

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/>

Volume 25, 2018

The Case for Reviving the Bhikkhunī Order by Single Ordination

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The Case for Reviving the Bhikkhunī Order by Single Ordination

Bhikkhu Anālayo¹

Abstract

In this article I examine the legal validity of reviving the Theravāda Order of *bhikkhunīs* by an act of single ordination, granted by *bhikkhus* on their own. My presentation responds to criticism voiced by Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro of this possibility of restoring the missing one out of the four assemblies in the Theravāda tradition.

Introduction

My case for considering the revival of the formerly extinct order of *bhikkhunīs* in the Theravāda tradition as legal is based on a permission given, according to the *Cullavagga*, by the Buddha for *bhikkhus*, on their own, to ordain female candidates. I refer to this as “single ordination,” distinct from “dual ordination,” which requires the collaboration of both orders.

In a monograph published recently, I examined this topic in detail (Anālayo *Bhikkhunī*). Soon after its publication, Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro published a criticism of the single ordination option on his website (“Trojan”).

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In the context of the present paper, I am not able to do full justice to the detailed discussion by Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro. Nor am I able to reflect fully my own detailed presentation. Since both publications are available online, the interested reader could consult these in order to arrive at a more complete picture. The selected instances of criticism that I address here, however, should suffice to show that the position taken by Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro is not conclusive.

For ease of reference during the ensuing discussion, I first summarize the main promulgations made, according to the *Cullavagga*, by the Buddha. The permission for *bhikkhus* to ordain female candidates on their own (“single ordination”) is preceded by the promulgation of a *garudhamma*, a “weighty principle.” This sixth of altogether eight *garudhammas* sanctions “dual ordination.”

The rule on single ordination is followed by two more rules. One of these authorizes dual ordination in “two stages.” The first stage involves the order of *bhikkhunīs*, the second the order of *bhikkhus*. This ruling is meant to avoid embarrassment of female candidates when asked, in front of the *bhikkhus*, intimate questions that are part of the ordination procedure.

If a candidate has gone through the first stage but, due to some danger, is unable to approach the order of *bhikkhus* for the second stage, another rule permits this second part to be performed “by a messenger.” The altogether four relevant promulgations, listed in their chronological order, are thus:

- dual ordination (*garudhamma* 6),
- single ordination,
- dual ordination in two stages, and
- dual ordination with the second stage by a messenger.

The Authorization for Single Ordination

The case for a revival of *bhikkhuni* ordination that I present here relates to the second of these promulgations. This is an authorization which, according to *Cullavagga* (X.2), was given by the Buddha as follows:

anujānāmi, bhikkhave, bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetunti.

Bhikkhus, I authorize the giving of the higher ordination of bhikkhunīs by bhikkhus.

The key question is whether this authorization for single ordination is still valid or else has been implicitly rescinded by the subsequent rule on *bhikkhuni* ordination in two stages. The latter is the position taken by Ṭhānissaro (“On Ordaining” 12), arguing that there is

a principle the Buddha consistently followed in amending rules. In every other case where he amended an already existing rule but wanted to keep both the pre-existing version and the amended version in force, he was careful to delineate the conditions to which the amended version applied, so that the pre-existing version would still be in force in all other situations.

The principle he describes here is based on his own conclusions and not on something explicitly stated in the *Vinaya*. He supports his position with two examples. The second of these is particularly pertinent, since it concerns ordination. It corresponds to the fourth promulgation mentioned in my survey above, when approaching the *bhikkhu* order puts the female candidate in danger. According to *Cullavagga* (X.22), the Buddha authorized that this second part of the ordination can be completed with the help of a messenger:

anujānāmi, bhikkhave, dūtena pi upasampādetunti.

Bhikkhus, I also authorize the giving of the higher ordination by messenger.

Ṭhānissaro (“On Ordaining” 13) notes that the addition of the word “also” (*pi*) shows that the ruling is not meant to rescind the earlier rule on two stages. In the course of his argument, he considers the above formulation with the word “also” to be the final version of the rule.² This is not correct. The above ruling is part of a narrative which continues by reporting the employment of unsuitable messengers. In response to this, the Buddha is on record for formulating the final version of the rule as follows:

anujānāmi, bhikkhave, vyattāya bhikkhuniyā paṭibalāya dūtena upasampādetun ti.

Bhikkhus, I authorize the giving of the higher ordination through an experienced and competent *bhikkhunī* as messenger.

It is after this final formulation of the rule that the transaction statement to be used in such a situation is found. Thus, strictly speaking, the final authorization comes without the term “also.” The fact that this rule is not meant to replace the earlier rule on dual ordination in two stages only becomes clear on consulting the earlier formulation, which is embedded in the narrative leading up to the final formulation, and the subsequent transaction statement. If the final formulation were to be extracted from its context and considered just on its own, its legal relevance would remain unclear.

² This is evident in the statement he makes after translating the above rule. Both together proceed as follows: “I allow, bhikkhus, for Acceptance to be given also [*api*] through a messenger.’—Cv.X.22.1. This statement of the rule is followed by the transaction statement to be used in this situation.” Yet, the transaction statement only comes after the rule has been reformulated in order to exclude unsuitable messengers.

