

The Validity of *bhikkhunī* Ordination by *bhikkhus* Only, According to the Pāli *Vinaya*

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Abstract

In this paper I argue that *bhikkhunī* ordination carried out by *bhikkhus* only, “single ordination”, is according to the Pāli *Vinaya* a legally valid procedure in a situation in which, due to the non-existence of a community of *bhikkhunīs*, the standard procedure of granting “dual ordination” by both communities is not possible.

Introduction

A Buddhist society ideally consists of four main parts or “assemblies”, which are *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs*, male lay disciples, and female lay disciples. For several centuries until recently, however, Theravāda societies had to make do with only three assemblies, lacking an assembly of *bhikkhunīs*. These became extinct at some point around the eleventh century when during a period of political turmoil the entire monastic community in Sri Lanka was decimated. To the best of our knowledge, at that time no *bhikkhunīs* were in existence elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia.

Before that happened, Sri Lankan nuns had travelled to China in the fifth century and conferred ordinations there.¹ Yet, in China the Dharmaguptaka

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Vinaya came to prevail, as a consequence of which the heirs of the ordination lineage transmitted by the Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs* now follow a different code of rules, adopt different procedures for establishing the boundary, *sīmā*, within which ordination is to be carried out, and do not employ Pāli for conducting legal acts. Each of these aspects would render the ordination of a male candidate invalid in the eyes of many traditional Theravādin *bhikkhus*, making it hardly surprising if all of these aspects together are from their viewpoint considered an unacceptable way of ordaining a female candidate and thereby reviving a community of *bhikkhunīs*.² Therefore it needs to be ascertained if ordination given by Theravāda *bhikkhus* alone would enable reviving the *bhikkhunī* lineage in a way that does not stand in conflict with the Pāli *Vinaya*. This requires a closer look at those parts of this particular *Vinaya* that have a direct bearing on the ordination of *bhikkhunīs*, beginning with the narrative of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī's ordination.

In a monograph on the *Foundation History of the Nuns' Order*, I examined the account of how Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī became the first *bhikkhunī* in different *Vinayas* and other canonical texts.³ Such comparative study of texts transmitted by different reciter traditions enables us to identify their common core and probable later additions.

One significant result from this research concerns an indication still found in some versions, according to which the Buddha's original refusal to permit Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī to go forth occurs together with an alternative suggestion. According to this alternative suggestion, the Buddha permitted Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and her followers to cut off their hair and wear robes, apparently so as to live a celibate life in a more protected environment at home. Other versions, including the Pāli account, that do not mention such a permission nevertheless report that Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and her followers did actually shave off their hair and don robes. What in these versions appears almost like an act of open defiance (an improbable depiction of the stream-enterer Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī) acquires meaning if read in the light of the alternative suggestion still found in other versions.

This in turn conveys the impression that the Buddha's refusal to grant women the going forth could have originally been an expression of apprehensions that conditions were not yet ripe for this move. In other words, it could have

¹ On this transmission cf. in more detail Anālayo 2018.

² A more detailed discussion can be found in Anālayo 2017: 333–338.

³ Anālayo 2016.

reflected concerns regarding how to accommodate women living the holy life in celibacy as homeless wanderers at this early stage in the development of Buddhist monasticism, when safe dwelling places for Buddhist monastics were still scarce and public recognition not yet widespread.

Another finding concerns the prediction of decline, according to which the very fact that now women have been permitted to go forth will halve the lifetime of the Buddha's dispensation. Closer study of the relevant texts, in particular of the contrast this prediction of decline creates with other passages reporting that the Buddha planned from the outset to have an order of *bhikkhunīs*, makes it probable that this element originated as part of the narrative regarding the convocation of the first *saṅgīti*. The very convocation of this *saṅgīti*, a term probably best translated as "communal recitation" rather than "council",⁴ soon after the Buddha's demise, is related to apprehensions of an impending decline in general. Such apprehensions, once they had come to be associated with the *bhikkhunīs*, appear in the course of transmission of the texts to have turned into statements made by the Buddha himself.

