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Political View regarding the Origin, Development and Importance of Bhikkhuni Sangha in Buddhism through Ages

"I cannot tell you how much I owe to the solemn word of my good mother."

Charles Spurgeon

Introduction

Buddhism is a spiritual tradition that focuses on personal spiritual development and the attainment of a deep insight into the true nature of life. There are 376 million followers worldwide. Buddhists seek to reach a state of nirvana, following the path of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, who went on a quest for Enlightenment around the sixth century BC. There is no belief in a personal God. Buddhists believe that nothing is fixed or permanent and that change is always possible. The path to Enlightenment is through the practice and development of morality, meditation and wisdom. Buddhists believe that life is both endless and subject to impermanence, suffering and uncertainty. These states are called the *tilakhana*, or the three signs of existence. Existence is endless because individuals are reincarnated over and over again, experiencing suffering throughout many lives. It is impermanent because no state, good or bad, lasts forever. Our mistaken belief that things can last is a chief cause of suffering.

Schools of Thoughts in Buddhism

There are numerous schools or sects of Buddhism. The two largest are Theravada Buddhism, which is most popular in Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Burma (Myanmar), and Mahayana Buddhism, which is strongest in Tibet, China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea and Mongolia.

The majority of Buddhist sects does not seek to proselytize (preach and convert), with the notable exception of Nichiren Buddhism.

All schools of Buddhism seek to aid followers on a path of Enlightenment.

Key Facts of Buddhism

- There are currently about 376 million followers worldwide.
- Buddhism is 2500 years old.
- There are more than 156,000 followers of Buddhism in Britain alone.
- Buddhism is the result of Siddhartha Gautama's quest for Enlightenment in and around the 6th Century BC.
- Buddhism does not believe in a personal God. It is not centered on the relationship between humanity and God.
- Buddhists believe that nothing is fixed or permanent-change is always possible.
- The two main Buddhist sects are Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism, but there are many more.
- Buddhists can worship both at home or at a temple.
- The path to Enlightenment is through the practice and development of morality, meditation and wisdom.

Origin of Bhikkhuni Sangha

The origin of the Bhikkhuni in the Sangha did start with many conflicts. Parjapati Gautami was the sister of Buddha's mother, Maya, who had died a few days after his birth. Maya and Parjapati Gautami were both married to his father, King Suddhodana, and after Maya's death Parjapati Gautami nursed and raised her sister's son. Parjapati Gautami approached her stepson in Kapilavastu and asked to be received into the Sangha. The Buddha said no. Later, Buddha traveled to Vaishali, which took many days to reach by walking. Meanwhile, Parjapati Gautami and five hundred palace women shaved their heads and also walked to *Vaishali*, showing their determination to be accepted in the sangha and to follow the Buddha. In Vaishali, Parjapati Gautami and others sat crying with swollen and bleeding feet from walking so far. Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and most devoted attendant, found Parjapati Gautami in tears, dirty, her feet swollen. "Lady, why are you crying like this?" he asked. She replied to Ananda that she wished to enter the Sangha and receive ordination, but the Buddha had refused her. Ananda spoke to the Buddha on behalf of Parjapati Gautami as he had promised her. At last, Lord Buddha decided to allow them to enter the sangha. Many scholars did not agree with the view of Buddha to allow women to join the sangha. It was really a revolutionary step because there was nothing like this in any religion in India at that time. It became clear from the early accounts that the Buddha established the Bhikkhuni Sangha that exists to this day. Since that time, women from many parts of the world have taken Buddhist vows to become bhikkhunis, attained realizations, got engaged in practice and worked for the peace and betterment for all. In many books of Buddhism and at many other places in the world throughout the history of Buddhist communities, woman was offered a lower status as compared to man. In the sangha there were more rules to follow for bhikkhunis than bhikkhus. Even there were so many obstacles for the bhikkhunis in the sangha but even after those the dedication, devotion and commitment of the bhikkhunis for the sangha led them to a respectful height in Buddhism. Now the sanghas of bhikkhunis have spread almost all over the world-in many countries like India, Italy, U.S., Germany, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Japan, Australia, Korea, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Those sanghas are working very well for the development of Buddhism.