In this way, the case chosen by Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro to determine the criteria for whether a rule is rescinded or not points to the importance of considering the legal implications of a rule in light of the accompanying narrative.

In evaluating the above rules, it is instructive to examine the evolution of *bhikkhu* ordination reported in the *Mahāvagga* (1.28), given that it concerns the same matter of ordination, only differing in that it involves male candidates. The evolution of ordination of male candidates shifts from ordination by going for refuge to a formal transaction with one motion and three proclamations. The *Mahāvagga* reports an explicit indication by the Buddha that with this shift the former method is no longer valid.

*yā sā, bhikkhave, mayā tīhi saraṇagamanehi upasampadā
anuññātā, taṃ ajjatagge paṭikkhipāmi.*

*Bhikkhus, from this day on I abolish the higher ordination
by way of taking the three refuges that I had authorized.*

This is followed by the authorization of the new procedure. Now this long formulation would have been entirely superfluous if it had been clear from the outset that the promulgation of the new procedure automatically rescinded the previous one. Instead, only the authorization of the new procedure would have been required:

*anujānāmi, bhikkhave, ñatticatutthena kammena upasam-
pādetun ti.*

*Bhikkhus, I authorize the giving of the higher ordination by
a formal transaction with one motion and three proclama-
tions.*

The absence of any mention of “also” in this formulation was clearly not considered sufficient to establish that the rule on the three refuges was

abolished. Instead, an explicit statement was felt to be required to ensure that the fact of abolishment was unmistakably expressed.

Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 12) notes this explicit statement as exemplifying a pattern that “when the Buddha totally rescinded a rule, *he would say so explicitly.*” Now the present case is simply a shift in ordination procedure, as is the case with the rules on *bhikkhuni* ordination under discussion. If automatic rescinding should be considered the invariable pattern for such rules, the explicit rescinding in the present case would have been redundant.

Applying what emerges in this way to the situation of *bhikkhuni* ordination, it becomes clear that, even though there is no explicit marker that the rule on single ordination is still in force, there is also no clear indication that it has been abolished. It is for this reason that in Anālayo (“Cullavagga” 417 note 17) I commented

Ṭhānissaro “On Ordaining” (12) argues that “to assert that the Buddha did not want Cv.X.17.2 (the rule for double ordination) to rescind Cv.X.2.1 (the rule for unilateral ordination), but forgot to limit the conditions under which Cv.X.17.2 would apply, is to assert that he was thoughtless and careless.” One could similarly argue that for the Buddha not to make more explicit his presumed wish that the rule on single ordination be rescinded is thoughtless.

In sum, as there is neither an explicit abolishment of single ordination nor a marker of its continuous validity, further examination is required. Such examination naturally proceeds to the narrative context. Before turning to that, however, I want to clarify two methodological issues raised by Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro, concerning historical-critical as against legal readings and the value of *Vinaya* narrative for interpreting a rule.

Historical-critical and Legal Readings

In my writings on *Vinaya*, I distinguish between two types of reading. One of these is “historical-critical,” which employs comparative study of parallel versions in order to understand the evolution of a text, often used to distinguish earlier and later layers. The other is “legal,” which relies on the text of a single *Vinaya* in order to discern its legal implications for those who have been ordained based on this *Vinaya*.

Thānissaro (“Trojan” 38) presents his discussion of these two readings under the premise: “Does Anālayo actually observe, as he claims, a strict separation between the two modes of scholarship?”

The premise he formulates does not reflect my position. The distinction between these two modes of reading does not mean that there must be a strict separation and they cannot inform each other. It only means that a historical-critical reading cannot determine questions of legal validity. But it obviously can provide additional information, which is precisely why I employ it in a subsidiary role when discussing legal matters.

This can conveniently be seen in my recently published study (*Bhikkhuni*), whose overall concern is a legal reading. Yet, when this seems relevant, I refer to my comparative studies. But each time I clearly point out that I am shifting gears, so to say, and that what I present now is the comparative perspective. An example in case is my discussion of the prediction of decline, according to which the Buddha supposedly held the founding of an order of *bhikkhunīs* responsible for a halving of the lifespan of his dispensation (a topic to which I return below). The relevant part in Anālayo (*Bhikkhuni* 110) reads:

Based on a comparative study of this prediction in the different *Vinayas*, I have come to the conclusion that . . . as far as I am able to tell, the prediction of decline is not an

authentic record of what the Buddha actually said. However, in what follows I will be taking the account in the *Cullavagga* at its face value, since my task is to arrive at a coherent reading of the Pāli canonical text as it has come down.

This example suffices to show that I clearly acknowledge that, regardless of the results of my comparative studies, a legal reading of the Pāli *Vinaya*, in the form it has come down, is alone binding.

The Relevance of the Narrative Context

Another methodological clarification concerns what value the narrative context has for understanding a rule. In reply to several cases cited by Brahmāli (235–244), supporting the significance of the narrative for understanding a rule, Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 8–10) points out a number of examples where the narrative does not fulfil this role, such as, when a narrative has no real connection to the rule.

