entry

When the Venerable Ananda noticed Mahapajapati Gotami in such a plight at the gate, he came to her and inquired: "O dear Step-mother, why do you look so miserable? Have the royal relatives of Sakya and Koliya families met with tragedies and are ruined? Why are you in an unsightly appearance such as this, with swollen feet, and looking shabby, a grief stricken face, standing helplessly and weeping at the gate?"

Whereupon, Step-mother Mahapajapati Gotami replied "O Venerable Ananda, we have been standing at the gate with tears for failure to get Tathagata's permission for women to receive formal ordination that they might lead the life of bhikkhunis in the Dispensation of Dhamma-Vinaya." Ananda soothed her by saying a few words of encouragement: "Step-mother... if that is the case .. I will go and approach the Tathagata for admission of women into the Order by formal ordination, so that they might lead the life of bhikkhunis in the Dispensation of. Dhamma-Vinaya; please remain at the gate till I come back", and so saying Venerable Ananda went to the Tathagata and made this request:-

"The Most Exalted Tathagata ... Step-mother Mahapajapati Gotami is standing at the gate with her feet swollen, her body covered with dirt and dust, her heart sore, tears streaming down her cheek, and in a miserable plight, for failure to obtain your permission for women folk to receive formal ordination, so that they might lead the life of bhikkhunis within the Sasana. May I pray solemnly that they be granted your permission for receiving formal ordination!"

The Tathagata said in response: "That is not a proper thing... dear Ananda and I advise you not to be interested in the matter of admitting women folk into the order as bhikkhunis" With an undaunted will, the Venerable Ananda made similar requests for the second time, for the third time, but received the same words of discouragement from the Tathagata.

A Renewed Request

The Venerable Ananda thought of a new approach, after failure to obtain permission for admission of women folk to the Dispensation of Dhamma-Vinaya for three times and accordingly went to the Tathagata and addressed him:

Most Exalted Tathagata , could woman folk attain Ariyaship ranging from Fruitional Stage of *Sotapatti, Sakadagami, Anagami* to *Arahatta*, by leading the life of bhikkhunis within the frame-work of Dhamma Vinaya Sasana?

Whereupon, the Tathagata replied: "*Ananda, women folk could attain Ariyaship ranging from Fruitional Stage of Sotapatti, Sakadagami, Anagami to Arahatta, by leading the life of bhikkhunis within the frame-work of Dhamma Vinaya Sasana.*"

Most Exalted Tathagata., if women folk were capable of attaining the four Stages of Ariyaship by way of their being bhikkhunis within the frame-work of Dhamma Vinaya

Sasana, may I submit a case that is worthy of the Tathagata's sympathetic consideration in support of my request:-

Most Exalted Tathagata.- Mahapajapati Gotami had rendered great service to you besides being your step-mother. She was responsible for feeding, nursing you and for your physical and mental well-being ever since the time of your birth. She used to tidy you up by showering with scented water twice a day. Indeed, she was responsible for feeding you exclusively with the milk that flowed from her breast."

Mahapajapati Gotami, gave birth to prince Nanda a few days after Maha Maya Devi had given birth to Boddhisatta. She entrusted her own child Nanda to the care of wet-nurses, and she volunteered to act as Boddhisatta's wet-nurse and care-taker; hence this additional weight applied to his request!]

Most Exalted Tathagata ... I humbly pray for favor of granting your permission for the women folk to receive ordination as bhikkhunis within the frame-work of Dhamma Vinaya Sasana."

The Buddha finally acceded to Ananda's entreaties, saying, "Ananda, if Mahapajapati accepts the Eight Special Rules, *Garu-dhamma*, let such acceptance mean her admission to the Order."

The Eight Special Rules are:

(1) A bhikkhuni, even if she enjoys a seniority of a hundred years in the Order, must worship, welcome with raised clasped hands and pay respect to a bhikkhu though he may have been a bhikkhu only for a day. This rule is strictly to be adhered to for life.

(2) A bhikkhuni must not keep her rains-residence at a place that is not close to the one occupied by bhikkhus. This rule is also to be strictly adhered to for life.

(3) Every fortnight a bhikkhuni must do two things: To ask the bhikkhu Sangha the day of Uposatha and to approach the bhikkhu Sangha for instruction and admonition. This rule is also to be strictly adhered to for life.

