

## **Theravada Buddhism and MDG 3:**

### **Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in Theravada Buddhism**

**By Ajahn Brahm**

#### **Introduction**

On December 1 1955, in Montgomery Alabama, an African-American woman refused to obey a bus driver's order to give up her seat on the bus to a white passenger. That simple act of defiance for the cause of social justice became one of the most important symbols of the modern Civil Rights Movements in the USA. That woman was Rosa Parks. The United States Congress called her "the first lady of civil rights" and "the mother of the freedom movement". December 1 is commemorated in the US states of California and Ohio as "Rosa Parks Day". Rosa Parks became a *Buddhist* before she passed away in 2005 aged 92. One can speculate that this female icon against discrimination chose Buddhism because it is well suited to advancing social justice issues.

In this paper, I will discuss how Buddhism may advance the particular social justice issue of Millennium Development Goal No. 3: Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. I will focus on the need for Theravada Buddhism's current male leadership to clearly demonstrate its own commitment to MDG 3 through acceptance of the bhikkhuni ordination. Only then can it use its considerable influence to make our world more fair, one where people are judged on their character and not on their gender.

#### **Gender Inequality in Australia and the Contributions of Buddhist Leaders**

.In a report on gender equity issued by the Council of Australian Governments on Tuesday 19 November 2013, the median salary of new female graduates in Australia was found to be 10% less than that of male graduates. Even though they were equally qualified, women received less pay than men. Thus even in a developed country such as Australia, gender inequality still persists. In less developed countries it is far worse.

My colleague, Ajahn Sujato, recently attended the 2013 Religions for Peace World Assembly in Vienna, sponsored by the government of Saudi Arabia. He reported in his blog: *One panel was devoted to the role of women in religion, and that was, predictably, powerful and moving. Rape, domestic violence, trafficking in women, forced prostitution, maternal mortality: these are all-too-painful realities for many women; and meanwhile male-dominated religious morality obsesses about correct doctrine and stopping gays. The suffering of women is rarely featured in religious discourse, and as one of the delegates said, when it is mentioned it is tepid*

*and equivocal. Yet as those working in development know well, empowerment of women is the single most effective means of lifting countries out of poverty.*

As Buddhists who espouse the ideal of unconditional loving kindness and respect, judging people on their behavior instead of their birth, we should be well positioned to show leadership on the development of gender equality in the modern world and the consequent reduction of suffering for half the world's population. Moreover, if Buddhism is to remain relevant and grow, we must address these issues head on. But how can we speak about gender equality when some of our own Theravada Buddhist organizations are gender biased?

In Australia, the Anglican Christian Church represents 17.1% of the population (2011 National Census) and is maintaining its relevance by ordaining female bishops. In May 2008, in Perth, I was invited to attend the ordination of the world's first female bishop in the Anglican Christian Church, Rev. Kay Goldsworthy. The media response to the recognition of women in the Anglican Church was overwhelmingly positive. Such initiatives shine a damning spotlight on other religions in Australia that still discriminate on the basis of gender. But it shone a positive light on Theravada Buddhism in Perth that has fully ordained nuns.

Unfortunately, other Theravada Buddhist temples and monasteries in Australia and in other parts of the world still adhere to excluding women from full membership of the Sangha. I will later argue that there is no legal basis in the Vinaya, the ancient Buddhist Monastic Code, to deny women full ordination. Moreover, when parts of Theravada Buddhism are generally considered to unreasonably prevent women from full membership of the Sangha, then they have no moral authority to speak on gender equality. They have lost the opportunity to speak for the empowerment of women in other parts of society and advance the Third Millennium Development Goal.