The narrative related to the rule on single ordination, however, fits none of the type of counterexamples quoted by Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro. For this reason, I can leave it up to Bhikkhu Brahmāli to respond, if he wishes, to Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro on the question of the general applicability of narratives for interpreting rules in the *Khandhaka*. As far as the present case is concerned, I consider it reasonable to follow Brahmāli (244) in that

the narratives and the rules in the *Khandhakas* need to be read as an integrated whole . . . the *Khandhaka* narrative within which the rules on *bhikkhunī* ordination are embedded needs to be considered to gain a proper perspective on the legal significance of these rules.

The Narrative

The actual narrative could be summarized as follows: In reply to a request by Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha granted her ordination on the condition that she accepts the undertaking of eight *garudhammas*. The sixth of these is that female candidates, who have undertaken the probationary training, should be ordained by both the order of *bhikkhus* and the order of *bhikkhunīs*. In terms of the four regulations surveyed at the outset of the present article, *garudhamma* 6 sanctions “dual ordination.”

Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī accepted, but was unable to act in accordance with *garudhamma* 6. She was the only *bhikkhunī* in existence at that time. There were no other *bhikkhunīs* who could join her to form an order of *bhikkhunīs*, required to collaborate with the order of *bhikkhus* to grant dual ordination to her five hundred followers.

Predictably, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī had to approach the Buddha and request guidance. In reply, the Buddha promulgated the authorization on single ordination, according to which *bhikkhus* should give ordination to the female candidates on their own.

Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 16) holds that this authorization “was implemented as a temporary, stopgap measure.” In previous publications I argued that such a conclusion is problematic, because it paints the Buddha as a bad legislator. The problem is that he had explicitly made the acceptance of these eight *garudhammas* the condition for Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī to be ordained.

If the rule on single ordination was just a “temporary, stopgap measure,” it follows that the Buddha had made a major blunder. He completely overlooked the fact that he was asking Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī to accept as “a principle to be revered, respected, honoured, venerated, and not to be transgressed” (as per the pericope attached to the formulation of the *garudhammas*) something that was flatly impossible for her in

that situation. On realizing his own oversight, the Buddha was then supposedly forced to devise a “temporary, stopgap measure.”

According to Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 21), we should consider the “temporary alternative that he chose as more in line with his intentions for the training of the bhikkhunīs.” This is hardly convincing and does not solve the problem. On this reasoning, the Buddha’s supposed intentions for training the *bhikkhunīs* forced him to resort to this “temporary, stopgap measure,” even though he could have avoided the problem by formulating the *garudhamma* differently. Another alternative would have been for the Buddha himself to grant ordination to the followers of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī. That would have dispensed with any need to give a special authorization to the *bhikkhus*. Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 21) objects:

If the Buddha had ordained the bhikkhunīs himself, their training would have been his direct responsibility. Given their numbers, this would have been an overwhelming task. At the same time, by formulating a rule for unilateral ordination, the Buddha was implementing one half of Garudhamma 6, getting the bhikkhus accustomed to the role they would play in overseeing the bhikkhunīs in the future. None of this would have been the case had he chosen either of Anālayo’s alternatives.

There seems to be no reason why the Buddha could not have ordained the five hundred followers of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and then delegated their training. As to the second point, this is covered in one of my alternatives (Anālayo *Vinaya* 263; also “Cullavagga” 413 and *Bhikkhunī* 126):

A simple alternative would have been for the Buddha to formulate *garudhamma* 6 in a different way. He could have simply stipulated the need for female candidates to receive

ordination from *bhikkhus*, without mentioning any cooperation by *bhikkhunīs*.

This is in fact the formulation found in some other *Vinayas* (Anālayo *Foundation* 96f). That would have provided the opportunity for the *bhikkhus* to become “accustomed to the role they would play in overseeing the *bhikkhunīs* in the future,” which Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro considers to be required. It would also have made the situation clear for Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, without any need for her to return to the Buddha for further clarification on how to proceed with her five hundred followers.

In sum, the problem of interpreting the narrative in such a way that the Buddha is not portrayed as a thoughtless legislator remains a challenge that the arguments by Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro have not been able to resolve.

The pattern of first asking Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī to accept *garudhamma* 6 and then issuing an authorization for *bhikkhus* on their own to ordain female candidates makes better sense if this authorization is meant to be relevant in future times as well, when the basic procedure of dual ordination cannot be followed. On this reading, the Buddha is not presented as a thoughtless legislator. Instead, he is considered to have intentionally created a situation for further regulation that clarifies how to act when the basic procedure of dual ordination is impossible.

This reading has already been proposed by the venerable U Nārada Mahāthera, also known as the Mingun Jetavan Sayādaw, in a commentary on the *Milindapañha* written in Pāli and originally published in 1949. According to U Nārada Mahāthera, the purpose of the rule on single ordination was precisely to ensure that a *bhikkhunī* order could be revived at a later time (Anālayo *Bhikkhunī* 198). Further evaluation of his suggestion requires a closer look at the nature of the *garudhammas*.