Yet another relevant finding concerns a set of principles whose acceptance according to all versions were the condition set by the Buddha for granting Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī ordination. A position taken repeatedly among scholars is that this set of *garudhammas* (Pāli) or *gurudharmas* (Sanskrit) must be a later interpolation, evident from the fact that several of these recur as *pācittiya* regulations elsewhere in the *Vinaya*. Although earlier I let myself be influenced by what seemed to all purposes to be general consensus among academics,⁵ in the meantime I have come to realize that this position is not correct. The *garudhammas* are mere injunctions and do not carry any consequences in cases where they are not followed.⁶ Thus failure to observe a *garudhamma* could have

⁴ In adopting this rendering I follow the example of Gombrich 1990: 25 and Cousins 1991: 27; cf. also the detailed discussion in Tilakaratne 2000.

⁵ This is the position I adopted when putting together a first summary of relevant material and scholarly research in 2006 for presentation at a conference held in 2007 at the University of Hamburg under the auspices of H.H. the Dalai Lama, which was published three years later as part of the proceedings; cf. Anālayo 2010: 82ff.

⁶ Appreciation of this point requires keeping in mind that the term *garudhamma* or its Sanskrit equivalent *gurudharma* is used in different ways. As explained by Nolot 1996: 135 note 52, "the term *garu-dhamma*, 'important rule', that gives its generic name to this as well as to the seven other rules, should not be confused with the homonymous *garu-dhamma* occurring in the text of the fifth one ... where it is syn[onymous] with *garukā āpatti* ... and means 'heavy offence', referring here to the Saṃgh[ādisesa]" type of rules.

motivated the promulgation of a corresponding rule, so as to lay down what such a breach would entail in future. This in turn implies that there is no definite reason to reject the whole set of *garudhammas* as a later interpolation.⁷

At the same time, comparative study shows that some of the *garudhammas* would have gone through a change of wording. This holds for the case of the *garudhamma* on ordination, which in the Pāli version stipulates that a female candidate who has gone through a period of probationary training should receive ordination from both communities, that is, a community of *bhikkhus* and a community of *bhikkhunīs*. From a comparative perspective it emerges that the reference to both communities is not found in all versions, as some only refer to a community of *bhikkhus*. The implications of this difference seem uncertain; at the present stage of my research I fail to see a definite reason for categorically preferring one reading to the other. In the Pāli *Vinaya* the reference to both communities leads up to a whole episode based precisely on this formulation and the resultant need to clarify in which way the followers of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī should be ordained when no *bhikkhunī* community is in existence. This in turn implies that the reference to ordination from both communities must be an early element in the development of this text.

In the case of the stipulation on probationary training the situation is different, however, as the remainder of the narrative would work just as well if the probationary period were not mentioned. The impression that this reference could indeed be a later addition is based not only on its absence in several parallel versions, but also on consulting another episode in the same Pāli *Vinaya*, which reports that a pregnant woman had been ordained.⁸ If from the outset all candidates had been observing the probationary training, which requires continuous adherence to celibacy, this could not have happened. It could of course be imagined that lack of proper adherence to the *garudhamma* led to the ordaining of a pregnant woman. Yet, had the probationary training already been in existence, instead of a rule against ordaining a pregnant candidate, a more natural response would have been a rule against lax observance of the probationary training, thereby also covering breaches of celibacy that do not result in pregnancy.⁹

⁷ I drew attention to this as well as another error (concerning Ānanda and not of direct relevance to the present discussion) in the introduction to my monograph study, Anālayo 2016: 11 note 2; the correction itself can then be found in Anālayo 2016: 99 note 26.

⁸ Pāc 61 at Vin IV 317,20.

⁹ Such as found in Pāc 63 at Vin IV 319,33.