The female monk in Buddhism is known as bhikkhuni. A bhikkhuni (Pali) or bhikkhshuni (Sanskrit) is a fully

ordained female Buddhist monastic. Bhikkhuni is also called an 'Upasika'. Both bhikkhus and bhikkhunis are ordained by receiving the Vinaya, the text defined for the monastic disciple. Once Buddha said, "I will not pass away until I have bhikhu, bhikkhuni and layman as my disciple."

When Lord Buddha allowed the women in the sangha, he allowed women to join the sangha, only if Parjapati Gautami agreed to accept eight important rules. Parjapati Gautami accepted the rules and thus the Bhikkhuni Sangha was born about seven or eight years after the Bhikkhu Sangha had been formed. Initially, Lord Buddha was not in favour of women to be the members of Sangha. Lord Buddha once said, "The Buddhist Dharma would have lasted one thousand years. However, since he did allow the foundation of the Bhikkhuni Sangha it would last only five hundred years."

Development of Bhikkhuni Sangha through Ages

We can discuss the development of Bhikkhuni Sangha with reference to various stages and roles played by its members through the ages.

The Eight Special Rules Governing Bhikkhunis in the Sangha

The following selection is from the earliest recorded account of the Buddha's establishment of an Order of Bhikkhunis. According to this *sutra*, the Buddha approved the *bhiksuni-sangha* only after three requests from his aunt, Prajapati Gautami. However, he is reported to have added eight special rules which became the basis of the subordination of Bhikkhunis in the Theravada tradition.

Lord Buddha said, "I am willing to allow Prajapati Gautami to be initiated and ordained, but first I wish to make known the eight cardinal rules for Bhikkhunis, which they should respect, esteem, honour, and venerate for as long as they live. They are like the steadfast banks of the great ocean, like a firm dike that people might build and that floodwaters cannot overflow."

Following are these eight rules

1. A Bhikkhuni, even one who has been ordained for a hundred years, must respectfully salute a monk, even one who has been ordained before a day.
2. Starting at age 18, a girl can request full ordination but she must first complete a two-year preliminary

course of training in the precepts. Moreover, her full ordination must be obtained from the communities of both monks and bhikkhunis.

3. It is forbidden for bhikkhunis to criticize monks for real or nonexistent offenses; it is not forbidden for monks to criticize bhikkhunis for real offenses (though it is forbidden for nonexistent ones).
4. Bhikkhunis should not receive food, bed, seat, or lodging ahead of monks.
5. A bhikkhuni who violates a cardinal rule of conduct must undergo disciplinary penance for 15 days in the community of bhikkhunis and must seek restitution in front of the communities of both bhikkhunis and monks.
6. Every 15 days, the bhikkhunis should approach the community of monks and ask them for instruction.
7. It is not proper for bhikkhunis to enter upon a rain retreat in a residence where there are no monks.
8. Bhikkhunis who have finished the rain retreat should request a ceremony of forgiveness from both communities.

Even the above given eight rules were full of partiality with bhikkhunis than bhikkhus. The partiality did not stop here; the other rules described in Vinaya Pitika were also at a huge variation. Bhikkhunis also have more rules to follow than monks. The Vinaya Pitika lists about 250 rules for monks and 348 rules for bhikkhunis.

Questions for the Woman

After the two-year probationary period, at the time of examination to receive full ordination as a bhikkhuni, the aspirant is to be asked a series of questions specified in the Vinaya. These include:

- Are you a human being?
- Are you a woman?
- Are you a free woman?
- Are you without debt?
- Are you free from royal service?
- Have you received the consent of your parents and husband?
- Have you completed twenty years of age?
- Do you have a bowl and robes?
- What is your name?
- What is the name of your woman-proposer?

Distinctions of the Bhikkhunis

In fact, all the monks and bhikkhunis are equal as the disciples of Lord Buddha, but they are divided into three distinct classifications: **the first** is according to their level of learning or training; one is called a learner or trainee

and one is non-learner or non-trainee, which means she or he is beyond learning or training. **The second** is according to their ordained; one group was ordained personally by the Buddha and one was ordained by other monks and bhikkhunis in the sangha. **The third** is according to the period in which they lived-Lord Buddha's period and the period after the Buddha's passing away.

