



## Myanmar Buddhist Nun (Thila-Shin) and The Revival of Bhikkhunī-Sāsanā

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### Abstract

*This paper examines the status and validity of Myanmar Buddhist nuns in the current situations within the Myanmar Buddhist society, and possible way to revive bhikkhunī Sanghā Organization in Myanmar. It will provide the information related to the case of reviving bhikkhunī Sanghā in accordance with the Buddha's attitude towards the full ordination of bhikkhunī that "whether the Buddha actually prohibited for restoring full ordination of bhikkhunī in this kind of situation or not." If we find out some exceptions of the Buddha for some reasons, the dream of the Myanmar Thila-shin will come true. The study will be conducted by finding out these facts: What is the Buddha's attitude behind the restriction of bhikkhunī ordination on the absence of one side of Sangha Order (bhikkhu and bhikkunī Order) which most of the monks in Myanmar believe that it is absolutely impossible to revive the Bhikkunī-sāsanā by way of single ordination procedure ? Is really happening gender discrimination within the Myanmar Sangha Organization or not ? Is there any way for Thila-shin to receive bhikkunīupasampada at the present time ? To find the way, the real solution should be within the boundary of the Theravāda tradition, especially from the standpoint of the Vinaya PāliPitaka Texts because it is the only way to revive bhikkhunī Sangha Order in Myanmar.*

**Keywords:** Bhikkhunī-sāsanā; Myanmar Buddhist Nun (Thila-shin); Myanmar Buddhist Society; Dual Ordination Procedure; Standpoint of Vinaya; Various methods of bhikkhunī Ordination: The way to revive.

### Introduction

The Buddha supported gender equality, and gave the same teachings to both sexes because man and woman possess the same capability in pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. That is the reason why the Buddha allowed women to receive fully ordained bhikkhunīsanghā, by doing so, uncountable numbers of female enlightened bhikkhunīs are common through the Buddhist Pāli texts, and He himself praised with various titles for their unique abilities. Unfortunately, the Bhikkhunī-sāsanā had died out due to the natural disasters and political turmoil of the respective countries. Since there was the absence of one side of Sangha Order (bhikkhu and bhikkhunīSanghā), it seems impossible to revive the Bhikkhunī-sāsanā. It is because according to the Aṭṭhavācika-upasampadā<sup>1</sup>, dual ordination procedure plays essential key to be a successful bhikkhunī full ordination, i.e., to become a valid bhikkhunī, a candidate must firstly be ordained in front of

the bhikkhunī Sanghā, and then the ordination will be legitimized by bhikkhu Sanghā. So, it is commonly believed that it is not possible to revive the Bhikkhunī-sāsanā by way of single ordination procedure.

In Myanmar, generally speaking, the Thila-shin organization was established by Buddhist monks for the purpose to substitute in the place of bhikkhunī-sāsanā. Here, it should be noted that monks had created just an imitation of bhikkhunī-sāsanā so that Thila-shins do not possess official status as bhikkhunīSanghā. And they are apparently blocked to become the fully ordained bhikkhunī in accordance with the Buddha's disciplinary rules (vinaya).

Myanmar Buddhist nuns are known as Thila-shin; the word 'Thila' is derived from the Pāli word 'sīla' which means morality or virtue, and 'shin' means possessor or owner, so the word 'Thila-shin' means the possessor of morality. They go forth from household life into homelessness, and live in a way of *brahmachariya*<sup>2</sup> life for searching spiritual



achievement just as the monks do. However, because of being nuns, they are not in the household life, but on the other hand, due to lack of higher ordination (upasampadā), they cannot possess the status of Sanghā. They earn lesser benefit and respect in their monastic way of lives in the Myanmar Buddhist society. As a result, they earn lesser benefit and respect in their monastic way of lives in the Myanmar Buddhist society.

### The Origin of Thila-shin and the Current Status of them in Modern Days

In the early history of Myanmar, around Phu Era during Tharekhettara and Hanlin dynasty, the name 'Thila-shin' was not used yet; it is not clear what the people call them at that time because Thila-shin was the

outcome of the evolution of Paṅṭarāṅgaparibhājaka (a kind of female hermit) after extinction of bhikkhunī Sanghā. In later time, around Inva dynasty, Thila-shin was called Thuopapyo (Thap-pa-yoh in Mon accent). Around 11 A.D, Theravāda Buddhism introduced to Pagan Dynasty, and it was undoubtedly the time flourishing Theravāda religious women along with Theravāda monks. In archeological evidences of Pagan, those women are called with their preceding names such as Eiv. Citin, Eiv. Kyanthin, etc. which are equivalent to the present days of the Thila-shin names such as SayalaySitin, SayalayKyanthin, etc. Here I do not agree with some scholars' statement thus; "Because of those names, they conclude that there was still Bhikkhunī-sāsanā in Pagan period." It is because the completed form of present Thila-shin can be found in the Konbaung dynasty during time of King Mindon. Today in Myanmar, there is a saying that "the beginning of Thila-shin was Maeking."

