

A Sima on Northern California Land:

A Visit to the Theravadan Nuns of Aloka Vihara

The invited nuns are asked to process down the hill, led by the President of the Board, who is dressed in a Chinese-looking silk brocade. She bows deeply and tearfully expresses her joy at the commencement of this event, saying that at times she had wondered whether it would ever come. As we walk, dozens of lay practitioners scatter flower petals at our feet. Having arrived at our seats, we stand and turn back toward the hill, where the bhikkhuni preceptor, leading bhikkhuni teachers and ordaining bhikkhunis (*upajjha, kammavacarinis and bhikkhunisangha*) are processing toward us, their arrival also softened by flower petals. Side by side with the bhikkhunis, the senior bhikkhu, bhikkhu teachers and accompanying bhikkhus (*ovadacariya, kammavacacariyas, bhikkhusangha*) also process down the hill. In all nine bhikkunis and six bhikkhus are present for the *upasampada* (full ordination) of Jayati Samaneri, who is about to become the first bhikkhuni ordained at the Theravadan women's monastery called Aloka Vihara. Also present is the *sima* (a boundary for community acts) that has been established, both physically and metaphysically.

Introduction

This paper is an exploration of the re-emergence of the full ordination of women in the Theravadan Buddhist tradition. In it, I will describe my impressions from two visits I paid to Aloka Vihara, a new Theravadan monastery for women in Northern California, at which the above ordination scene played out. The paper will also provide an overview of the doctrinal and

sociopolitical issues related to the women's lineage in terms of its propagation and its ongoing leadership.

Aloka Vihara

Aloka Vihara is a monastery, a practice center for the fourfold sangha of ordained women, ordained men, lay women and lay men. It is also a residence exclusively for ordained women of the Theravada and aspirants to ordination. The monastery is led by two fully ordained bhikkhunis, Ayya Anandabodhi and Ayya Santacitta. These women were invited by the Board of the Saranaloka Foundation, which was formed in 2005, to support the establishment of a women's monastery on US soil. [Saranaloka Foundation: Support] In December 2010, they came as nuns to the San Francisco Bay Area in the hopes of continuing the monastic form they had practiced at Amaravati, a Theravadan monastery in the Chiltern Hills in England. However, shortly after their arrival here, they realized that to continue the *siladhara* practice they had been doing for many years would undermine the handful of Theravadan women in the States who had already received full ordination and been accepted into the bhikkhuni Sangha. [Varvaloucas 2014] Seeing those women take what is considered in their tradition to be a radical step, the women felt emboldened to take it as well. Therefore, they formally took leave of Amaravati and the *siladhara* order, although maintaining with the *pabbaja* formerly granted them by Ajahn Sumedho, but now they formally undertook the ten precepts with their bhikkhuni preceptor as samaneris. Then they set out to learn and prepare to undertake the ancient bhikkhuni monastic form, so that Western Theravadan women could practice without having to be "...in a relationship to a patriarchal system." [Varvaloucas 2014, 79]

Initially they lived as samaneris in a small house in the Sunset area of San Francisco, together with a rotating group of vihara stewards, lay women who practice with the Sangha and attend to the responsibilities of the vihara. Like most Theravadan monastics, they refrain from many daily activities such as handling money and cooking, due to the Pali Vinaya they follow. They also refrain from being alone in the company of men. In combination, this makes them dependent on the support of lay women practitioners. As samaneris (and then bhikkhunis), they changed to wear the orange/maroon robes also worn by their male counterparts in the Southeast Asian Theravada traditions, different from the dark-brown color (not allowed for Thai bhikkhus) which they had previously worn as *siladharas*. They keep their heads shaved. The Sisters were also joined in 2012 by a woman who at that time was using her given name of Maria. She was ordained at Amaravati as an *anagarika*, a white robed aspirant to the sisterhood who takes the eight precepts.¹ The house in San Francisco became a practice place, and before long women and men were attending periods of meditation, dharma talks, and *pujas* (chanting and offering rituals) together with the monastics.