Bhikkhunis Sangha Abroad

Bhikkhunis Sangha in Sri Lanka: During the time of King Devanampiyatissa (250-210 BCE), his daughter Princess Anula also converted to Buddhism and asked to join the sangha. However, Mahindra the son of Emperor of Great Asoka informed her that according to regulations, it takes at least five bhikkhunis to form a sangha and that a preceptor with at least twelve years' experience must grant the precepts. For this reason, King Devanampiyatissa asked Asoka to send ten bhikkhunis and a branch from the bodhi tree, under which the Buddha had achieved Enlightenment. Meanwhile, Asoka's daughter, Princess Sanghamittra (Sanskrit, Saghamitta), like her brother, had become a highly respected member of the Buddhist sangha. Being a great teacher of the Dhamma and the Vinaya, she agreed to sail to Sri Lanka as the senior bhikkhuni in order to establish the Bhikkhuni Sangha in Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, King Devanampiyatissa planted the branch of the bodhi tree and later distributed cuttings from it to be planted throughout the island. Sanghamittra and the other Indian bhikkhunis formed the Bhikkhuni Sangha in Sri Lanka and ordained Princess Anula. It is said that upon her arrival, five hundred women wanted to receive ordination from Sanghamittra. King Devanampiyatissa provided ample quarters for them, establishing a separate Bhikkhunisnery called Bhikkhunupasaya. This community of women became the first bhikkhuni sangha to be established outside of India.

Bhikkhunis Sangha in China: In China, Ching Chien was the first Chinese woman to request for ordination. In the year 433 CE a group of Chinese women requested for help from the Sri Lankan Buddhist community to establish a Chinese Bhikkhuni Sangha. Led by a bhikkhuni named Devasara, a group of Sri Lankan bhikkhunis went to China. There they granted ordination to three hundred Chinese women at Nanking. That bhikkhuni sangha is said to still be in existence today and has propagated the bhikkhuni sangha to other regions of East Asia.

Bhikkhunis Sangha in Myanmar: At the time of King Asoka the great, following the Third Buddhist Council, a

team of missionary monks (bhikkhus) and women monks (bhikkhunis), led by *Theras Sona* and *Uttara* was sent to *Suvannabhumi* (where many Indian settlers were located) to reintroduce Buddhism in Myanmar. Both male and female sangha orders were established.

Bhikkhunis Sangha in Taiwan: Earlier this century, many huge monasteries existed in Mainland China. Before the communist takeover, it was the thinking of the monks that they were strong and would be able to survive. However, when bhikkhunis heard that China might be taken over by the communists, they started to migrate to Taiwan. They brought their resources along with them, began to build bhikkhunisneries, and became well settled in Taiwan. Later the monks who were left in China realized that they could not survive under the Communists. They also fled to Taiwan in a hurry and reached there with almost nothing. The bhikkhunis sangha helped them in reestablishment. The monks could not forget the help done by the bhikkhuni sangha and respected heartily, the lay Buddhists to the same. Taiwan is a stronghold for bhikkhuni ordination. The bhikkhunis and their sangha both are progressing well in Taiwan. Venerable Master Wu Yin is noted for the high level of secular and religious education of her bhikkhunis. Bhikkhuni Cheng Yen received the Magsaysay Award for starting hospitals and college for engineering which have been built there recently.

Re-establishing Bhikkhuni Ordination: There was a meeting in July 2007 of Buddhist leaders and scholars of all traditions who met at the International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in Sangha, in Hamburg, Germany, to work toward a worldwide consensus on the re-establishment of bhikkhuni ordination. In the congress, 65 delegates came. In those delegates there were bhikkhus and bhikkhunis who were Vinaya masters and elders from traditional Buddhist countries and Western-trained Buddhologists also attended. At the end, all the delegates were in unanimous agreement that Mula Sarvasti Vada Bhikkhunis Ordination should be re-established. The only and still in existence, the transmission line of ordination is the Dharmagupta, which allows the ordination of bhikkhunis in China, Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam. Now bhikkhunis sanghas are there in the U.S., India, Italy, Germany, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam.

