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Peeling Back the Layers: Female Higher Ordination in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The question of higher ordination for Theravāda women is a complicated one. Although thousands of Buddhist women in a number of different Theravāda countries pursue a life of homelessness and renunciation, the majority are not recognized as ordained renunciants by their surrounding male monastic orders. This paper explores some of the reasons behind the general reticence concerning higher ordination felt by many of the silmātas *interviewed, and focuses specifically on some of the socio-economic factors that may be affecting their decision-making process.*[1]

Keywords: *silmātas*, *bhikkhunīs*, Sri Lanka

In 2004, I spent the summer months interviewing Sri Lankan *dasa silmātas* (lit. 'mothers of the ten precepts') about their views of higher ordination and whether or not they were considering taking it in the future.[2] The *dasa silmātas* are women who have chosen to live a life of renunciation, but, due to the long absence of a fully recognized higher ordination process in Sri Lanka, live in accordance with only ten precepts rather than the complete 311 required of fully ordained Theravāda nuns, *bhikkhunīs*. In 2004, I interviewed 14 *silmātas* from different regions in the country. Some were very senior (one, for example, had recently been honoured by the government for her 50 years of renunciation), while others were quite young and had only gone forth a few years prior to our meeting. Some were very educated and functioned as school teachers in their communities, whilst others did not have much education at all. Some lived in communities; others managed by themselves. Most had a roof over their heads, but some did

1. Though, beyond the Theravāda, they are fully recognized in China, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Korea. In Tibet, they have lower ordination equivalent to the status of novice monks, though even this has not been the case for many centuries in Theravāda countries, until the recent re-establishment of a small Theravāda *bhikkhunī* order in Sri Lanka.

2. The results of this research were published in an earlier paper (Sasson, 2007).

not. The variety of the *silmāta* experience is hopefully captured to some extent in this study.

This paper explores some of the reasons behind the general reticence concerning higher ordination felt by many of the *silmāta*s interviewed, and focuses specifically on some of the socio-economic factors that may be affecting their decision-making process.

According to the chronicles, Buddhism first arrived in Sri Lanka in the third century BCE when King Aśoka sent his son and daughter as missionaries to the island. Sanghamittā, Aśoka's daughter and a fully ordained *bhikkhunī*, is said to have arrived with a retinue of other *bhikkhunī*s with the purpose of instituting higher ordination for women in the country. The *bhikkhunī* order was consequently established and it survived there for more than 1000 years. In the eleventh century, however, the *bhikkhunī* lineage of Sri Lanka died out, and by the thirteenth century, the Theravāda formulation of this ordination lineage had disappeared from other countries as well, destroying a lineage that was believed to have stemmed directly from the Buddha and Mahāpajāpati more than 1500 years earlier.[3] There were no more Theravāda *bhikkhunī*s anywhere on the planet, and according to some interpreters of the tradition, women would have to wait for the next Buddha-in-line, Metteyya, to appear to re-institute the lineage before women could take the robes again with any kind of authority.

When the British colonized Sri Lanka in the nineteenth century, they made the remarkable decision of de-centralizing religious affairs. Prior to colonization, many religious issues were determined by government decisions; the British crown, however, deemed it inappropriate for a Christian power to be too heavily associated with Buddhist practice. As a result, a number of religious strictures were suddenly loosened, and one of these was the limit placed on women to practise renunciation. Beginning with Catherine de Alwis in 1905, women quickly responded to the opportunity by taking the ten precepts, shaving their heads, donning ochre-colored robes, and living a life of renunciation that was previously forbidden to them. They were not fully ordained and were abiding by only ten of the otherwise 311 precepts *bhikkhunī*s traditionally followed, but it was more than they had had access to for a very long time.

In 1996, ten Sri Lankan women traveled to Sārnāth, India and were officially transformed into *bhikkhunī*s by a delegation of Korean monastics. These women, headed by Bhikkhunī Kusuma who is, as a result, referred to by many as the most senior *bhikkhunī* on the island, believed that they did not need to continue living unrecognized in their renunciation, but that they could take *upasampadā* legitimately[4] with some Mahāyāna assistance.[5] Thus did the *bhikkhunī* lineage return to the island after nearly 1000 years of absence, but this return was not welcomed by

3. For discussions concerning the historical disappearance of nuns in Sri Lanka, see Gunawardana (1988 and 1979, 37–39) and Bartholomeusz (1994, 18–22).

4. Numerous arguments have been put forth in recent years concerning the legitimacy of reclaiming ordination for women in a Theravāda context. See for example, Kabilisingh (1988); Karma Lekshe Tsomo (1988); Devendra (1988); and most recently, Cheng (2007).