The Nature of the *Garudhammas*

The *garudhammas* are of a somewhat special character and are not “rules” in themselves. They were formulated in relation to someone who at the time of their promulgation was still a lay person, namely Mahāpajāpati Gotamī. As I pointed out in *Anālayo* (*Foundation* 114 note 73), the Pāli commentary “notes that the *garudhammas* are the only pre-emptive type of regulation found in the Theravāda *Vinaya*.”

Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 8) seems to have misunderstood this, as he argues that rules not promulgated in response to some misdeed show that I am mistaken. Yet, my point here is not just the idea of a rule being promulgated in response to some misdeed, but also the fact that the *garudhammas* are formulated for someone who is not yet a monastic. It is in this sense that the promulgation of the *garudhammas* “differs from the standard procedure of laying down rules recorded elsewhere in the *Vinaya*.”

In addition to this difference, although several *garudhammas* have counterparts among the *pācittiyas*, the *garudhammas* themselves are not found in the code of rules and their transgression does not result in the need for a formal act of disclosure or in some form of invalidation of a legal act. Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 15) reasons that

Garudhamma 6 is a *garudhamma*, which means that it is not a rule. Instead, it is a principle that the Buddha formulated as part of his ultimate vision for how the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha should be governed. This means further that the remaining rules *do not rescind or modify this garudhamma*. They are simply ways of embodying it in legal form as explicit allowances.

Although the *garudhammas* are indeed somewhat unique and do not fit the pattern of other rules, and they are indeed formulated as part of the Buddha’s vision of what was to come, it does not follow that they could

not in principle be rescinded or modified by the Buddha. Moreover, even though the *garudhammas* are not “rules,” they are nevertheless legally binding. This distinction needs to be clearly kept in mind.

The question of abolishing or rescinding a *garudhamma* in fact comes up right away in the next section of the *Cullavagga*. It reports that Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī asked Ānanda to request the Buddha to abolish *garudhamma* 1 concerning the paying of respect between *bhikkhunīs* and *bhikkhus*. The Buddha refused, thereby making it clear that *garudhamma* 1 has to be followed.

Now Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī would hardly have made her request, had she been aware that the *garudhammas* cannot be abolished. Moreover, the Buddha is on record for explaining why he chose not to abolish it, rather than declaring that in principle a *garudhamma* can never be abolished. In sum, the episode gives the impression that, in principle, a *garudhamma* could have been abolished by the Buddha.

If a *garudhamma* can be abolished, it would follow that it should also be open to modification. Here the counterparts found for some *garudhammas* among the *pācittiyas* can be consulted. The promulgation of a corresponding *pācittiya* rule is to some extent a modification, since it implies that, from now on, failure to perform the prescribed action requires a formal act of disclosure in front of a fellow *bhikkhunī*. This was not the case before the promulgation of the *pācittiya*, when the same behavior was only a failure to implement the corresponding *garudhamma* but carried no consequences.

Yet, according to Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 21), “the *garudhammas* all provide the opportunity to provide additional legislation alongside them.” In other words, according to his assessment a *garudhamma* has no legal repercussions on its own. For it to be legally binding, additional

legislation is needed. In the case of *garudhamma* 6, according to Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 26),

Even though the *garudhamma* mentioned that *bhikkhus* would play a role in the acceptance of *bhikkhunīs*, they had no authority to play any role until the Buddha had specifically set down a rule allowing them to.

This suggestion can be examined by consulting the narratives related to several *pācittiya* rules that correspond to *garudhammas*, in order to ascertain whether the *garudhammas* were already legally binding on their own or else required additional legislation in order to become operative.

According to *garudhamma* 3, the *bhikkhunīs* should inquire from the *bhikkhus* about the date of the observance day and come for exhortation. The *Vinaya* reports that, when some *bhikkhunīs* failed to do so, the *bhikkhus* complained about it (which then motivated the Buddha to promulgate *pācittiya* rule 59 for *bhikkhunīs*):

*kathaṃ hi nāma bhikkhuniyo uposatham pi na pucchissanti
ovādam pi na yācissantī ti.*

How can these *bhikkhunīs* not enquire about [the date of] the observance day and not request exhortation?

To the best of my knowledge, the enquiry about the date of the observance day only comes up in this rule. Judging from the introductory narration and the complaint of the *bhikkhus*, this enquiry was already being undertaken prior to the promulgation of this rule. Such previous practice must have been based on *garudhamma* 3.

In the case of exhortation, other relevant regulations are found in *pācittiyas* 21 and 22 for *bhikkhus*. The narrative introducing the first of these two (which is clearly the earlier one) reports that elder *bhikkhus* were exhorting the *bhikkhunīs*. This in turn conveys the impression that

exhortation was already in practice. Independent of whether we consider the episode leading to *pācittiya* rule 21 for bhikkhus to be earlier or later than the episode leading to *pācittiya* rule 59 for *bhikkhunīs*, the exhortation appears to have been undertaken based on *garudhamma* 3. It did not require additional legislation.