*When Mahatma Gandhi was a law student in London, the landlady of his boarding house asked him to have a talk with her son. Her boy was eating too much sugar and would not listen to his mother when she told him to stop. Yet the boy had a fondness for the young Mr. Gandhi. She suggested that if Mr. Gandhi advised her son not to eat so much sugar then he might follow the good advice. A week or two went by and the landlady's son was still eating lots of sugar. So she took Mr. Gandhi aside and asked him why he had not kept his promise to talk with her son. "But I did talk with your son" Mr. Gandhi replied, "but only this morning." "So why did you wait so long?" "Because it was only yesterday that I gave up eating sugar". Such was the reply of the great man.*

Religious leaders, above all others, must practice what they preach to be taken seriously and for their advice to be effective.

## **The Power of Leading by Example**

According to the latest figures from Wikipedia, there are between 506 million to 1,146 million Buddhists in our world. Even at the lower estimate that is a significant proportion of the global population. The vast majority of these look to their monks and lamas for inspiration, guidance and moral leadership. Moreover, many of these Buddhists are in undeveloped or developing countries where the empowerment of women is crucial for those countries' economic development and social progress. In today's highly connected world, words are not enough. Actions are demanded.

Master Cheng Yen, the female founder of the International Tzu Chi Foundation, is an example of the power of an ordained Buddhist Nun. Ordained in Taiwan in 1962, at a time when women had little influence in social policy, she is now regarded as an icon throughout her homeland as well as internationally. She has built state-of-the-art earthquake-proof hospitals in Taiwan, led the way in encouraging recycling of waste in her country, and established the largest Buddhist Relief Organization in our world. When I visited Tzu Chi Foundation in Taiwan in May 2013, I was shown how discarded plastic bottles were turned into blankets to be sent to natural disaster zones, such as the areas devastated by the recent Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines. Much of the work was done by retired men and women who gained meaning in their lives together with the considerable emotional and health benefits that such a social activity provides. They were enjoying their twilight years instead of wasting away at home. No monk or lama has done anything comparable.

For Buddhism to grow in our modern world, we need to do more than teach meditation, preach inspiring sermons, and make the Sutras available over the internet. We are good at studying, publishing and spreading the word of Buddhism. What we have not been very successful at is showcasing the compassion and selflessness of the Dharma by our actions. We have written many more words in our books than what few kind words we have spoken to the poor, lonely and desperate. We have built so many more temples than orphanages.

### **Female Leadership in Theravada Buddhist Countries.**

Sri Lanka, a majority Theravada Buddhist country, can be proud of having the modern world's first female Prime Minister, Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike, in 1960. Myanmar would have had its first female head of government in 1990 when Aung San Su Kyi and her NLD party won 59% of the popular vote in the national election, but the election result was not accepted. In 2013, Thailand elected their first female Prime Minister, Yingluck Shinawatara.

This shows that Theravada Buddhist laypeople can accept women in leadership roles, why can't the Sangha?

## Tradition

Theravada Buddhist monks, generally speaking, are very conservative. They often claim that they are the guardians of “Original Buddhism” from the time of the Lord Buddha Himself. They consider that one of their most important duties is to preserve these precious and authentic early teachings. In this context, what was the tradition in the time of The Lord Buddha with regard to women in the Sangha?

All monks of all traditions in all countries, and all Buddhist lay scholars as well, fully accept that there were fully ordained women, called Bhikkhuni, in the lifetime of the Buddha. Moreover, it is clearly stated in these early teachings that one of the goals of the Lord Buddha’s mission was to give the full ordination to women:

*Ananda, once I was staying at Uruvela on the bank of the river Neranjara (present day Bodh Gaya) under the Goatherd’s Banyan tree, when I had just attained supreme enlightenment. And Mara the Evil One had come to me, stood to one side and said “May the Blessed One now attain final Nibbana, may the Sugata now attain final Nibbana. Now is the time for the Blessed Lord’s final Nibbana.”*

*At this, I said to Mara: “Evil One, I will not take final Nibbana until I have bhikkhus, **bhikkhunis**, lay men and lay women followers, who are accomplished, trained, skilled, learned, knowers of the Dhamma, trained in conformity with the Dhamma, correctly trained and walking in the path of the Dhamma, who will pass on what they have gained from their Teacher, teach it, declare it, establish it, expound it, analyse it, make it clear, until they shall be able by means of the Dhamma to refute false teachings that have arisen, and teach the Dhamma of wondrous effect (MahaparinibbanaSutta 3. 34-35)*

Theravada Buddhists should have an advantage over other major world religions because their tradition explicitly gives such equity to women. Christianity has no tradition of gender equality in their priesthood. Nor does Islam, Judaism or the various schools of Hinduism. Buddhism stands apart and ahead of its time in granting such status to women from “*when I (the Lord Buddha) had just attained supreme enlightenment*” at Bodh Gaya.