Based on this survey of chief findings from my research, I now turn to the sequence of events as reported in the Pāli *Vinaya*. In what follows I adopt what I like to call a “legal reading”, in the sense that I take the portions of the Pāli *Vinaya* that are of direct relevance to *bhikkhunī* ordination as they have been transmitted and in the way they are now found in the text. In other words, I adopt an emic perspective. This differs from a historical-critical reading of the type I adopted in my monograph study, which requires comparative study of the different versions.¹⁰ At present, my aim is not to reconstruct possible stages in the development of the *Vinaya* narrative on ordination of *bhikkhunīs*. Instead my aim is to understand the Pāli *Vinaya* version on its own terms and in its relevance to Theravāda jurisprudence. From the viewpoint of Theravāda jurisprudence, the text of the Pāli *Vinaya* is the central reference point for deciding legal matters, not what is found in other *Vinayas*.

Since in the Pāli *Vinaya* the rules are embedded in a narrative context which often, although not invariably, can help one to understand their implications and significance,¹¹ in what follows I attempt to develop what, as far as I am able to see, results in “a coherent interpretation” of the narrative background to the rules on ordaining *bhikkhunīs*.

A Coherent Interpretation

The narration relevant to *bhikkhunī* ordination begins with the Buddha stipulating eight *garudhammas*, the acceptance of which will serve as Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī’s ordination. The first of these eight *garudhammas* describes the conduct to be followed by “a *bhikkhunī* who has received the higher ordination a hundred years ago”.¹² The formulation shows that this *garudhamma* is not just concerned with matters right at that time, since no *bhikkhunī* was yet in existence, leave alone a *bhikkhunī* ordained a hundred years ago. It follows that these *garudhammas* are best understood as describing the Buddha’s vision of how the *bhikkhunīs* should behave in future times. In the present setting, where Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī is about to become the first *bhikkhunī*, it would indeed be meaningful for the Buddha to clarify to her what he expects to happen. By accepting these principles she will become the first and most senior of *bhikkhunīs*; therefore as their future leader she is the one to whom such principles need to be conveyed to ensure that they will be implemented.

¹⁰ On legal and historical readings of the Pāli *Vinaya* cf. Anālayo 2014: 1f and 2015: 403–405.

¹¹ A more detailed discussion of this issue by Venerable Brahmāli can be found in Brahmāli and Anālayo 2017.

¹² CV X 1.4 at Vin II 255,6.

The sixth of these *garudhammas* concerns ordination. It stipulates that “a probationer who has trained for two years in six principles should seek higher ordination from both communities.”¹³ This formulation could also not be meant to describe the immediate future, since at that juncture of events only a single community was in existence, namely the community of *bhikkhus*. Nevertheless *garudhamma* 6, just as the two preceding *garudhammas*, refers to “both communities”.

Not only in matters of invitation (*garudhamma* 4), *pavāraṇā*, or the undergoing of penance (*garudhamma* 5), *mānatta*, but also in matters of ordination (*garudhamma* 6), *upasampadā*, the respective procedure could not have been implemented right away. Although by accepting the eight *garudhammas* Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī had become a *bhikkhunī*, she was alone. For the procedures described in these *garudhammas* to be undertaken, first an order of *bhikkhunīs* had to be created by ordaining other female candidates. Yet, even for such an order to come into existence was not possible in the way described in *garudhamma* 6, since Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī could not have gathered the quorum required for forming a *bhikkhunī* community that could cooperate with a *bhikkhu* community in giving ordination to female candidates, simply because there were no other *bhikkhunīs*. “Higher ordination from both communities” was impossible at that time.

This impossibility predictably leads to the situation in which Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī had to come back to the Buddha and ask what she should do in regard to her five hundred followers, who also wanted to become *bhikkhunīs*. Her request afforded the Buddha an occasion for promulgating a rule as follows: “I authorize the giving of the higher ordination to *bhikkhunīs* by *bhikkhus*.”¹⁴

In this way, the standard procedure of dual ordination has found expression among the *garudhammas*, which according to a recurrent indication attached to each of them are to be “revered, respected, honoured, venerated, and not to be transgressed for the whole of one’s life”. This should be considered the basic agreement between the Buddha and Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī regarding how the community of *bhikkhunīs* is to operate, an agreement binding on its future members. The present ruling on single ordination in turn caters for the exceptional case when this standard procedure cannot be followed simply because a community of *bhikkhunīs* is not in existence; but at least a community of *bhikkhus* is in existence.