In fact, the episode of the promulgation of the *garudhammas* as principles to be accepted by Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī in order to become a *bhikkhunī* could hardly be about principles that had no applicability unless further legislation occurred. Having become a *bhikkhunī*, she would anyway have had to follow whatever rules the Buddha promulgated. Therefore, the request for her to accept the *garudhammas* makes sense if they had some consequences on their own, as guidelines to be observed from that moment onwards.

These considerations in turn make it safe to conclude that the promulgation of *garudhamma* 6 was sufficient ground for dual ordination to take place. It did not require additional legislation.³

In sum, stating that a *garudhamma* is not a “rule” does not imply that it has no legal significance. There is therefore no reason to assume that it could not be modified. It follows that Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 19) is not correct in assuming that “none of the rules about Acceptance amended or replaced the *garudhamma*.”⁴

³ It is also incorrect for Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 19) to argue that my position implies that the rule on single ordination “effectively, is not a rule only for unilateral ordination but also for dual ordination.” The same misunderstanding of my position is repeated in Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 23). That is not the case. The principle of dual ordination has been sanctioned with *garudhamma* 6 already. The rule on single ordination authorized single ordination. It did not authorize dual ordination.

⁴ This also shows that an objection by Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 20) to the problem of depicting the Buddha as a bad legislator does not work, as it is also based on his misunderstanding of the nature of *garudhamma* 6.

Based on the clarification that a *garudhamma* can be modified by the Buddha, just as any rule, the situation that emerges from the narrative points to a foundational regulation enshrined in *garudhamma* 6 that is followed by a specific modification authorizing *bhikkhus* on their own to ordain female candidates.

This is the position taken by U Nārada Mahāthera: *garudhamma* 6 is the *mūlapaññatti*, the “fundamental prescription,” and the subsequent rules on *bhikkhunī* ordination are supplementary prescriptions, *anupaññatti* (Anālayo *Bhikkhunī* 186).

Notably, the same position has been taken more recently by the State Saṅgha Mahānāyaka Committee in a document on the topic of *bhikkhunī* ordination, published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the government of Myanmar. Although their general conclusions do not agree with those of U Nārada Mahāthera, they concord with him that the rule on single ordination is a supplementary prescription, based on *garudhamma* 6 (*Bhikkhunīvinicchaya* 14).

The Implementation of Dual Ordination

Now the rule on single ordination authorized the *bhikkhus* to give ordination on their own. However, once an order of *bhikkhunīs* had come into existence through the assistance of the *bhikkhus*, the new *bhikkhunīs* would have been under obligation to follow *garudhamma* 6. This means that they had to ensure that a female candidate, who had undertaken the probationary training, received ordination from both orders.⁵

⁵ This is implied by the formulation of *garudhamma* 6: *dve vassāni chasu dhammesu sikkhitasikkhāya sikkhamānāya ubhato saṅghe upasampadā pariyesitabbā*, “a probationer who has trained for two years in six principles should seek higher ordination from both orders.”

The same need is in fact a continuous element, even after further rulings on conducting dual ordination in two stages. Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 19) rightly points to

the origin story to Pācittiya 21, which stipulates that the bhikkhu instructing the bhikkhunīs must ask them if the eight garudhammas were still being kept up. This clearly implies that the garudhammas are still in force. The rules that implement a garudhamma do not rescind it.

In this way, the *bhikkhunīs* continue to be under the obligation to ensure that both orders are involved in the ordination. They are not free to grant ordination by themselves, nor can they leave the matter entirely in the hands of the *bhikkhus*. But the form of dual ordination to be followed has in the meantime been modified. Such modification does not stand in contradiction to the origin story to *pācittiya* 21, mentioned by Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro. The basic principle enshrined in *garudhamma* 6 remains the same: dual ordination (plus the probationary training).

It would have been contrary to *garudhamma* 6 if the *bhikkhunīs* had continued to send female candidates to the *bhikkhus* for single ordination. The *bhikkhus* on their side could safely be expected to have wanted to support the *bhikkhunīs* in adhering to the *garudhammas*. This would have made it preferable, from the perspective of both orders, to shift to dual ordination as soon as this was possible. In other words, following the narrative in the *Cullavagga* in the way it has evolved up to the present juncture, it could be expected that, from then onwards, dual ordinations were held.

The translation by Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 14) is not entirely accurate: “Only after a female trainee has trained in the six precepts for two years can she request Acceptance [full ordination] from both Saṅghas,” as the original has no explicit reference to “only” and the formulation “can she request” does not fully convey the sense of *pariyesitabbā*.

There are in fact indications that support this impression, found in relation to the inquiry about stumbling blocks. Such inquiry is meant to prevent ordination being granted to candidates with diseases or other defects. *Cullavagga* X.17 reports the Buddha authorizing the form in which such an inquiry should be presented to female candidates. The inquiry involves a series of questions, the last of which is:

kā nāmā te pavattinī ti?

What is the name of your female preceptor?

This implies that, at a time when only *garudhamma* 6 and the authorization for *bhikkhus* to give ordination on their own had been promulgated, there was already a female preceptor involved in the ordination of female candidates. Nevertheless, this does not in itself entail an active participation of the order of *bhikkhunīs* in the ordination.