5. For description of this event, see De Silva (2004). For a description of the 1998 ordination ceremony in Bodhgaya, see Li (2000). The involvement of nuns from a Mahāyāna tradition — though their *Vinaya* cannot be called 'Mahāyāna' — was not without controversy. For a discussion, see Kawanami (2007).

most governmental or monastic authorities. Indeed, for most institutions in the country, the *bhikkhunī*s had no legitimate authority, leaving these women to fend for themselves. Had it not been for the support of organizations like Sakyadhita, the International Association of Buddhist Women, life as a *bhikkhunī* would have been extremely difficult to sustain.

The *bhikkhunī* movement has grown quite quickly since 1996, with hundreds of *bhikkhunī*s in Sri Lanka today. The majority of female renunciants, however, remain *silmāta*s. Buddhist scriptures do not make reference to anything that corresponds to current *silmāta*-status. Many people in Sri Lanka believe that, since it is not a category envisioned by the Buddha, it is not a legitimate expression of Buddhist renunciation. I repeatedly encountered the argument that the Buddha created four specific categories — *bhikkhu*, *bhikkhunī*, *upāsaka* and *upāsikā* — which are supposed to function like the four legs of a table.[6] The *bhikkhunī* leg no longer exists in Theravāda lands, so the table is not as solid as it used to be. The *silmāta* category, however, cannot replace it because the table was not engineered for it. The *bhikkhunī* movement of the island is based on the premise that it is up to them to take back their rightful position in the community and bring stability back to the Buddhist 'table'. Many *silmāta*s, however, along with the government and most male monastic institutions, represent the view (to one extent or another) that the Theravādin *bhikkhunī* leg cannot be re-molded from non-Theravādin materials. The *silmāta*-status is consequently the only available alternative. It provides women with the opportunity for a life of renunciation, albeit with limited authority, recognition, or financial support.[7] Women, according to this view, are relegated to the waiting rooms of history until Metteyya makes his final appearance.

Despite this prevailing view, doctrinal and philosophical arguments have been circulating for more than three decades warranting a legitimate return to the *bhikhhunī* robes in Theravāda countries. Why, then, do the majority of female renunciants continue as *silmāta*s? In 2004, of the estimated 4400 renunciant women on the island,[8] only 400 — in other words, only ten percent — had taken higher ordination and become *bhikkhunī*s. Ninety percent of the women did not. Why?

One possible reason for this discrepancy may be that many of the remaining 4000 *silmāta*s have yet to be convinced of — or for that matter even encounter — the many doctrinal arguments in favour of *bhikkhunī* ordination.[9] Disseminating

6. Known in the Pāli Canon as the 'fourfold assembly' (*catu-parisā*).

7. *Silmāta*s do receive some recognition and financial support from the government, but it pales in comparison with *bhikkhu* support.

8. According to De Silva (2004, 122), there are approximately 4000 *silmātās* on the island. When I interviewed her, however, she suggested that there were only 3000. It is unlikely that the numbers dropped so radically in such a short time. A few years earlier, Salgado (2000, 31) also claimed that there were only about 3000, as did Goonatilake (1997, 28). During my time in 2004 in Sri Lanka, I attempted to attain the official numbers from government offices in Colombo, but to no avail.

9. While it was obvious that many *silmāta*s were fully aware the various arguments circulating around the issue, it also became clear that, for some of the women – in particular the ones who were not established in *vihāra*s with a thriving community to exchange with – the arguments concerning *bhikkhunī* ordination were far from their reality. For examples, see Sasson (2007, 64–66).

this information is at the heart of the *bhikkhunī* movement. As more women become engaged in the debate and gain access to the range of arguments available on the subject, it is likely that more women will choose to take higher ordination (*upasaṃpadā*) and leave their *silmāta* robes behind. This will be achieved not only through the growing visibility of *bhikkhunī*s on the island, but similarly through the growing visibility of the *silmāta*s themselves. Salgado provides a brief history of *silmāta*-visibility in the Sri Lankan media and notes that, as a direct result of their first television appearances in the early 1980s, a series of editorial responses surrounding the question of ordination emerged, thereby rendering *silmāta*-status a much more public issue than had previously been the case. In Salgado's view, this newly focused coverage prompted 'renewed interest in the *bhikkhunī* order' (2008, 191–192). Add to this the steady stream of academic enquirers that have been raising the issue in their own way since the 1980s, thereby producing their own inevitable effect 'on the contemporary self-reflection of Buddhist nuns' (Salgado, 2008, 192), and we can safely conclude that the question of higher ordination for women will continue to challenge the status quo in increasingly significant ways.