Then, after a year of preparation and training², on October 17, 2011, the Sisters Anandabodhi and Santacitta received full ordination in a ceremony which took place at Spirit

¹ The eight precepts for Theravada anagarikas are:

1. I undertake to abstain from harming or taking life.
2. I undertake to abstain from taking what is not given.
3. I undertake to abstain from any sexual contact.
4. I undertake to abstain from false speech.
5. I undertake to abstain from the use of intoxicants.
6. I undertake to abstain from taking food after midday.
7. I undertake to abstain from dancing, singing, music or any kind of entertainment, and the use of garlands, perfumes, unguents and adornments.
8. I undertake to abstain from using luxurious seats

² Ayya Tathaaloka notes that the period of preparatory training is normally at least two years, however, as Ayyas Anandabodhi and Santacitta had already been training with the ten precepts for nearly 20 years, this was not required in their case. They did however complete two years of subsequent training with their bhikkhuni preceptor before attaining “independence” after their bhikkhuni ordination.

Rock Meditation Center. 350 supporters of all types were said to be present, as well as 50 monastics, women and men of several traditions, with Sanghas of Theravada bhikkhus and bhikkhunis at their core. It was a joyous occasion, presided over by Ayya Tathaaloka Theri.³ The ordination conferred is a dual ordination, in that the women first receive ordination from a quorum of five or more bhikkhunis and then that ordination is confirmed by a quorum of five or more bhikkhus. With this, the new bhikkhuni is said to be ordained by the full acceptance of the Sangha. I will say more about this form of ordination later. For now, it is sufficient to note that, as a result of this ordination, the nuns were no longer practicing according to the forms developed for women in the Thai Forest tradition of Ajahn Chah as practiced in the West. Though the Pali-text Vinaya does not describe a concept of lineage, some contemporary Theravada Buddhist monastic traditions may include this concept in various ways. Thus, it is important to note that various South and Southeast Asian Theravada lineages have historically been intermingled in the re-emergent full ordination of Theravada bhikkhunis, while subsequently all practice with reference to the 311 rules of the Dhamma-Vinaya of the Pali Canon. Still, the bhikkhunis often refer to themselves as simply being in the lineage of the Buddha.

Similarly, the ordination I attended on November 1, 2014 was a dual ordination, conducted by Ayya Tathaaloka together with the bhikkhuni and bhikkhu Sanghas. It was held

³ Tathaaloka studied in South Korea with Bhikkhuni Elder Myeong Seong Sunim, became a sramaneri in 1995 and was ordained in 1997 by Bhikkhu Ratanasara Sangha Nayaka Thera in one of the first dual ordination ceremonies. See <http://awakeningtruth.org/about/preceptor>.

within a *sima*, a ceremonial boundary in this case identified by stones.⁴ Several steps occurred within the ceremony, prior to the request for ordination by the candidate, in this case Jayati Samaneri, as Maria was known after the time of her samaneri pabbaja. These included the request for forgiveness by and dependence on her preceptor, a review of her robes and bowl, and a private interview with her teachers in which she is asked a series of questions about her health and her ability to freely commit to the order. Ayya Anandabodhi shared with me that during this questioning, as is traditional, the candidate affirms that she is anatomically female and is asked whether she has any of several medical conditions that would prevent her entry into the order.⁵ Having determined her suitability, the bhikkhuni Sangha are three times requested to confer the ordination, and consent is given by silence. Then the candidate is said to be a “one sided bhikkhuni.” She then approaches the bhikkhus present, and three times makes the request to confirm the ordination, and again consent is given by silence. Once agreed upon by both sides, the ordination is considered complete. At that point, the new bhikkhuni is given instruction in the three requisites (alms food, robes, and medicine), the eight things never to be done (*parajikas* or “defeats” of which there are four for men)⁶, and the higher training (*sila* or morality/*citta* or mind and heart/*pañña* or wisdom).