In Myanmar, there is a serious issue to examine the policies of Ministry of Religious Affairs on Thila-shin. Frankly saying, Myanmar government like monks' community never agrees on the issue of Thila-shin's full ordination yet, but always

regards that they are a part of monastic community. For example, Myanmar monastic community including Thila-shin is prohibited to vote in election because they are existed apart from lay society. That is why government gives them different identity cards from lay people.

This clearly indicates that the issue of full ordination of Thila-shin in Myanmar is much more than the concept of the conservative Myanmar monks. On the other hand, people see Thila-shin as not fully ordained nuns; they are just 'upasikā' (lay women Buddhists). Some people even think that they do not deserve to pay respect in a traditional Buddhist way. Here is the reason for that we can classify the Buddha dispensation (Buddha-sāsanā) into Four Classes: the assembly of bhikkhus, the assembly of bhikkhunīs, the assembly of laymen Buddhists, and the assembly of laywomen Buddhist. Among them, Thila-shins have been considered as none of them; neither bhikkhunīs nor laywomen Buddhists. That is why most of Thila-shins are willing to take the official status of bhikkhunī Sanghā.

### The Possibility of the Revival of Bhikkhunī-sāsanā in Myanmar

In Myanmar, both of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Myanmar Government and the State Sangha Mahā Nāyaka Committee of Theravāda Buddhist Monks have been strictly restricting to the revival of Bhikkhunī-sāsanā. Here is one of the examples of it; Ma Saccavadi, a Myanmar Thila-shin, had received bhikkhunī ordination from the Sri Lanka monastic society while she was studying for her further study in Buddhist Literature in 2003. When she came back to Myanmar, the senior monks- the State Sanghā Mahā Nāyaka Committee and Myanmar Government- Ministry of Religious Affairs, disrobed and sentenced her for five years in prison because of her illegal bhikkhunī ordination in Sri Lanka.

Here, it is urgently needed to consider whether the attempt of the revival of bhikkhunī ordination is illegal or not in



accordance with the Buddha's disciplinary rules (vinaya). As far as I have learnt in the Theravāda Vinaya Pāḷi Pitaka Texts, I have found four types of bhikkhunī Upsampadas: (i) Ordination of bhikkhunī by accepting eight important rules (garudhamma-paṭṭiggahana-upasampada); (ii) Ordination of bhikkhunī through messenger (dūtena-upasampada); (iii) Ordination of bhikkhunī from the one-side of Sanghā (ekaso-upasampada); and (iv) Ordination of bhikkhunī by the pronouncement of eight times (aṭṭhavācika-upasampada)<sup>3</sup>. Among them, we do not need to discuss about two types of bhikkhunī ordinations: Ordination of bhikkhunī by accepting eight important rules (garudhamma-paṭṭiggahana-upasampada); and Ordination of bhikkhunī through messenger (dūtena-upasampada). Since the absence of Buddha, these two types of ordinations are no more available for the present days because these two ordinations have to be done by Buddha himself. Since there absents one side of Sangha Order (bhikkhunī Order), it is also impossible for the ordination of bhikkhunī by the pronouncement of eight times (aṭṭhavācika-upasampada). It is because according to the Aṭṭhavācika-upasampadā, dual ordination procedure plays essential key to be a successful bhikkhunī full ordination, i.e., to become a valid bhikkhū, a candidate must firstly be ordained in front of the bhikkhunī Sanghā, and then the ordination will be legitimized by bhikkhu Sanghā. At last but not at least, the ordination of bhikkhunī from the one-side of Sanghā (ekaso-upasampada) was permitted by the Buddha himself allowing monks to make full ordination of bhikkhunī by way of pronouncing four times (one motion- natti, and threefold announcement- anusavana), thus: "Monks, I allow you to make full ordination of bhikkhunī by yourselves (anujānāmi, bhikkhave, bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetunti)<sup>4</sup>. Thus the Buddha allowed the bhikkhu Sanghā to give full bhikkhunī ordination to women, and more importantly this type of bhikkhunī

ordination never had been revoked by the Buddha so that this procedure is still active to perform in the present days. However, the Theravāda monks are worried to cross the line of Vinaya Procedure because they think that when the new procedure (aṭṭhavācika-upasampada) was laid down by the Buddha, performing the previous procedure (ekaso-upasampada) will be a transgression of the authoritative teachings of the Buddha (ānādesanā).

Here is my explanation for that the Buddha laid down all the Vinaya rules for these two reasons: Lokavijja-sikkhāpada (moral laws) and Pannattivijja-sikkhāpada (apparent misconducts). In the Milindhapañña, it is clearly stated that even an arahant can still commit an offence of the Pannattivijja Vinaya rules. However, he never commits against the moral laws (Lokavijja Vinaya rules). So, it is clear to say that all the Vinaya rules are not existed in the ultimate sense. In some cases, it could not be absolute.