Therefore, full ordination of women is part of the earliest tradition. It is also the declared wish of the Lord Buddha

## Obstacles to Gender Equality in the Theravada Sangha

There are two main obstacles to the acceptance of the Bhikkhuni Ordination in Theravada Buddhism: 1) Ignorance about who makes the decisions that govern the Sangha, and 2) Ignorance of the Vinaya, the rules established by the Lord Buddha that restrict what decisions may be made.

1. Many monks in Thailand argue that a ruling from the Sangharaja of Thailand in 1928 bans the ordination of female monks:

*Announcement*

*“It is unallowable for any Bhikkhu to give the Going-Forth to Women.*

*Any woman who wishes to ordain as a Samaneri, in accordance with the Buddha’s allowances, has to be ordained by a fully ordained Bhikkhuni. The Buddha laid down the rule that only a Bhikkhuni over 12 vassas is eligible to be a Preceptor (pavattini).*

*The Buddha did not allow for a Bhikkhu to be the preceptor in this ceremony. Unfortunately, the Bhikkhuni lineage has since faded and died out. Since there is no more fully-fledged Bhikkhunis to pass on the lineage, there is henceforth no Samaneris who have obtained a proper ordination from a fully-fledged Bhikkhuni.*

*Therefore both the Bhikkhuni and Samaneri lineage has died out. So any Bhikkhu who gives the going forth to a woman to become a Samaneri, it can be said that the Bhikkhu is not acting in accordance with the regulations the Buddha laid down. In essence, he is following his own guidelines and diverging from the guidelines that the Buddha laid down. This is something that will jeopardize the Buddhist Religion and is not a good example for other Bhikkhus.*

***Therefore, all monks and novices in both Nikayas are forbidden to ordain any woman as a Bhikkhuni, Sikkhamana, or Samaneri from this day forth.”***

*Phra Bancha Somdet Phra Sangharacha Jiao Gromluang Jinawarn Siriward (18 June 2471)*

(An official announcement from the Sangha Committee Meeting minutes, Book 16 pp 157)

As well as noting the antiquity of this ruling, it should also be pointed out that the Sangharaja of Thailand, together with the Thai Council of Elders (Mahatherasamakom), are only permitted by their legally binding constitution to rule on matters directly concerning the monks and novices of the main two Thai Buddhist sects, Mahanikaya and Dhammayuttanikaya. They are legally not empowered to rule on the affairs of other monastic groups, such as Chinese Mahayana monks in Thailand, **nor on nuns**. For those well meaning monks waiting for the Thai Council of Elders to decide on the legitimacy of Theravada Bhikkhunis, they will need to wait forever. The Thai Council of Elders is not legally entitled to rule on matters beyond its remit.

As the Late Somdet Phra Pootajarn, the then acting leader of the Thai Council of Elders, told me in 2009 regarding the question of Bhikkhuni ordination “Thai law does not extend beyond Thailand”. In essence, a Sangha in Thailand cannot rule on the proceedings of a Sangha in Sri Lanka, nor in Australia.

Indeed, the Buddha established that all Sanghakamma (monastic acts), such as the ordination of Bhikkhunis, are to be decided on by the local monastic community, defined as those monks or

nuns within the same monastic boundary. Decisions or opinions of other monastic communities are not binding. Governance of the Sangha is devolved to each monastic community. This is the ruling of the Lord Buddha.