Amaravati and the *Siladhara* Training

Amaravati monastery is a training center in the Theravada lineage of Ajahn Chah, a world renowned Thai monastic who taught and wrote in Thailand at Wat Nong Pah Pong. He

⁴ For a photo of the ceremony for establishing a *sima*, see <http://saranaloka.org/news/whats-new/page/2/>

⁵ Though it is conducted in the presence of the guests and monks and nuns, it is in Pali.

⁶ The eight *parajikas* are 1) having sexual intercourse, 2) stealing, 3) taking a human life, 4) claiming superpowers that one doesn't have, 5) physical (but non-penetrational) sexual liaison, 6) concealing another bhikkhuni's defeat, 7) following a suspended bhikkhu, 8) lustful seduction and foreplay intentionally leading up to sexual liaison. The first four are the men's *parajikas*.

had many Western disciples, some of whom have continued his teachings and lineage in the more than 300 branches that exist today. [Amaro 2012] ⁷Amaravati was led by one of Ajahn Chah's senior disciples, Ajahn Sumedho. According to its website, Amaravati began ordaining women as *anagārikās* as long ago as 1979. The word *anagārikā* literally means "the homeless state of a vagrant ascetic" [Apte]. However, as used at Amaravati for men and also at some women's monasteries in America, it refers to a form of Buddhist monastic postulancy that is recognized internationally in the Ajahn Chah temples. *Anagarikas* typically take eight precepts, wear white robes, and may continue daily activities such as driving, cooking and handling money. Other than that, their training and lifestyle is very similar to the next stage of ordination, the *samanera/samaneri* who have taken 10 precepts. Both forms are part of the early stages of renunciant life and, at least in the bhikkhuni monasteries in America, the *samaneri* can later request full ordination as a bhikkhuni.

Subsequently, in 1983, Amaravati began ordaining women who had been *anagarika* for two years into a "ten precept nun" training called the *siladhara*, exercising the authority they claim was granted to them by a group of unnamed Thai Elders. This form was called the *siladhara* training and it is partly modeled after some of the forms of "lay nun" renunciation for women in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma, and partly modelled after the bhikkhu and bhikkhuni vinayas. As *siladharas*, the women were required to stand in line behind the monks to receive food offerings, and were prohibited from leading the meal chants or presiding over other ceremonial duties unless they were explicitly invited by the monks to do so. As distinct from the monks, they wore dark-brown patchwork *civara* robes. In resemblance to the monks, they shaved their heads and lived a celibate life of dependence on alms.

⁷ Only 16 are listed on the Wat Nong Pah Pong website. See <http://www.watnongpahpong.org/sakhananae.php>

In late 2008, Ajahn Sumedho decided to suspend the ordination of the *siladharas*, which the Forest Sangha Newsletter describes as a response to his wish not to continue with a form of practice that seemed to be harming the women, who were expressing difficulty within the community.⁸ However, there continued to be what is described by an observer as, “...ongoing problems in the relationship between the monks and the nuns...events that have shaken the community such as the disrobal of Ajahn Thaniya, one of the most respected of all the nuns...” [A. Sujato] Much of the difficulty was attributed to the lack of clarity about the status of the nuns within the community. Ayya Anandabodhi describes it this way, “...our actual ordination was contested. Some would say we were ordained; some would say we weren’t. Some would say we were novices. Some would say that we weren’t even novices, that we were only lay renunciants.” [Varvaloucas 2014]

In response to this unrest, Ajahn Sumedho’s secretary handed down to the elder’s council monks standards that could be communicated to the whole community about the status of the nuns. Apparently there was limited consultation with the *bhikkhus* outside of Amaravati and very vague consultation with the nuns themselves. From this emerged the Five Points that were presented to all of the women practicing the *anagarika* and the *siladhara* training at Amaravati in 2009. The English Council of Elders ratified the standards, which the monks viewed as simply stating what was already in place but the nuns received as creating even more oppression.⁹ The Five Points are:

1. The structural relationship as indicated by the Vinaya of the Bhikkhu Sangha to the *Siladhara* Sangha is one of seniority, such as the most junior *bhikkhu* is senior to the

⁸ See the Forest Sangha Newsletter here <http://forestsangha.org/2009/11/19/where-we-are-now/>

⁹ *ibid*

most senior *siladhara*. As this relationship of seniority is defined over time it is not subject to change.