Another indication occurs when the female candidates are embarrassed on being asked about the stumbling blocks, some of which are on matters of an intimate nature. The *Cullavagga* introduces this episode with the following phrasing:

*tena kho pana samayena bhikkhū bhikkhunīnaṃ antarāyike
dhamme pucchanti.*

At that time the *bhikkhus* asked among the *bhikkhunīs* about the stumbling blocks.

The term *bhikkhunīnaṃ* is curious, since these are stumbling blocks for candidates, not for *bhikkhunīs* themselves. Moreover, the stumbling blocks have just been listed, leaving no need for them to be qualified further to ensure clarity to whom they apply. This makes it possible, although far from certain, that the idea is rather that the *bhikkhus* did not ask the candidates directly, but instead asked the *bhikkhunīs* who had brought the candidates for ordination. The *bhikkhunīs* would then in turn have in-

quired of the candidates. In the ancient Indian setting this would have been a perfectly normal procedure.

Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 26) considers it “more natural that the candidates would be unable to answer when asked the embarrassing questions by the bhikkhus, and not when bhikkhunīs were answering for them.” This does not appreciate that, in order for the *bhikkhunīs* to answer on behalf of the candidates, they would of course have to question them directly. The ensuing narrative in fact shows that when candidates were interrogated by *bhikkhunīs*, even without any *bhikkhus* present, they were still embarrassed.

Another objection to this interpretation by Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 25) takes the following form:

‘Bhikkhunīs’ stumbling blocks’ doesn’t necessarily have to mean stumbling blocks *for* bhikkhunīs. The genitive in Pāli can also mean, “pertaining to,” “belonging to,” or “related to.” In Pāli syntax it would be perfectly acceptable to refer to “bhikkhunīs’ stumbling blocks” as a quick, short-hand way of referring to the questions specifically for bhikkhuni ordination . . . [Moreover] the listing of stumbling blocks given in the narrative contains two types of questions: those specifically for female candidates, and those that the female candidates have in common with male ones. So it is not superfluous to mention which questions were the ones that caused embarrassment. They were the sexually explicit ones.

Even on the alternative meaning of the genitive, the phrase does not really work so well, because, after all, the stumbling blocks pertain to, belong to, or are related to female candidates for ordination and not to *bhikkhunīs*. Taking the case of one of the diseases that are stumbling

blocks, if it should turn out that an already-ordained *bhikkhunī* has such a disease, no consequence would result from that. This is because these do not cause a *bhikkhunī* to stumble, so to say. They only make a candidate for ordination stumble.

Throughout the remainder of this section of the *Cullavagga*, the candidates are consistently referred to as *upasampadāpekkhā*, “those who want to be higher ordained.” They are not referred to as *bhikkhunīs*, and quite correctly so. On taking the *Vinaya* text literally as it is, this prevents considering the reference to *bhikkhunīs* just prior to the mention of the stumbling blocks as referring to the candidates.

The second argument by Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro does not work well, because it would imply that the *bhikkhus* asked the candidates only about those stumbling blocks that are specific to female candidates and not those in common with male candidates. This would have been an improper procedure.

It would also not work to assume that the phrase in question is meant to convey that, even though all stumbling blocks were stated, the embarrassment occurred right at the time when those specific to female candidates were spoken. To convey that sense, the Pāli phrase would have to involve a *yasmiṃ samaye* construction instead of beginning with *tena kho pana samayena*.

Given that the two objections do not really hold, it seems indeed possible that the *bhikkhunīs* were already involved to some extent in the actual granting of ordination. This would then have continued until the need for further legislation arose due to the introduction of the questions regarding stumbling blocks. The resultant legislation is indeed not just about dual ordination, but about two stages in such dual ordination that aim to avoid the potential embarrassment of female candidates.

In sum, if there are no *bhikkhunīs*, there is nobody who has the obligation to ‘revere, respect, honour, venerate, and not transgress’ the *garudhammas*. In that situation, there are only *bhikkhus* who have the right to ordain on their own, based on the authorization given by the Buddha on single ordination. Once such ordaining has brought into being an order of *bhikkhunīs*, however, these need to ‘revere, respect, honour, venerate, and not transgress’ *garudhamma* 6. This is legally binding on them, even though, as mentioned above, there is no explicitly mentioned consequence for a case of transgression. Still, it is clear that *bhikkhunīs* should not just ordain a female candidate on their own, and they should also not just send such a candidate to the *bhikkhus* for single ordination.

Lack of Specifications about Ordination Procedure

The assumption that dual ordination was already in practice before the promulgation of the rule on ordination in two stages would imply that *garudhamma* 6 was the only directive employed for such purposes. Here it needs to be kept in mind that, at this early stage in the evolution of the Buddhist monastic community, regulations were not necessarily as clearly defined and detailed as they became in later times.