¹³ CV X 1.4 at Vin II 255,19.

¹⁴ CV X 2.1 at Vin II 257,7.

This ruling in turn can be considered a precedent for contemporary times, in that in a situation where no *bhikkhunī* community is in existence but a *bhikkhu* community is in existence, the *bhikkhus* can give ordination to female candidates on their own.

According to the next relevant episode, the Buddha found it necessary to introduce an enquiry about possible stumbling blocks to ordination. Similarly to the ordination requirements for *bhikkhus*, such enquiry serves to avoid ordination being granted to candidates not considered fit to become full members of the monastic community. This holds for candidates who have various diseases, for example, as well as those with certain sexual deformities. The Pāli *Vinaya* reports that, when the enquiry was implemented, the following happened:

“At that time the *bhikkhus* asked the *bhikkhunīs* about the stumbling blocks. Those who wanted to be higher ordained were abashed; they were embarrassed and unable to reply”, *tena kho pana samayena bhikkhū bhikkhunīnaṃ antarāyike dhamme pucchanti; upasampadāpekkhāyo vitthāyanti mañku honti na sakkonti vissajjetuṃ*.¹⁵

¹⁵ CV X 17.2 at Vin II 271,31. Horner 1952/1975: 375 translates this passage as: “Now at that time monks asked nuns about the things which are stumbling blocks.” Noteworthy in the Pāli original is the peculiar use of the genitive *bhikkhunīnaṃ* rather than the expected accusative *bhikkhunī*, such as found in the corresponding passage for male candidates, MV I 76.2 at Vin I 93,32: *bhikkhū ananusiṭṭhe upasampadāpekkhe antarāyike dhamme pucchanti*. Probably the simplest solution would be to emend the present passage to read *bhikkhū bhikkhunī antarāyike dhamme pucchanti*. However, Edgerton 1953/1998: 47 (§7.70) reports that “verbs of asking (cf. Sen 33) may take the gen. (1) of the person questioned, as well as (2) of the thing asked about. (1) *mātāpitṛṇāṃ ... pṛche* LV 231.17; *bhikṣūṇāṃ pṛchanti* MV i.300.5, 12”, followed by giving more examples for this type of usage from the same *Mahāvastu* (the first example is from the *Lalitavistara* and the reference before that is to Sen 1928). Although offhand I am not aware of an instance of such usage of the genitive in the Pāli canon, it remains nevertheless possible that the original reading in the present passage conforms to this usage in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit. The alternative of relating *bhikkhunīnaṃ* to *antarāyike dhamme* would not work, as the stumbling blocks are only relevant for those wanting to be higher ordained, not for already ordained *bhikkhunīs*. Suppose a *bhikkhunī* had any of the diseases comprised among the list of stumbling blocks, she would nevertheless remain a *bhikkhunī*. It would also be superfluous to add a specification to the expression *antarāyike dhamme*, as the present sentence is immediately preceded by a detailed listing of the stumbling blocks for female candidates, making it indubitably clear what type of stumbling blocks are meant. In fact a recurrence of the same expression *antarāyike dhamme pucchanti* just a few lines later at Vin II 271,36 stands on its own and is not preceded by a genitive or qualified in some way. Instead, it is preceded by a reference to those wanting to be higher ordained in the accusative, *upasampadāpekkhāyo*.

I have provided the Pāli text alongside my translation since the wording of this passage is of significance. The reference to *bhikkhunīs* here requires further exploration. The term *bhikkhunī* also occurs in the rule on single ordination, where it refers to the candidates for ordination.¹⁶ In that context this is a peculiar but still understandable usage, since the procedure results in making them *bhikkhunīs*. In the present case, however, the passage is not about the whole procedure, but only about the enquiry regarding stumbling blocks. Moreover, due to the embarrassment and consequent lack of reply to these questions, the ordination could not have been carried through to its successful completion. Thus it would not be possible to refer to these candidates of an unsuccessful ordination as *bhikkhunīs*.