2. In line with this, in ritual situations where both *bhikkhu* and *siladhara* - such as giving *anumodana*¹⁰ and precepts - leading the chanting or giving a talk - is always presumed to rest with the senior *bhikkhu* present. He may in some cases invite a senior *siladhara* to lead. Yet if this is a regular invitation it does not imply a new standard of shared leadership.

3. The *Bhikkhu* Sangha will be responsible for the *pabbajja* (ordination) the way Ajahn Sumedho has been in the past. The *siladhara* look to the *Bhikkhu* Sangha for ordination and guidance rather than exclusively to Ajahn Sumedho. A candidate for *siladhara* should seek approval from the *Siladhara* Sangha and then receive acceptance by the *Bhikkhu* Sangha as represented by those *Bhikkhus* who sit on the elder council.

4. The formal ritual of giving *pavarana* (invitation for feedback) by the *Siladhara* Sangha to the *Bhikkhu* Sangha should take place at the end of *Vassa* as it has in our communities traditionally: according to the structure of the *Vinaya*.

5. The *Siladhara* training is considered to be a vehicle already suitable for the realization for liberation, and is respected as such within our tradition. It is offered as a complete training as it stands, and it is not a step to a different form, such as *Bhikkhuni* Ordination.

These rules were announced at the end of an ordination, without prior notice, and all were instructed that the women had to accept these Five Points in order for the *Siladhara* ordinations

¹⁰ Sanskrit, literally, it means "rejoicing together," but it can also mean approval and encouragement. It is a chant that is done by the monks and nuns in response to a gift of food or other item from a donor.

to continue. A few of the nuns disrobed rather than accept the Five Points. A few of the nuns simply left. However, all of the nuns who stayed reportedly accepted them and adopted to this expression of male dominance.

Thus, while the leadership of Amaravati was making some attempt at soteriological inclusiveness, the shadow of South Indian caste and Southeast Asian misogyny even in this Western setting continues to relegate women practitioners to second class status. Sponberg describes this phenomenon as “institutional androcentrism,” the tendency of organizations to enforce social norms of gender hierarchy. [Sponberg 1962] This hermeneutic has meant that the introduction of a limited form of ordination for the women of Amaravati was a painful step that created divisions within the community.

Ancient Women’s Ordinations

Where does the greater Theravadan Buddhist community turn for guidance regarding monasticism for women? The answer seems to vary. There appears to be clear doctrinal evidence in the canon of the Buddha’s acceptance of women into the ordained Sangha and the greater Sangha. For example, according to the *Mahaparanirvana Sutra 3.7* the Buddha is said to have refused Mara’s suggestion to immediately enter nirvana until the fourfold Sangha was established,

“Evil One, I will not take final Nibbana till I have bhikkhu disciples who are accomplished, trained, skilled, learned, knowers of the Dhamma, trained in conformity with the Dhamma, correctly trained and walking the path of the Dhamma, who will pass on what they have gained from their teacher, teach it, declare it, expound it, analyse it, make it clear; till they shall be able by means of the Dhamma to refute false teachings

that have arisen, and teach the Dhamma of wondrous effect...I will not take final Nibbana till I have bhikkhuni disciples who are accomplished...till I have laymen-followers...till I have laywomen-followers..." (as verse above)