2. However, each monastic community is bound to act within the rules called the Vinaya. So are these rules an obstacle to Bhikkhuni Ordination?

The Thai Sangharaja's 1928 ruling judged that a bhikkhu Sangha cannot give ordination to a bhikkhuni, because one needs other bhikkhunis to ordain a bhikkhuni. This is a moot point. In a recent publication "The Revival of the Bhikkhuni Order and the Decline of the Sasana" by the renowned scholar monk Bhikkhu Analayo (Journal of Buddhist Ethics, Vol. 20 2013, available on-line at <http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/2013/09/Analayo-Legality-final.pdf>), the author argues that such an ordination **is** valid. In short, he argues that at first the Lord Buddha gave the bhikkhus authority to ordain bhikkhunis. Later, the Buddha gave authority for bhikkhunis to be ordained by a dual ordination ceremony; first in a Sangha of bhikkhunis and then in a Sangha of bhikkhus. However, in contrast with the history of the bhikkhu ordination, where one finds that whenever a new ordination is allowed by the Lord Buddha then the previous method is immediately abolished, **the original ordination of bhikkhunis by bhikkhus was not abolished by the Lord Buddha**. It is a general principle of Theravada Buddhism "Not to abolish what has been authorized by the Buddha" (one of the seven causes for the longevity of the Buddhist religion – Anguttara Sevens, 23). This, then, is a strong argument for the legitimacy of ordination of bhikkhunis by bhikkhus alone.

It is generally regarded that the first bhikkhuni ordination of modern times was that which occurred in 1998 in Bodh Gaya. This was a dual ordination performed first by Chinese bhikkhunis following the "Dharmagupta" Vinaya and then by an international Theravada Sangha of bhikkhus. Was this legitimate?

There are four, and only four, ways that an ordination may be judged illegitimate:

1. Simavipatti: when there is a monk or nun within the monastic boundary who should be present but is absent.
2. Parisavipatti: when there is not an adequate quorum.
3. Vatthuvipatti: (for ordinations) when the candidate is disqualified from ordination such as being underage.
4. Kammavacavipatti: when the procedure is chanted incorrectly, e.g. an ordination ceremony being chanted without a motion and three announcements.

In regard to the Bodh Gaya ordination, there is no doubt that:

1. All the monks and nuns within the monastic boundary were present,
3. The candidates were well qualified and

4. The procedure was chanted correctly.

But was there a quorum? May Mahayana bhikkhunis qualify as a quorum?

There are no reasonable grounds to suspect that the Chinese Mahayana nuns who performed the Bodh Gaya ordination are not legitimate bhikkhunis. The records show that their lineage came from Sri Lanka. Their own ordination procedure does not fail for any of the four reasons given above. They perform the ceremony with all present within a boundary (which they call a “platform”). There is always a quorum. They ensure that the candidate is qualified. And the ceremony is enacted by the same motion and three announcements as in Theravada, albeit chanted in Chinese. They are bhikkhunis according to the Vinaya and so can ordain other bhikkhunis.

But what about a quorum of one sect (Mahayana) ordaining nuns of another sect (Theravada)?

### **Sects in Buddhism**

The different sects of Theravada are called “nanasamvasa” in the Vinaya. They are separate communities each performing their own acts of governance (Sanghakamma), even within the same monastic boundary. The Vinaya states that there are only two origins of separate communities (nanasamvasabhumi – Vinaya Mahavagga, chapter 10, verse 1.10):

1. A monk decides for himself to belong to a community separate from others, or
2. The Sangha forces a monk out of their community by enacting the severe penalty of Ukkhepaniyakamma by a motion and three announcements.

The second cause for a separate community is not used these days. This leaves only the first, that of personal choice. Put simply, according to Vinaya, a monk may choose to perform Sanghakamma with any group of monks he feels comfortable with. There is no legal impediment preventing a Theravada bhikkhu from performing a Sanghakamma with a Mahayana bhikkhu. Indeed, it may be accurately said that there are no *Theravada* or *Mahayana* bhikkhus, there are just *bhikkhus*, according to the Vinaya, who happen to follow Theravada customs or Mahayana practices. Thus, a monk ordained in a Theravada ceremony may join a Mahayana monastery without needing to be re-ordained.