As noted by Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 15), the formulation of the rule on single ordination just refers to “*bhikkhus*,” whereas the next rule on ordination in two stages speaks of the “order of *bhikkhus*.” Such an increasing degree of formalization and precision is in line with a general tendency for matters during an early period of the monastic orders to be less precise and detailed.⁶ For instance, in the case of the boundary (*sīmā*)

⁶ It does not imply, *pace* Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 22), that the rule on single ordination must be a make-shift solution. Although in *Cullavagga* X similar formulations are used for temporary regulations, *Cullavagga* X.6 (below cases 1 to 3) and X.8 (case 4) employs this

to be established for holding ordinations, Chung and Kieffer-Pülz (14) explain that:

Originally, “the residence” (*āvāsa*) in which Buddhist monks had their dwelling-places delimited the space within which the monks had to assemble as a “complete community” (skt. *samagra saṃgha*, pā. *samagga saṃgha*) for “ecclesiastical acts” (skt. *karma*, pā. *kamma*), as for example the “ordination ceremony” (*upasaṃpadā*), the “observance day” (skt. *poṣatha*, pā. *uposatha*) etc. This area was later defined more precisely by determining a “boundary” (*sīmā*) with “marks” (*nimitta*) which indicated the border of the *āvāsa*. Still later, the *sīmā* gained a life of its own and was determined irrespective of the extension of the residence.

The rule on ordination in two stages takes its occasion from the entry of undesirable members into the order of *bhikkhunīs*. For this to happen, it can safely be assumed that quite some time had elapsed since the founding of the order.

Another indication in this respect is an episode in *Cullavagga* X.8, concerning a pupil of Uppalavaṇṇā who for seven years had been unable to memorize the *Vinaya*. Although the sequence of episodes reported in the *Cullavagga* is probably not meant to follow a strict chronology, there is an overall tendency to proceed from earlier to later events. This makes it probable, although not certain, that the episode involving this pupil took place before the promulgation of ordination in two stages.

type of formulation for legislating what appear to be permanent authorizations: 1) *anujānāmi, bhikkhave, bhikkhūhi bhikkhunīnaṃ ācikkhituṃ: evaṃ pātimokkhaṃ uddiseyyāthā ti*; 2) *anujānāmi, bhikkhave, bhikkhūhi bhikkhunīnaṃ ācikkhituṃ: evaṃ āpattiṃ paṭikareyyāthā ti*; 3) *anujānāmi, bhikkhave, bhikkhūhi bhikkhunīnaṃ ācikkhituṃ: evaṃ kammaṃ kareyyāthā ti*; and 4) *anujānāmi, bhikkhave, bhikkhūhi bhikkhunīnaṃ vinayaṃ vācetun ti*.

In sum, it seems fair to assume that quite some time passed between the rule on single ordination and the rule on two stages in dual ordination. In view of this, it is less surprising that we find no detailed explanation for how dual ordination, sanctioned by *garudhamma* 6, should be executed. In other words, it is not necessary to expect, as Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 26) does, that “there would have had to have been rulings on what role they were to play: Were they allowed to voice objections and bring the procedure to a halt? How were the *bhikkhunī* intermediaries chosen? And so forth.” Comparable to the gradual evolution of legislation concerning the delimitating of the space for ordination, mentioned above, protocols employed in later times need not have been in use already at such early stages. A simple application of the procedure already in use for ordaining male candidates could have been employed for dual ordination, without a need for extensive additional legislation.

Modifying *Garudhamma* 6

The survey so far supports the reasoning by U Nārada Mahāthera that *garudhamma* 6 served as the foundational promulgation that was then modified by subsequent rules on single *bhikkhunī* ordination, dual ordination in two stages, and ordination through a messenger.

Now Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 12–15) formulates what he considers to be several “patterns of legislative procedure” regarding how rules are rescinded or modified. Since he has made it clear that the *garudhammas* are not rules, it seems safe to assume that his arguments are not meant to apply to them. In fact, as discussed above, Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro holds that *garudhammas* can in principle not be rescinded or modified.

However, in the case of *garudhamma* 6 he provides an additional argument. According to Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 24), the subsequent rule on ordination in two stages,

on formal terms, cannot be viewed as a modification of Garudhamma 6, both for the reason that it is a rule whereas the garudhamma is not, and for the reason that, if it were a modification of the garudhamma, it would have been a full restatement, with modifications, of the garudhamma.

He does not give further details regarding how *garudhamma* 6 should have been restated if a modification took place. The rule on two stages reaffirms the basic principle of dual ordination, so in that respect it does restate it. What it fails to mention is the probationary period. As I mentioned in Anālayo (*Bhikkhunī* 98–100), it is in fact not entirely certain that the probationary training was indeed part of the formulation of *garudhamma* 6 from the outset.

Perhaps then the above assessment by Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro could be taken as confirming the impression that the reference to the probationary training is a later addition to *garudhamma* 6. Although there are other reasons why I consider this a probable scenario, I would hesitate to draw a definite conclusion here.

In fact, the idea of a full restatement, supposedly a required element for considering the rule on two stages to be a modification of *garudhamma* 6, is not found in the modification of that rule on two stages by introducing the alternative of employing a messenger. At the outset of this article, I translated both the earlier and the final versions of this rule. Neither amounts to a full restatement of the rule on two stages in dual ordination, as they do not mention that the candidate needs to be higher ordained on one side and cleared in the *bhikkhunī* order (*ekato-upasampannāya bhikkhunīsāṅghe visuddhāya*). Clearly, the two formulations of the rule

on employing a messenger do not involve a full restatement of the rule on ordination in two stages.