Other canonical descriptions of the Buddha's invitation of women into the ordained Sangha are not so conclusive. There are several versions of Mahapajapati's request to be ordained, for example. In the Mulasarvastivada version of the *Bhiksuni-Karmavacana* she asks the Buddha herself and receives approval without having to ask again, but the Buddha later has to be convinced by Ananda to allow her 500 followers to ordain. In the Theravada Vinaya, which is a Pali version, she asks Ananda to intercede on her behalf from the beginning and the Buddha refuses three times before finally acquiescing. In this version, the Buddha prescribes the eight *garudhamma* or "heavy rules" for the nuns (which some believe have been confused with the eight defeats) as a condition of allowing them to ordain. [B. Sujato, White Bones Red Rot Black Snakes 2012, 21-23] What the versions have in common is the seeming reluctance of the Buddha to ordain women, and his statement that the inclusion of women in the Sangha will reduce the longevity of his teachings. However, the Pali version ends with the statement that the *garudhamma* are imposed by the Buddha to prevent such a reduction. [Sponberg 1962]

There are also several conflicting versions of Bhadda Kundalakesa's ordination. As one of the first disciples of the Buddha, she appears in the Therigata, or enlightenment poems of the women arhats. Her poem refers to having been ordained in the way that is commonly described as having been used by the Buddha with many of the earliest monks, "Come Bhadda." (Thera and Hecker 2003) However, other versions of this story describe her being sent by the Buddha to be ordained by the bhikkhunis in a more formal manner. [Mohr, Tsedroen 2010, 45-48] So it seems that one cannot turn to the extant documentation of the women ancestors' ordinations for

clear guidance, in part because later forms of ordination were likely to have been introduced into earlier texts, in the process of updating them.

Indeed, the existence of so many seemingly divergent descriptions of the Buddha's treatment of women who were interested in monasticism has led to skepticism about the authenticity of certain passages in the canon. The *garudhammas* in particular have been disputed by several scholars [Mohr , Tsedroen 2010, 147], including Australian monk Ajahn Sujato in *White Bones Red Rot Black Snakes*, who makes the case that this material is apocryphal. Still, even if one is willing to accept that the *garudhamma* are a later accretion, such a fact raises more questions than it answers. In the absence of the *garudhammas* are Buddhist bhikkhunis equal to their male counterparts? Are they independent of them? Should nuns continue to solicit feedback from the monks, should they offer feedback to each other, or should the practice be dropped? What of the dual ordination procedure; is it no longer necessary? Some women's have adapted the stance of following the 311 precepts of the *Bhikkhuni Patimokkha* which includes some but not the first and most egregious of the *garudhammas* as *pacittiya* precepts, that is, comparatively minor offences for confession.

The End of the Women's Lineages?

Returning to the question of the revival, it is helpful to understand the history of the women's lineages. It is said that bhikkhuni ordination in the Theravadan tradition died out centuries ago. Though the records seem to indicate that its bhikkhuni Sangha died out in the 11th Century, Sri Lankans have long had an affinity for the ordination of women into the Buddhist monastic Sangha. This is due to the earlier *Dipavamsa* and later *Mahavamsa*'s tales of Asoka having sent his daughter to Sri Lanka with a piece of the Bodhi tree to plant in there, signifying

the transplantation of Buddhism to that country. His daughter had blossomed in practice in India to become the Arhat Theri Sanghamitta. Sanghamitta is said to have become the first bhikkhuni to perform an ordination in Sri Lanka. As a result of the positive regard with which she was held, this mission and its subsequent unfolding is said to have resulted in the ordination of 500 women in Sri Lanka, while the mission of Sona and Uttara Thera during roughly the same period resulted in the ordination of a further 1,500 women in an area which now includes Thailand and Burma. [B. Sujato, Sects and Sectarianism 2010] Thus, the women's Sangha has historically been strong in Sri Lanka, and the nuns of Aloka Vihara believe that for some monks it is a matter of national pride that the women's lineage be revived. It is crucial to note that, if we accept this account regarding Sanghamitta as having some historical accuracy, then the women originally received their lineages from the Indian women monastics, who would have received dual ordinations with the Indian men or equivalent ordinations from Indian women. In addition, both the Sri Lankan male monastics and the Thai male monastics are said to have received their lineages from the Indian male monastics. Therefore it should be equally valid for the women to receive what amounts to a continuation of the Indian male lineage as it survives in the Sri Lankan and Thai male lineages. .