For instance, there are thirty-two types of unfit persons (parisadūsakapuggala), briefly, it covers disabled, defective and deformed persons in such as head, eyes, ears, nose, mouth, jaw, neck, shoulder, hands, breast, waist, legs, feet and any parts of the body, who are prohibited to ordain as monks.<sup>5</sup> However this rule is not absolute, if senior monks ordain them for some reasons, they can attain the monkhood. Only the preceptor monk (upajjhāya) and co-participant monks in the kammavācā-kamma will incur dukkaṭa offence due to their transgression of the authoritative teachings of the Buddha. So too, if senior monks make the full ordination by way of the ordination of bhikkhunī from the one-side of Sanghā (ekaso-upasampada) pronouncing four times (one motion- natti, and threefold announcement- anusavana) to Myanmar Thila-shin for the good reason of the revival of bhikkhunī Sanghā in Myanmar, it will definitely be a successful bhikkhunī upasampadakamma.

Conclusion



The Buddha might lay down specific rules for the restriction of bhikkhunī ordination for some reasons. And more importantly, there needs to be considered the different conditions and circumstances of the time of the Buddha and modern times because the Buddha has always laid down the Vinaya rules when the present condition has arisen; he has never intended to lay down the Vinaya rules for the future situations. To find the way, the solution should be within the boundary of the Theravāda tradition, especially from the viewpoint of the Vinaya Piṭaka Texts. Because, it is the only way to revive Bhikkhunī-sāsana in Myanmar. Theravādamonks are denying the full ordination of Thila-shin not because of tradition, nor the sense of gender discrimination; there is only one reason that they are being Theravāda. The rules and regulations of Vinaya Pāli Texts are the central importance and the characteristics of the tradition of the Myanmar Theravāda monks. That is the only reason why Myanmar does not take part for the revival of Bhikkhunī-sāsana while almost all the Buddhist countries are accepting to do it. So, it is obvious that nothing can change the attitude of Myanmar monks for restoring Bhikkhunī-sāsana except pointing out the possible ways in the Theravāda Vinaya Texts which are related to the bhikkhunī ordination.

Myanmar State Sangha Mahā Nāyaka Committee had already made an absolute decision only by pointing out ordination of bhikkhunī by the pronouncement of eight times (aṭṭhavācika-upasampada) by quoting vast of Pāli Texts, in 2006, due to unauthorized bhikkhunī ordination received by Ma Saccvadi, a Myanmar Thilashin, in Sri Lanka. It seems impossible to revive the bhikkhunī full ordination because the bhikkhunī lineage has already vanished, and they believe that without the dual ordination it cannot be carried out any types of bhikkhunī upasampadakamma. But they had omitted the third way of ordination of bhikkhunī from the one-side of Sangha

(ekaso-upasampada). I have pointed out in this paper about the most reasonable solution of the revival of bhikkhunī higher ordination by way of one-side of Sangha (ekaso-upasampada) pronouncing four times (one motion- natti, and three fold announcement- anusavana) which had officially allowed by the Buddha himself, and more importantly, which had never been revoked to perform that type of kamma by the Buddha. The most important part of it is that there might be some transgressions of the authoritative teachings of the Buddha (ānādesanā) but that does not mean the performing sangha kamma would be invalid, it will only incur dukkaṭa offence at most in the preceptor monk (upajjhāya) and co-participant monks due to carrying out that type of kamma. My suggestion is that why cannot senior monks sacrifice for the perfection of the Four Classes of Buddha-sāsana, if they do so, the dream of the Myanmar Thila-shins will finally come true.

## References

- 1 To ordain a bhikkunī, firstly bhikkhunīsanghā must recite one ṅatti and three kammavācā, so too bhikkhu sanghaone ṅatti and three kammavācā. There are two ṅatti and six kammavācā, then eight in total. This bhikkhunī ordination method is so called Aṭṭhavācikaupasampadā.
  - 2 The word 'brahmachariya' is the combination of two words brahma+chariya. The word 'brahma' means noble, and 'chariya' means practice or way of life. So 'brahmachariya' means the practice of noble life.
  - 3 To ordain a bhikkunī, firstly bhikkhunīSanghā must recite one ṅatti and three kammavācā, so too bhikkhu Sanghā one ṅatti and three kammavācā. There are two ṅatti and six kammavācā, then eight in total. This bhikkhunī ordination method is so called Aṭṭhavācikaupasampadā.
  - 4 CūlavaggaPāli, Vinaya Piṭaka. p. 447
  - 5 This matter is primarily dealt with in the Vinaya MahāvaggaPāli and secondly in the PācīyādiAṭṭhakathā. Vin. III. 126; VinA. III. 308-9
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