It would also not work to assume that the usage of the term *bhikkhunī* implies that the candidates had previously gone through part of their ordination in the community of *bhikkhunīs*. In the Pāli *Vinaya* account this two-stage procedure only comes into being *after* the present incident. Moreover, those who have gone through the first of these two stages are in the Pāli *Vinaya* referred to as “ordained on one side”, *ekato-upasampannā*, but not as *bhikkhunīs*. The phrase *upasampannā* in this compound clearly implies that the procedure conducted by the *bhikkhunīs* on their own should be reckoned a form of ordination, *upasampadā*. At the same time, however, those who have gone successfully through such ordination do not yet deserve to be called *bhikkhunīs*, for which the procedure to be carried out subsequently in the community of *bhikkhus* is required. This in turn supports the impression that the term *bhikkhunīs* in the passage on the inquiry about stumbling blocks would not refer to the candidates for ordination.

That the term *bhikkhunīs* does not refer to the candidates for ordination finds confirmation in the fact that the sentence translated above uses quite another term to refer to the candidates as “those who wanted to be higher ordained”, *upasampadāpekkhā*. The same term *upasampadāpekkhā* is used consistently to refer to the candidates for ordination in subsequent sections of this part of the Pāli *Vinaya*, which is concerned with the enquiry into stumbling blocks.

¹⁶ CV X 2.1 at Vin II 257,7: *anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetun ti*, “I authorize the giving of the higher ordination to *bhikkhunīs* by *bhikkhus*.” Similar usage can be found in the *gurudharma* on ordination in some other *Vinayas*; cf. Anālayo 2016: 97 note 22.

This consistent usage of the term *upasampadāpekkhā* for the female candidates for ordination makes it unlikely that the very occurrence of the term *bhikkhunīs* in the passage translated above results from a textual error. Oral transmission in general tends to stereotype. This means that a reference to *bhikkhunīs*, which is out of keeping with the rest of the passage, stands a good chance to be ‘corrected’ to *upasampadāpekkhā*. In contrast, a change in the opposite direction is rather improbable.

At a subsequent point in this part of the Pāli *Vinaya* the two terms *bhikkhunī* and *upasampadāpekkhā* occur again in close proximity, similar in this respect to the passage translated above, although the grammar differs. In this case the two terms clearly refer to different persons, distinguishing the *bhikkhunī*, who has been appointed for the task of rehearsing the enquiry into stumbling blocks, from the *upasampadāpekkhā*, who is being taught how to reply to this enquiry.¹⁷ The same basic difference seems to hold for the passage translated above, in that those referred to as *bhikkhunīs* are different from those referred to as *upasampadāpekkhā*, “those who wanted to be higher ordained”.

In sum, it seems to me that the passage under discussion is best read as a reference to already ordained *bhikkhunīs* taking part in the ordination. This in turn gives me the impression that at this stage in the evolution of the *bhikkhunī* community, as described in the Pāli *Vinaya*, dual ordination had already come into existence. Had the *bhikkhus* given ordination alone, the appropriate formulation would have been to describe that they asked the candidates for ordination about the stumbling blocks, not the *bhikkhunīs*, followed by stating that these same candidates were embarrassed. It should read: ‘At that time the *bhikkhus* asked those who wanted to be higher ordained about the stumbling blocks. Those who wanted to be higher ordained were abashed; they were embarrassed and unable to reply.’

I conclude that the fact that the *bhikkhus* are described as asking the *bhikkhunīs* would imply that the latter took part in the ordination procedure. Since some of the questions are of a rather intimate nature, especially those concerned with sexual deformities, it would be quite understandable if the *bhikkhus* do not ask a woman such matters directly, but rather ask the

¹⁷ CV X 17.5 at Vin II 272,33: *tāya sammataṅgā bhikkhuniyā upasampadāpekkhā upasaṃkamitvā evam assa vacanīyā*, “that nun, who has been agreed on, having approached the one who wants to be higher ordained, is to speak to her like this.”

bhikkhunīs who have brought the candidates for ordination to inquire on their behalf and ask the candidates.¹⁸

Although to a Western mind this might appear a bit beside the point, such indirect questioning is a fairly common occurrence in an Asian setting. An example from the discourses would be the *Nāḷakapāna-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel, where the Buddha enquires from the monks in the assembly if Anuruddha and others, who have recently gone forth, delight in the celibate life.¹⁹ Only after not receiving any reply does he finally ask them directly.