Importance of Bhikkhuni and Bhikkhuni Sangha

Gradually the society is accepting the bhikkhuni order and has started paying them respect. People started inviting the bhikkhunis to recite the religious texts at home. This is really remarkable as it is seen from the

studies of the past that people never considered inviting bhikkhunis for any kind of religious activities. For performing rituals or for reciting holy texts they always invited only the monks. Now bhikkhunis are reciting the religious texts for the society. Some of the bhikkhunis have good knowledge of herbs and are serving the society by providing medicines. Those bhikkhunis are called *amchi* (a Tibetan term, which means a person who practices traditional Tibetan medicine). Many bhikkhunis are spreading education in the society by teaching the needy people. Many of them are rendering non-profitable social services.

Bhikkhunis can help society simply by being a good example for people who are unpretentious and live in the spirit of non-harmfulness. Aside from their spiritual studies and practice, bhikkhunis can also help the society directly in many other ways too; like by involving in issues concerning women. For example, bhikkhunis can help with problems regarding abortion, prostitution, menopause, and other issues that women prefer to discuss with other women.

Bhikkhunis can also help unwed mothers, many of whom do not want to have an abortion but do not know how to handle the situation.

In Thailand, bhikkhuni sanghas just opened a home for women with unwanted pregnancies, so they can avoid abortion and receive the care they need. Afterwards, some of these women have regret and confused emotions about their actions. We need to help them accept that this act was committed, teach them means to purify its karmic imprints, and encourage them to go forward in their lives without the burden of a guilty conscience. Some Buddhist women in the West have begun to create rituals to help these women do this.

The bhikkhunis order has great potential, for whatever bhikkhunis do will have a ripple effect for Buddhist women all over the world. Bhikkhunis will use their collective energy to help each other, to contribute to society, and to preserve and spread the precious teachings of the Buddha.

Bhikkhunis can present themselves as an example before the whole society, as a symbol of self-dependence and self-respect.

Since they are limited in numbers with limited opportunities they can contribute in a limited way. Though present response from the society yet is not a complete achievement for the bhikkhunis, it can be counted as a great start toward getting recognition.

With the passage of time, once the bhikkhunis get their required status and support from the society they too can serve the society in every possible way and become one of the strongest pillars of the society and help in the spread of Buddhism.

Conclusion

The bhikkhuni's entry into sangha started with the effort done by the Lord Buddha's step mother Parjapati Gautami with the help of Ananda. There were some specific rules for bhikkhunis in the sangha but those rules for bhikkhunis have been used to keep bhikkhunis in a subservient position. When the orders of bhikkhunis died out in India and Sri Lanka centuries ago, conservatives used the rules calling for bhikkhunis to be present at bhikkhunis ordination to prevent the institution of new order. Attempts to begin bhikkhunis orders in Tibet and Thailand, where there had been no bhikkhunis before, met with enormous resistance. In last few years the ordination problem has been solved by allowing properly authorized bhikkhunis from other parts of Asia to travel to ordination ceremonies. In America, several co-ed monastic orders have sprung up in which men and women take the same vows and live under the same rules.

Bhikkhuni Sangha started from India, and spread in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Taiwan, North America, Sought America, China and many other countries also. And the bhikkhuni sanghas are working well in those countries. Those bhikkhuni sanghas have their own importance. Those are working well for the betterment of human beings and the society. But one thing which is most important must be mentioned here, yet whatever his intentions, the Buddha was certainly wrong about one thing-his prediction about the survival of the teachings. It has been 25 centuries, and the teachings are still with us.

Women in any relation, she may be mother, wife, sister, daughter or a friend should always be respectable. If we cannot provide a happy, friendly and fearless society and family to the women then we cannot imagine the same for us. Today women are not far behind men in any field of progress and success. Now the time has come when the people of the society

have to change their way of thinking, behaving and in all other aspects of behaviors which are related to women. Only then we can change and develop the society in a true sense.

Yatranaaryastupoojyanteramantetatradevataah

Yatraitaastunapoojyantesarvaastatraaphalaahkriyaah

यत्र नार्यस्तु पूज्यन्ते रमन्ते तत्र देवताः ।

यत्रैतास्तु न पूज्यन्ते सर्वास्तत्राफलाः क्रियाः ॥

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