Thus, it is also not surprising that some of the monastics who have been most active in reviving the Theravadan women's lineage are Sri Lankan monks. Venerable Dr. Havanpola Ratanasara, a Sri Lankan monk who taught in his homeland and in the US, is believed to have been one of the first to support the ordination of women as bhikkhunis in contemporary times, beginning in 1988 with women from several countries. [Woo 2000] Then, acting in unison, the Sri Lankan monks and scholars of the Mahabodhi Society in India, and the bhikkhus together with support from the bhikkhunis from the Korean Dharmaguptaka tradition conducted the first

of the contemporary ordinations of women into the Theravadan lineage at Sarnath, India. This took place in December of 1996. At that time, 10 Sri Lankan women were ordained as *bhikkhunis*. [Mohr , Tsedroen 2010, 99-100] In 1998, a larger group of novices from some 23 countries were ordained at Bodhgaya in a ceremony lead by 15 Taiwanese *bhikkhunis* and *bhikkhus* from various traditions. That ordination was immediately followed by a Theravada *dal'hikamma* supplement to the *upasampada* ordination was administered to the new *bhikkhunis* from the Sri Lankan Theravada tradition by the Sri Lankan *bhikkhu* Sangha for the sake of formal and official conversion to the Theravada. Since that time, several *bhikkhuni* ordinations have been conducted around the world, including in Australia, the United States, India and Thailand. In fact, the six *bhikkhus* who played a role in the ordination of Samaneri Jayati, whether from Laos, Nepal or Sri Lanka, were of a Sri Lankan lineage. One of the monks is the current Abbot at the American Buddhist Seminary in Sacramento, California which was founded by Ven. Madawala Seelawimala Mahathera.

Legal Arguments and Allegations of Schism

The modern day ordinations of *bhikkhunis* have taken various forms¹¹, but most of them include the dual ordination procedure which complies fairly closely with *Cullavagga 10*, a

¹¹ No fewer than seven ordination methods have been used:

(1) Ordination by the Dharmaguptaka rite by a Dual Sangha of *bhikkhunis* and *bhikkhus*, supervised by a Theravada *bhikkhu* elder (1988 in USA)

(2) Ordination by the Dharmaguptaka rite by mixed-traditions dual quorums of the *Bhikkhuni* Sangha and *Bhikkhu* Sanghas (1994-2008 in USA)

(3) Ordination by the Dharmaguptaka rite by a *Bhikkhu* Sangha alone, prepared by Dharmaguptaka *bhikkhunis* and Theravada *bhikkhus* (1996 in Sarnath)

section of the Vinaya which describes the Pali canon's version of the women's ordination procedure. However, these ordinations are not without their detractors or without negative consequences for those who conduct them. Venerable Sri Sumangala Mahathero, Abbot of the Dambulla tradition, was disenfranchised from the Sri Lankan Siam Nikaya for founding a Theravada bhikkhuni order. In another example, Ajahn Brahm, the Abbot of Bodhinyana monastery in Perth, Australia, and all monastics practicing in his monastery were ejected from the Wat Nong Pah Pong lineage nine days after the ordination of the first four nuns at his temple, even though he was not the preceptor who presided over the ceremony. Thai Sangha Elders have indicated that they consider the bhikkhuni ordinations "void." [Rachapavanavikrom] During their investigation of the matter, Ajahn Brahm states that he described the dual ordination process in which the preceptor, Ayya Tathaaloka, ordained the bhikkhunis and the bhikkhus affirmed such ordination. [Brahm]

Given the above doctrinal positions attributed to the Buddha himself, such vehement opposition may seem surprising. However, there are at least two main arguments against the ordination of women into the Theravada. The first hinges on the dual ordination requirements.