Despite this rapid expansion of the *bhikkhunī* movement on the island,[10] the fact remains that the majority of renunciant Buddhist women have retained their *silmāta* robes and have not chosen to take higher ordination. While a struggle for female monastic recognition may seem appealing from a modernist or feminist perspective, the *silmāta*s interviewed for this study did not broach the issue easily or with romantic ideas about it. There are serious doctrinal arguments to contend with — in particular, the belief that only the coming of Metteyya could legitimate a new (Theravādin) *bhikkhunī* order — but equally significant are the socio-economic factors faced by the women. With every decision come socio-economic consequences, and certainly no less so than when women are considering challenging the monastic standards they are expected to uphold. If women are going to take on *upasaṃpadā* without the formal blessing of their government, the monks, or the laypeople they are surrounded by, they are risking more than disapproval. As we shall see, they may be risking their very ability to survive as monastics, for without socio-economic support, monasticism is effectively impossible.

Many of the women that I had the privilege of interviewing hesitated when the question of higher ordination was broached. They seemed particularly hesitant given the pervading lack of consensus among members of the *bhikkhu saṅgha* regarding re-establishment of the *bhikkhunī* ordination. Although philosophical debate was an integral part of the discussion, the over-riding concern I witnessed over the course of the interview process was about the lack of consensus among the *bhikkhu*s. While it is most certainly the case that a number of monks, and indeed a few monastic communities more generally, have been outspoken in their support of female higher ordination, the loudest voice remains one of condemnation.[11] As a result, all but one of the women interviewed declared that,

10. Hiroko Kawanami (2007, 229) reports that the number of *bhikkhunī*s in Sri Lanka has risen from 400 in 2004 to 500 in 2007. The Carolina Buddhist Vihara website (http://carolinabuddhist.net/bhikkhuniordination.html) reports 600 by the end of 2009, and Tsomo in this volume reports 800 by April 2010.

11. For a brief history of some of the male voices in this debate, see Goonatilake (1997, 32–34).

so long as the *bhikkhu* majority refuses to recognize the process, so would they. The *bhikkhu*s, I was told, must have good reason for their opposition, so it would be best to wait for those issues to be resolved — if, indeed, they can be — rather than become associated with what was consistently assumed to be a flawed ordination process.

The most prevalent *silmāta* explanation for *bhikkhu* opposition was, to my surprise, not fear of competition (*bhikkhunī*s potentially capturing the spotlight at their expense, for example), scarcity of resources (the government having to split its monastic support in half), or plain old-fashioned misogyny (women are karmicly inferior and their demands for ordination are therefore best ignored). All of these concerns emerged at one point or another during the interview process, but rarely were they cited as the predominant explanation for *bhikkhu* refusal to support higher ordination. Rather, with one exception (discussed below), the leading explanation was that the fault must be found in the *bhikkhunī*s themselves. Nearly all of the *silmātā*s interviewed condemned the *bhikkhunī*s of their country for one reason or another, all the while paradoxically admitting their interest in the process, should the government ever recognize it. Although none of the *silmāta*s interviewed admitted to more than passing interactions with the *bhikkhunī*s of their country, they nevertheless had come to the conclusion that the behaviour of the *bhikkhunī*s was at the source of the problem. Surely the monks had refused to support the cause because there was something wrong with the women undertaking the process. *Bhikkhunī*s were assumed to be lax and incompetent concerning the precepts, or they were assumed to have become arrogant as a result of their new ranking and expected the world to cater to them. So long as the tape recorder was running and the formality of the interview process remained in place, the *silmāta*s were quick to point out the flaws they imagined were embodied by the *bhikkhunī*s and reticent about describing the complicated socio-economic factors ordination elicited (although the discussion did eventually emerge in a few cases).

Confrontation with the male monastic establishment was a serious concern for most of the women wrestling with the question. Bartholomeusz (1994, 137) reports having encountered a number of women who cited their freedom from the monastic establishment as one of the advantages of the *silmāta* way of life, but in my own research, this argument was the exception rather than the rule. Only one *silmāta* insisted on her freedom from the *bhikkhu*s as a substantial benefit of her situation. She was young, bright, and vocally defiant of the male monastic community. She proudly declared, on tape and in the presence of her female *silmāta* teacher that she would never want to take higher ordination because it would force her into a hierarchical relationship with *bhikkhu*s that she considered utterly impossible. She enjoyed an exclusive and intimate relationship with her teacher that would be compromised with *bhikkhunī* ordination. For example, she feared that it would require her to confess publically to the *bhikkhu*s; as a *silmāta*, however, she retained a private confession ritual that her beloved teacher alone received. This *silmāta* was outspoken in her distrust of the *bhikkhu*s and she consequently refused to even contemplate ordination because of the freedom she believed she would have to relinquish as a result.