When in the case of the enquiry about stumbling blocks even such indirect questioning leads to embarrassment, the Buddha is on record for promulgating the following rule: “I authorize the higher ordination in the community of *bhikkhus* for one who has been higher ordained on one side and has cleared herself in the community of *bhikkhunīs*.”²⁰ This implies a two stage procedure, where the candidate first goes through the first part of the ordination procedure conducted by a community of *bhikkhunīs* on their own and as a result becomes one who is “partly ordained”, *ekato-upasampannā*, followed by approaching a community of *bhikkhus* for the completion of the ordination.

The present episode itself is not just about the need for both *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* to participate in the ordination, but more specifically about the need for the former *not* to participate in the first part of the ordination when questions about the stumbling blocks are asked. It is not just about dual ordination as such, but much rather about a two stage procedure for dual ordination.

Given the stipulation in *garudhamma* 6, it would in fact be natural if dual ordination was used after a community of *bhikkhunīs* had come into existence through ordination by *bhikkhus* only. In order to follow the *Vinaya* narrative to the letter and thus also take into account the probationary training, one might assume that the next ordinations happened only after an interval of two years. Independent of whether the probationary period should indeed be allocated to the beginnings or rather a later period in the evolution of *bhikkhunī* ordination,

¹⁸ Perhaps this might explain the peculiar use of *bhikkhunīnaṃ* mentioned in note 15, in that an indirect or oblique case might be warranted by the fact that the action expressed by *pucchanti* does not proceed on to the *bhikkhunīs* as its direct object, but has as its target rather those wanting to be ordained. This would concord with the indirect function played by the *bhikkhunīs* with respect to the fulfilment of the action expressed by the main verb.

¹⁹ MN 68 at MN I 463,2 and its parallel MĀ 77 at T I 544b26; for a comparative study cf. Anālayo 2011: 370.

²⁰ CV X 17.2 at Vin II 271,34.

it does seem meaningful to allow for time to elapse before the next ordinations were undertaken. Even though Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and her followers were already in robes and had previous experience as wandering mendicants when they followed the Buddha from Kapilavatthu to Vesālī, the Pāli *Vinaya* shows that it still took some time for the new *bhikkhunīs* to familiarize themselves with various monastic procedures. This would make it natural to allow for some time to pass before the next generation of *bhikkhunīs* was ordained and perhaps also for new candidates, who unlike Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and her followers had not necessarily had experience of living in robes, first to go through some sort of a preparatory training.

That the *Vinaya* does not explicitly mention the shift from single to dual ordination is not surprising, since this had already been regulated with *garudhamma* 6 and thus did not require any further ruling. The section of the *Vinaya* between single ordination and the embarrassment episode reports that in other types of legal actions the two communities did collaborate, showing that they must have developed some formal procedure for doing so. An example is the recitation of the code of rules, *pātimokkha*, where according to the *Vinaya* account at first the *bhikkhus* would recite these for the *bhikkhunīs*, and when this led to problems the Buddha ruled that the *bhikkhunīs* should do that on their own. Ordination seems to have followed a to some extent comparable pattern, in that this would earlier have been done by both communities together under the leadership of the *bhikkhus*, and once the interrogation about stumbling blocks led to the problem of embarrassment, the Buddha ruled that the *bhikkhunīs* should perform the first part of the ordination on their own.

In short, the rule promulgated after the embarrassment episode is not about dual ordination as such, but much rather about a two stage procedure in conducting dual ordination. Its promulgation is an amendment to the basic procedure described in *garudhamma* 6.

The *Vinaya* continues with yet another regulation, according to which in case the candidate's approaching a community of *bhikkhus* for the second part of her ordination puts her in danger, this second part can be performed on her behalf by a messenger.²¹

What results from the above reading of the *Vinaya* is one basic promulgation in the form of *garudhamma* 6, with three subsequently promulgated modalities relevant for mutually exclusive situations. These are:

²¹ CV X 22.1 at Vin II 277,11, etc.