(4) Ordination by the Pali-text rite by a Theravada Bhikkhu Sangha alone (1997 in USA, 2006 in Thailand)

(5) Ordination by the Dharmaguptaka rite by a Dual Sangha of bhikkhunis and bhikkhus followed by a Pali-text dahlakamma conversion rite administered by the Theravada Bhikkhu Sangha (1998 in Bodhgaya, 2002 in Taiwan)

(5) Ordination by the Dharmaguptaka rite by a Bhikkhuni Sangha followed by ordination by the Pali-text rite by a Theravada Bhikkhu Sangha (2004, 2008 in USA)

(7) Ordination by the Pali-text rite by a Dual Sangha of Theravada bhikkhunis and bhikkhus (1999-current in Sri Lanka, 2009-current in Australia, 2010-current in USA, 2014-current in Thailand, planned for 2015 in Indonesia & Germany).

According to Ayya Tathaaloka, the last "reestablished" method is the method that is now prevailing for the ordination of Theravada bhikkhunis.

The *Cullavagga* first sets forth the dual ordination method, then it allows bhikkhus to give ordination. Afterwards, it again mentions bhikkhuni ordination, but by a proceeding where the ordination is done by bhikkhunis, and only confirmed by bhikkhus. Therefore, when the latter method is upheld as the prescription, if there are no fully ordained bhikkhunis in one's lineage and the ordination procedure requires initial ordination by bhikkhunis, then the first cause is forever missing. It is this very logic which has been used to suppress the reinstatement of the bhikkhunis' lineages for over a hundred years. This same logic is also used to invalidate the ordinations that have taken place in recent years because they, by definition, must be traced through other lineages unless they are conducted by the bhikkhu Sangha alone. Some of those monastics who have participated in ordaining Theravada bhikkhunis were themselves ordained via the Pali Theravadan Vinaya lineage, but others by monastics who were ordained via the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya or the Mulasarvastivada.

Related to the dual ordination argument is the argument of schism. That argument rests on the Vinayas' prohibition of ordination and other acts of the Sangha together when there has been a schism. Here the meaning of schism is defined as separate *uposathas*¹² having been conducted within the same *sima*. Thus, if the Sangha was unable to recite the precepts together due to doctrinal differences, that would represent a schism. Although he defends the validity of full ordination of bhikkhunis, Ajahn Sujato acknowledges that the Theravadan Sangha would likely be emphatic in their affirmation that schism has taken place within the Sangha, beginning with the Second Council at which monks who advocated the use of money were said to have been expelled. In fact, the *Dipavamsa*, thought to be one of the earliest Sri Lankan chronicles of

¹² Pali, a day of observance of precepts for lay followers, and recitation of the Patimokkha, to coincide with the new moon, full moon and quarter moons. Sanskrit – upavasati. <http://dsalsrv02.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/search3advanced?dbname=pali&query=uposatha&matchtype=exact&display=utf8>

Buddhism, explicitly states that all schools other than the Theravada arose from schisms. [B. Sujato, Sects and Sectarianism 2010] Many believe that those monks who separated formed what is now known as the Mahayana. That interpretation is erroneous, however. According to contemporary scholarship, there is no Vinaya Sangha extant that descends from the Mahasanghika, the group said to have separated. [Mohr , Tsedroen 2010, 30-31] In addition, scholars seem convinced that there has never been a distinctively “Mahayana Vinaya” or ordination lineage of bhikkhus and bhikkhunis that did not trace itself back to one of the early schools of Buddhism. [Williams, Tribe , Wynne 2012, 74] Of course, this is in some sense intuitive; all Buddhist Sangha are descendants of the Buddha. Typically East Asian traditions, with the exception of various Japanese schools, follow the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya and Central Asian traditions follow the Mulasarvastivada. Each of these arose out of the Sthavira, as did the Theravada Vinaya. [B. Sujato, Sects and Sectarianism 2010]