Other than this one young woman, however, the majority of the *silmāta*s interviewed gave the impression — while the tape recorder was running at least — that

they were impressed by the authority of the male monastic institution and were averse to challenging it in any way. This did not prevent them from complaining about, criticizing, or even making fun of the *bhikkhu*s when we were 'off-the-record', but during formal interview sessions, their loyalty was to the *bhikkhu*s. Challenging institutional authority was problematic for a number of reasons, not the least of which includes the financial repercussions many believed were at stake. Many of the *silmāta*s I spoke with seemed to have come to terms with their status in the villages or towns they inhabited. Most seemed to have created positive relationships with their neighbours and were enjoying the fruits of those exchanges. Their establishments could rarely compete with the *bhikkhu vihāra*s, but overall it seemed that the respect they garnered was the result of hard work and a genuine commitment to their neighbouring communities. Indeed, I was repeatedly assured by laypeople that they enjoy giving *dāna* to *silmāta*s more than to *bhikkhu*s, because *silmāta*s do not make menu requests.[12] That being said, however, it was clear that *silmāta*s generally experienced limited financial support and security.

It is to be expected, of course, that not all *silmāta*s enjoy these limited comforts; Sri Lanka is home to many destitute *silmāta*s — evidence that, while many have managed to make a life for themselves, the fact remains that many also have not. *Silmāta*s do not usually take the robes with the expectation of obtaining a comfortable livelihood. This is in stark contrast with the *bhikkhu*s, who may reasonably expect ordination to bring with it security, education, and perhaps even the outlines of a future career. The hard-won recognition and financial support that many *silmāta*s have managed to pull together is therefore not relinquished lightly. Indeed, many intimated their fear that their already precarious livelihood would be jeopardized with higher ordination. They would have to leave their communities and their teachers[13] for an unknown context and would possibly have to fight for financial security all over again.

Dāna was a major concern for the female renunciants interviewed, particularly given that during festivals and mourning observances, priority is given to the *bhikkhu*s. *Bhikkhu*s are seen as the classical 'fields of merit' at these times, while *silmāta*s are rarely ever included. The major opportunities for receiving *dāna* are therefore almost exclusively *bhikkhu*-oriented (despite the prevailing concern that the *bhikkhu*s' almsbowls are often overflowing (see Langer, 2007, 145). And while it may be the case that, as *bhikkhunī*s, their *dāna*-potential would increase, the *silmāta*s I spoke with were not willing to bet their lives on it. If they take *bhikkhunī* ordination before it is officially sanctioned by the state and the major monastic establishments, laypeople may continue to believe that they would not gain much merit by contributing to them, leaving the new *bhikkhunī*s even more destitute than they already were. Taking *upasaṃpadā,* in their view, may recklessly endanger an already challenging situation.[14]

12. Goonatilake (1997, 30) reports a similar finding.

13. W. Cheng encountered this same concern in her research (2007, 128).

14. It is not clear to me what kind of financial situation the *bhikkhunī*s find themselves in exactly, or where they receive their support from. My assumption is that it comes from a combination of foreign aid and personal donations/alms, but government support is obviously not being provided to the *bhikkhunī*s, whereas a meagre amount is being distributed to 'card-carrying' (i.e. registered) *silmāta*s. Since many of the *silmāta*s have worked hard to earn the little com-

These socio-economic issues, and surely many more, play key roles in the question of higher ordination for the *silmāta*s of Sri Lanka. Although *Vinaya* determines the *legalistic* feasibility of the project, social, political and economic factors inevitably determine its *practical* feasibility. Indeed, one need only consider the many ways in which *Vinaya* has been molded to fit the specific needs of the modern context to recognize that *Vinaya* alone does not determine the course of the future. *Vinaya* rules have been interpreted and re-interpreted over the ages to navigate contemporary situations. Consider, for example, that many *bhikkhu*s in Sri Lanka make allowances for travel, use of money, and attending shows to the point that Wickremeratne calls them 'part-time monks' (Wikremeratne 2006, 189). Moreover, official temporary ordination practices have also developed to encourage laymen to have a taste of monastic life without requiring a life-long commitment from them — and this not without a public debate on the merits of institutionalizing such an unorthodox practice for Sri Lankan Buddhism.[15] Perhaps most fascinating, *Vinaya* has been re-negotiated to justify monastic participation in the Sri Lankan government, despite very clear scriptural prohibitions against it (Rahula 1974). In other words, where there is a will, there is always a way. The *Vinaya* and doctrinal way is opening itself up more with every passing day, as arguments emerge that render the re-establishment of Theravādin *bhikkhunī* ordination impossible to be deemed illegitimate. The more pressing issue at hand now is whether this way is socially and economically viable for the women facing it.

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munity support they tend to receive, and since some of them can rely on some institutional support, *upasampadā* certainly appears as a financial risk to be considered seriously.

15. For a history of this debate, at least up to the time of the article, see Gombrich (1984). A fascinating detail that emerges from his article is that Prof. Malalasekera publically advocated for temporary ordination practices; Malalasekera likewise advocated for higher ordination for women. Unfortunately, the latter cause has yet to be widely accepted.

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