Thus, according to the Vinaya, Mahayana bhikkhunis may perform the first part of the ordination ceremony for a new bhikkhuni, and then she may take the second part of the dual ordination in a gathering of Theravada bhikkhus. This is what happened in Bodh Gaya. There is no reasonable argument based on the Vinaya to invalidate this. And what sect to those bhikkhunis ordained at Bodh Gaya belong to? They choose!

## **The Perth Bhikkhuni Ordination in 2009**

Once there were Theravada bhikkhunis, it was relatively easy to arrange for the ordination of four women as bhikkhunis in Perth in October 2009. Even though it caused some trouble at the time, the bhikkhunis that were ordained are now recognized by all as bhikkhunis according to the Vinaya. As the old saying goes: “One cannot make an omelette without cracking eggs”.

The Bhikkhuni Sangha is growing. In Perth, the Dhammasara Nuns Monastery currently has 11 members of the Sangha with a waiting list of women from around the world wanting to ordain. Recently, a Thai TV channel visited Dhammasara and interviewed the bhikkhunis. In Thailand there are around 100 bhikkhunis (Murray Hunter, ANU, 2/1/2014) and in Sri Lanka around 800 bhikkhunis (The Sunday Leader, Sri Lanka, 3 March 2013). They may not be respected by all monks but they are becoming ever more respected by the lay Buddhist community, especially in Western countries. The Perth bhikkhunis are giving talks and teaching meditation. They are taking their place in the fourfold assembly of Buddhism as the Lord Buddha wanted. They are getting ample support.

## **The Need for the Current Leadership of Theravada to Embrace Bhikkhuni Ordination**

It may be of interest to Thai monks to know that the Preceptor (pavattini) at the Perth Bhikkhuni ordination, Ayya Tathhaaloka, visited Ajahn Maha Boowa at Wat Bahn That in Udon shortly before the Perth Bhikkhuni ordination. Ajahn Maha Boowa invited her to stay in the female quarters overnight, and gave her ordination recognition by inviting her up onto the monks’ platform and then addressing her as a bhikkhuni, in front of the Sangha together with the assembled laity.

Many influential leaders in Thailand respect Ajahn Maha Boowa to such an extent that this incident may encourage other senior monks to accept the existence of Theravada bhikkhunis in Thailand. Such acceptance by Buddhist monk leaders will result in greater respect for the status of bhikkhunis among the lay Buddhist followers. Then those women will be empowered to lead in many other areas for the benefit and progress of their nation.

## **The Relevance of Bhikkhuni Ordination for the Third Millennium Development Goal**

In a recently published paper by Emma Tomalin and Caroline Starkey (Sakyadhita newsletter, Winter 2012), the authors explored the role that Buddhism in Thailand and Cambodia plays in maintaining gender disparity in education and, “ultimately ask what is the relationship between the reassertion of women’s traditional ordination rights and female empowerment through education?” They noted that “Several scholars, both Thai and Western, have implicated Buddhism as one explanatory factor for the historical inequality between genders, particularly in the poorest areas.” Also that “Many advocates of the bhikkhuni ordination consider that that there is a direct relationship between the low status of women in many Buddhist traditions and the inferior status of women within Buddhist societies.

Thus, by restoring equity to women in the Theravada Sangha through the reinstating of the bhikkhuni ordination, we will be addressing the inferior status of women in many Theravada countries, promoting gender equity in education and, thereby, making a strong statement in support of the Third UN Millennium Development Goal.

By fixing our own house first, we have the considerable opportunity and moral authority through our books and sermons to inspire and encourage our Buddhist followers to also work towards gender equality in spheres other than religion. That will lead to a world with less violence, better health and more prosperity.

Ajahn Brahm, Perth, January 2014