(4) When the rains-residence period is over, a bhikkhuni must attend the *Pavarana* ceremony at both the assemblies of bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, in each of which she must invite criticism on what has been seen, what has been heard and what has been suspected of her. This rule is also to be strictly adhered to for life.

(5) A bhikkhuni who has committed a *Sanghadisesa* offence must undergo penance for a half-month, *pakkha manatta*, in each assembly of bhikkhus and bhikkhunis. This rule is also to be strictly adhered to for life.

(6) A bhikkhuni must arrange for ordination by both the assemblies of bhikkhus and bhikkhunis for a woman novice only after two years probationary training under her in the observance of six training practices. This rule is also to be strictly adhered to for life.

(7) A bhikkhuni should not revile a bhikkhu for any reason whatsoever. This rule is also to be strictly adhered to for life.

(8) Bhikkhunis are prohibited from exhorting or admonishing bhikkhus with effect from today. Bhikkhus should exhort bhikkhunis when and where necessary. This rule is also to be strictly adhered to for life.

These are the Eight Special Rules. If Mahapajapati Gotami accepts the Eight Special Rules let such acceptance mean her admission to the Order." The Tathagata thus permitted the establishment of Bhikkhuni Sasana after expounding the Eight Special Rules for their guidance.

Ananda learned the Eight Special Rules from the Tathagata and returned to Mahapajapati Gotami at the gate and told her what had transpired at his meeting with the Tathagata:

Great step-mother, if you accept the Eight Special Rules, such acceptance means your admission to the Order. The Eight Special Rules are:

(1) A bhikkhuni, even if she enjoys a seniority of a hundred years in the Order, must worship, welcome with raised clasped hands and pay respect to a bhikkhu though he may have been a bhikkhu only for a day. This rule is strictly to be adhered to for life.

Etcetera (Pelayya)

(8) Bhikkhunis are prohibited from exhorting or admonishing bhikkhus with effect from today. Bhikkhus should exhort bhikkhunis when and where necessary. This rule is also to be strictly adhered to for life.

Great step-mother, you can count yourself as one who has been duly admitted to the Order of bhikkhuni, the moment you adhere strictly to these Eight Special Precepts."

Mahapajapati Gotami responded: "Venerable Ananda just as a young maiden who is in the habit of decorating herself with flowers with her hair washed and brushed or a man in like manner, would eagerly receive lilies, Moe-swe or Lai-tu flowers with out-stretched hands, for planting on their heads if and when offered; so also I am prepared to adhere to the Eight Special Rules, *Garu dhamma*, with great delight and due respect till I breathe my last.

Thereupon the Venerable Ananda approached the Tathagata again with profound respect and stood at a suitable place and addressed:

"Most Exalted Tathagata... Mahapajapati Gotami has vowed to adhere strictly to the Eight Special Rules as laid down, with due diligence and respect up to the end of her life".

(Her enthusiastic acceptance of the Eight Special Rules constitutes automatic admission to the Order; she became a bhikkhuni without formal ordination in a *Sima*. Such procedure of admission into the Order is known as "*Attha garu dhamma patiggahana Upasampada*".

Permission Granted for Ordination of Bhikkhuni.

Step-mother Mahapajapati Gotami went to the Tathagata and sat at a suitable place with due respect and asked. "Exalted Tathagata.. what should I do with those five hundred princesses of royal blood?" The Tathagata gave her certain instructions. She left after hearing the dhamma and making obeisance to the Tathagata. Then the Tathagata told the bhikkhus about his instructions to Mahapajapati and laid down the following rules:

"Bhikkhus, I give permission to bhikkhus to help ordination of female candidates to become bhikkhunis."

Bhikkhus proceeded to help ordination of the five hundred royal princesses with Mahapajapati Gotami as their preceptor (*upajjhaya*). They were known as "*ekataw upasampanna*" there being insufficient number of bhikkhunis to participate jointly with bhikkhus in the ordination ceremony.

When the ordination ceremony was over, Mahapajapati Gotami attained Fruitional Stage of Arahathship through hearing *Sankhitta Sutta* (Anguttara), and those five hundred bhikkhunis attained Ariyaship according to their wishes, ranging from *Sotapatti*, *Sakadagami*, *Anagami* to *Arahatta* through hearing *Nandakovada Sutta* (Majjhima)

Source: - <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/buddhism//gcobv323.htm>