1. a *bhikkhunī* community is not in existence,
2. a *bhikkhunī* community is in existence and the candidate can safely approach the *bhikkhus*,
3. a *bhikkhunī* community is in existence, but the candidate cannot safely approach the *bhikkhus*.

Each of these three situations has its corresponding legislation and the three respective rules can all be valid together; they do not conflict with each other because they refer to distinct situations. It follows that, whenever situation (1) occurs, *bhikkhus* can give ordination on their own.

Another Interpretation

Another and fairly widespread interpretation of this part of the Pāli *Vinaya* is that the regulation on dual ordination in two stages simply replaced the one on single ordination. On this interpretation, it is not possible for *bhikkhus* to give ordination to female candidates even when no *bhikkhunīs* are in existence, because single ordination was only valid during the first few years and implicitly rescinded when dual ordination in two stages came into existence in response to the embarrassment episode.²² The basic logic behind this interpretation is that, even without explicit mention being made, a subsequent ruling implicitly rescinds an earlier ruling on the same matter.

One problem I see with this interpretation is that it does not concord too well with the intention the narrative context suggests to be relevant to all four regulations on *bhikkhunī* ordination. *Garudhamma* 6 is part of a series of guidelines set, according to the *Vinaya* account, by the Buddha in order to start a community of *bhikkhunīs*. The rule on single ordination has the purpose of enabling ordination of *bhikkhunīs* even when the standard procedure cannot be followed. The ruling on two stages in dual ordination serves to ensure that embarrassment does not interrupt the carrying out of ordination. The regulation on a messenger is meant to enable ordination even for a candidate who due to potential danger cannot present herself in front of the community of *bhikkhus*.

²² An example for the type of reasoning behind this position can be seen in the otherwise quite reliable *Vinaya* study by Venerable Thānissaro, in which he comes to the conclusion, Thānissaro 2001/2013: 450, that “in the event that the original Bhikkhunī Saṅgha died out, Cv.X.17.2 prevents bhikkhus from granting Acceptance to women.”

All of these four regulations have as their purpose the facilitation of ordination of *bhikkhunīs*, not its prevention. This makes it to my mind rather doubtful that an interpretation of any of these rules as completely and definitely preventing any ordination of *bhikkhunīs* does full justice to them.

Another problem is that this interpretation does not accommodate the fact that, *before* the promulgation of the rule on dual ordination in two stages, the Pāli *Vinaya* appears to refer implicitly to dual ordination already being undertaken with the formulation discussed above that “the *bhikkhus* asked the *bhikkhunīs* about the stumbling blocks”. This is a detail which is easily overlooked, in fact it took me quite some time to realize its significance myself. Yet, it does seem to imply that the *bhikkhunīs* were part of the ordination procedure and thus that some type of dual ordination was already being undertaken *before* the embarrassment episode resulted in the ruling on dual ordination in two stages. Any such granting of dual ordination before the ruling in response to the embarrassment episode could only have been done in reliance on *garudhamma* 6. Given the function of the rule on single ordination as being meant for a situation in which dual ordination was just not possible, it would be natural for subsequent ordinations to follow the procedure that according to *garudhamma* 6 was how the Buddha preferred the ordination of female candidates to be undertaken. In fact the ruling on the two stage procedure is a modification of *garudhamma* 6, not of the rule on single ordination. The assumption that the rule on single ordination has been invalidated by the two stage procedure for dual ordination fails to do full justice to the existence of *garudhamma* 6.