The second argument is more sociopolitical in that it is actually illegal, in the secular sense, for nuns to be fully ordained in Tibet without government sanction, which is difficult to receive.¹³ There the Chinese occupation and subsequent diaspora complicates a matter which was already somewhat dominated by the first argument above. The Chinese government which now rules Tibet is actively choosing its own spiritual leadership for the monasteries [KQED Frontline], and has issued “press statements calling on cadres to diminish Tibetan religious belief because it is full of ‘deceitfulness, backwardness and poisoning.’” Thus, the flourishing of women’s ordination and practice certainly does not fit into their agenda.

¹³ US Department of State “International Religious Freedom Report 2010” for China including Tibet, Hong Kong and Macau at <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010/148863.htm>

As for the diaspora, the Vinaya Masters of Tibetan lineages have offered “strong resistance” [Mohr , Tsedroen 2010, 268] to the more than four decades of calls for the full ordination of women. They maintain that any ordination must take place purely within the Mulasarvastivadan Vinaya. Other Tibetan masters have said that there is no need for the nuns to be fully ordained. At a 2009 conference in Hamburg which was convened by the 14th Dalai Lama, 65 monks, nuns, and scholars discussed the arguments for and against the ordination of the Tibetan nuns. The vast majority of them spoke on behalf of the women and the legal arguments in favor of reviving the lineage. [Mohr , Tsedroen 2010, 268] However, at its conclusion the Dalai Lama asserted that, even after years of studying this dilemma, he is in support of the nuns but he cannot find the personal authority or the consensus to move forward.¹⁴

In Thailand cultural bias against women became institutionalized when, in 1902, the king established a law called the Sangha Law, giving the government control over the Buddhist Sangha. Since then, Theravadan Buddhism in Thailand has been a State-run affair. Additional Sangha Laws defined the rules of monastic practice, including the requirements for ordination. The Sangha Law also created a council of elders known as the Mahatherasamakhom, which it explicitly defines as men. The secular law forbidding the ordination of women as bhikkhunis was rescinded as unconstitutional 10 years ago. Yet the Theravada bhikkhu elders of the national Supreme Sangha Councils of Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka maintain that the full ordination

¹⁴ HH the Gyalwa Karmapa has recently issued a statement stating his intention to go ahead. See: <http://kagyuoffice.org/gyalwang-karmapa-makes-historic-announcement-on-restoring-nuns-ordination/>.

of women is not legal or authentic, and does not allow for their inclusion in the Sanghas they oversee.¹⁵

That said, it is at times the lay community that fights the hardest against change in the Sangha. In one such example, two young women were ordained as bhikkhunis in 1928 and, as might be expected the monastic community responded with harsh criticism, but the judgment of the public media was even harsher at that time. One news reporter went so far as to call the act, “deserving of the death sentence.” [Strong 2002, 241-243] It would seem that lay supporters sometimes have as much, if not more, interest in maintaining the patriarchal status quo in Thailand.¹⁶ That said, at least one modern day journalist, Sanitsuda Ekachai, has publicly supported the women.

Conclusion

There is a global movement toward re-establishing the full ordination of women in the Theravada, and Aloka Vihara is part of that movement. These bhikkhunis and the people that support them are Theravadan practitioners who are willing to acknowledge the shared heritage of all Buddhist lineages, rather than emphasize their differences. However, there is also global resistance to change, and a powerful monastic and political hierarchy that enforces a centuries old form of oppression. Studying the history of the origins of Buddhist women’s ordinations, and the forms that came down through the centuries does not provide complete clarity. There seem to be doctrinal inconsistencies and the basis for arguments on both sides of this debate. It may take

¹⁵ Wikipedia and Library of Congress Country Study

¹⁶ <http://thediplomat.com/2014/05/the-rise-of-buddhist-feminism>

generations to arrive at a consensus and, in the meantime, sincere women practitioners leave home and follow the Way.

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