The Question of Women in Buddhism
Bhikkhu Analayo

(The following is from a talk by Venerable Analayo given at the IBC in Delhi, early September 2013. It is reproduced here with permission)

The question of the position of women may be one of the greatest challenges Buddhism faces at present. The Buddha himself provided a lofty example by fully recognizing women’s spiritual potential. He had no doubt that their ability to awaken was equal to that of men. Nor did he believe that to be born as a woman is in principle the result of bad karma. That idea is a late intrusion into the Buddhist traditions.

In some respects, the Buddha went along with established conventions concerning gender hierarchy that existed in ancient India and used them as a framework so as not to upset the public. But within this framework he gave full opportunity for women to dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to the path to inner peace and awakening.

According to the discourse that records the last moments of the Buddha’s life, a central concern of the Buddha was to leave behind four assemblies of disciples: bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, and male and female lay followers. He believed that the Dharma will survive if it is lived, practiced, and taught by members of these four assemblies.

At present, probably the most pressing issue in relation to women in Buddhism relates to the bhikkhuni order. This has been lost in the Theravada tradition and has never been established in the Mulasarvastivada tradition in Tibet. Buddhism in these traditions has only three of the four assemblies. This predicament is comparable to a noble four-footed animal like an elephant who has one crippled leg.

The medicine to restore this crippled leg is not easily found. At times, supporters of the bhikkhuni ordination do not fully appreciate the legal problems involved. It is not meaningful to demand changes in the rules to accommodate the ordination of bhikkhunis in a tradition that bases its sense of identity on upholding the ancient rules without change. At times, opponents of the revival or creation of a bhikkhuni order do not fully appreciate the sincerity of those who wish to restore the four assemblies in order to promote the Dharma.

In a recent detailed academic research article published in the Journal of Buddhist Ethics, I come to the conclusion that the bhikkhuni ordinations held in Bodhgaya in 1998 are legally valid. Contrary to popular assumptions, they fully satisfy the requirements of the Theravada Vinaya. In other words, the Theravada order of bhikkhunis has been successfully revived and can fully claim legal recognition. This is a great relief, since it allows restoring the four assemblies without undermining the basis of the Theravada tradition, which is strict adherence
to the Vinaya. In this way, in the Theravada tradition the crippled leg of the elephant’s body is about to heal. Hopefully this process of healing will lead to a similar process of healing in the Mulasarvastivada tradition in Tibet, also.

The modern secular world is in a mess. The recent Bodhgaya bombings show how far things can go. This messy world urgently needs the spread of the peaceful message of the Dharma. For this message to spread, it needs to be carried forward by the four assemblies – monastic and lay, male and female – in all Buddhist traditions.

It is my sincere hope that Buddhists everywhere will pledge to uphold the vision of the founder of Buddhism: a Dharma lived and taught by all four assemblies. I also hope that Buddhists everywhere will do what they can to facilitate dialogue and the exchange of accurate information to ensure that women occupy the positions in Buddhism to which they are entitled. This will be of great benefit for the Dharma, for all Buddhist traditions, and for the world at large.

Bhikkhu Analayo was born 1962 in Germany and completed a PhD in 2000 at the University of Peradeniya in Sri Lanka. His dissertation on the Satipattha-nasutta, the main early Buddhist discourse on mindfulness practice, was published as in 2003. Titled *Satipatthana: The Direct Path to Realization*, it is a central reference for the study and practice of mindfulness meditation, with translations in ten other languages completed or underway. In 2007 at the University of Marburg, he completed postdoctoral studies comparing Chinese, Sanskrit, and Tibetan parallels to the Majjhimanika-ya. Currently, he is a professor of Buddhist Studies and research scholar at Hamburg University and well known meditation teacher in Asia and the West. He is the author of more than 200 academic publications, including many on the Chinese Agamas, meditation, and women in Buddhism.