This brings me to another and in my view the most substantial problem with this mode of interpretation, which is that it makes the Buddha’s promulgation of *garudhamma* 6 become a meaningless act. Even leaving aside the two problems mentioned earlier, this alone suffices to defy the alternative interpretation. On this alternative interpretation, in reply to the request that he allow “women to receive the going forth from home to homelessness in the teaching and discipline made known by the Tathāgata”,²³ the Buddha asked Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī to accept a way of ordaining women that she could not possibly implement. It implies that, when Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī’s coming back and requesting how to proceed in this situation made the Buddha realize this problem, he found himself forced to drop *garudhamma* 6 for good and replace it with another rule, since *garudhamma* 6 was just not appropriate for

²³ CV X 1.2 at Vin II 255,2.

the situation for which he had promulgated it. In fact, on this interpretation *garudhamma* 6 never had any practical function, but was from beginning to end a meaningless regulation.

Elsewhere the Pāli *Vinaya* does report that on a number of occasions the Buddha would amend or change a rule, but in such cases this happens in response to some event or misbehaviour that had occurred in the meantime. I am not aware of any case where the Buddha is on record as promulgating a rule that from the outset was dysfunctional, in the sense that it just could not be implemented at all.

It seems to me that the price to be paid for upholding the alternative interpretation becomes too high, as it requires demoting the Buddha to a short-sighted and careless law-giver. Instead, it would definitely be preferable to assume that, in the account given in the Pāli *Vinaya*, *garudhamma* 6 as well as the other *garudhammas* are meant to encapsulate the Buddha's general vision of the future of the community of *bhikkhunīs* and that consequently the rule on single ordination was meant to be applicable to the specific situation when the standard procedure described in *garudhamma* 6 cannot be followed, because no community of *bhikkhunīs* is in existence. In this way, a depiction of the Buddha as thoughtless can be avoided.

The question remains how this alternative interpretation came to be so influential in the past. This could be related to the report in the *Dīpavaṃsa* on how *bhikkhunī* ordination was transmitted to Sri Lanka. The *Dīpavaṃsa* reports that the arahant Mahinda's arrival from India had led to numerous conversions to Buddhism, including members of the royal family. When the king of Sri Lanka asked Mahinda to grant ordination to the queen and her followers, Mahinda replied that it is not possible for a *bhikkhu* to do so.²⁴ In that particular situation his statement was correct, since *bhikkhunīs* were in existence in India. Therefore the appropriate procedure was to bring *bhikkhunīs* from India to ordain the queen and her followers, which is indeed what happened.

It could easily be that this statement by the famous arahant Mahinda was understood by later generations of *bhikkhus*, once the *bhikkhunī* ordination lineage had been lost in the eleventh century, as implying that it is in principle impossible for *bhikkhus* on their own to grant ordination to *bhikkhunīs*, even in a situation when no community of *bhikkhunīs* is in existence. A close study

²⁴ Dīp 15.76 in Oldenberg 1879: 84,19.

of the Pāli *Vinaya*, however, shows that this is not the case. This is in fact nothing new, as already the Venerable U Narada Mahāthera, also known as the Jetavan Sayādaw, in a commentary on the *Milindapañha* composed in Pāli and originally published in 1949, clarified that *bhikkhus* can give ordination to female candidates when no community of *bhikkhunīs* is in existence.²⁵ The foregoing discussion by me is merely an attempt to relate the implications of his insight to the relevant episodes in the Pāli *Vinaya*.

Conclusion

I conclude that *bhikkhunī* ordination carried out by *bhikkhus* only is indeed a legally valid option according to the Pāli *Vinaya* in a situation where no community of *bhikkhunīs* is in existence. This in turn implies that the ordinations carried out in 1998, which have been crucial for the revival of the *bhikkhunī* lineage in Sri Lanka, and subsequently also in Thailand, are legally valid.²⁶

By now nearly twenty years have passed, and in both Sri Lanka and Thailand steadily increasing numbers of senior *bhikkhunīs* are in existence, some of whom have become capable teachers and are well respected by their lay disciples. Continuing resistance to this beneficial development will weaken the Theravāda tradition, rather than strengthening it.

Abbreviations

CV	<i>Cullavagga</i>
Dīp	<i>Dīpavaṃsa</i>
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
MV	<i>Mahāvagga</i>
Pāc	<i>Pācittiya</i>
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i>

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²⁵ Deshpande 1999: 195–203; translated in Bodhi 2009.

²⁶ Cf. in more detail Anālayo 2013.

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