In sum, here and elsewhere, Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro's perception of invariable patterns that, according to his view, are inherent in *Vinaya* law, are not necessarily the final word on the matter. On closer inspection, they might turn out to be far less self-evident than he seems to think. The rule on ordination in two stages is indeed a modification of *garudhamma* 6, as it introduces the two-stage procedure to the already sanctioned dual ordination. This is unfortunately lost from sight if one fails to recognize that the *garudhammas*, despite not being rules, do have legal relevance.

The Intention Behind the Rules on Bhikkhunī Ordination

By way of presenting a background for evaluating the significance of the altogether four promulgations on *bhikkhunī* ordination, in *Anālayo* ("Validity" 21) I suggested that

all of these four regulations have as their purpose the facilitation of ordination of *bhikkhunīs*, not its prevention. This makes it to my mind rather doubtful that an interpretation of any of these rules as completely and definitely preventing any ordination of *bhikkhunīs* does full justice to them.

Ṭhānissaro ("Trojan" 18) replies that this

ignores the specific rules placing restrictions on *bhikkhunī* ordination, such as those regarding the need for a qualified sponsor . . . It ignores one of the basic principles underlying the rules surrounding all Community transactions: They exist not only to facilitate the procedure in question, but

also—by establishing the basic requirements for a valid transaction—to mark it as invalid when those requirements are not met.

This reply concerns a different issue. The suggestion that the four regulations on *bhikkhunī* ordination are throughout concerned with facilitating such ordination does not stand in contrast to other rules that stipulate some restrictions. These restrictions are meant to facilitate the proper carrying out of ordinations, rather than preventing them wholesale.

The situation could be compared to the difference between a speed limit and a driving ban. The problem is not limits of some type, but the assumption that a particular rule makes it totally impossible to grant ordination at all. This is an interpretation that runs counter to the overall intention of all of the main promulgations that, according to the *Cullavagga*, the Buddha made on the topic of *bhikkhunī* ordination.

Training of Bhikkhunīs

Another objection by Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 27) concerns the need to ensure that the members of a revived order of *bhikkhunīs* receive proper training. In reply to an earlier response by me to this type of objection, he states that:

Anālayo’s response shows a total lack of appreciation for what training entails. Nowhere does the Vinaya state that eight- or ten-precept nuns are qualified to train *bhikkhunīs* . . . there is no precedent in the Canon on which to base the argument that eight- or ten-precept nuns could act as qualified teachers for *bhikkhunīs*.

This objection is based on a misunderstanding. I did not propose that eight- or ten-precept nuns train *bhikkhunīs*. My suggestion was rather that the first generation of *bhikkhunīs* resulting from the recent revival of *bhikkhunī* ordination had previously been senior eight- or ten-precept nuns and thus brought with them many years of monastic experience. In addition, they received training from compassionate *bhikkhus* who were willing to help them gain expertise in those aspects of monastic conduct with which they were not yet familiar from their experience of being eight- or ten-precept nuns.

By now, these *bhikkhunīs* have twenty years of seniority and are well able to train others. In both Sri Lanka and Thailand, *bhikkhunīs* have meanwhile gained themselves a reputation for their good conduct. To the best of my knowledge, so far no scandal has emerged of the type that regularly manifests due to irresponsible members of the order of *bhikkhus*. Thus, the whole discussion about the need to ensure proper training is not fully in keeping with the current reality.

The revival of the *bhikkhunī* tradition could be considered in the light of the revival of strict discipline in the forest traditions of Sri Lanka and Thailand. The first generation of these forest *bhikkhus* were not able to avail themselves of proper training from *bhikkhu* teachers really qualified in the maintenance of strict discipline and thus did not have the benefit of living in dependence (*nissaya*) on an exemplary teacher whose conduct they could emulate.

According to Carrithers (139), lacking exemplary teachers the first forest monks of Sri Lanka “took their inspiration from the Jātakas perhaps, but their organization from the Vinaya and their practice from the Visud-dhimagga.” Regarding the forest tradition of Thailand, Taylor (303) reports that

forest monks of both *nikaai* in the lineage of Ajaan Man refer to the pristine *winai* and so-called *dhutanga* as their charter, the ‘forest discipline.’ These are the particular rules and regulations which Man re-enacted from his, and Ajaan Sao’s, own understanding of the *vinaya* texts available to them at the time.

This puts into perspective the position taken by Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 27) that the training available in personal relationship between student and teacher “cannot be gained through books or Dhamma talks.” In spite of having started out without the traditional type of personal training under an exemplary teacher and basing themselves on books instead, the forest tradition has developed successfully. By now its members have acquired sufficient seniority to be able to provide proper training for disciples who live in dependence on them. At least to some extent, this provides a precedent for the first generation of *bhikkhunīs*.

Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 2) also notes that “the Buddha made no provision for reviving the Bhikkhu Saṅgha in case it died out after he died.” That is only to be expected, given that the order of *bhikkhus* came into existence first and is hierarchically in a higher position. For this reason, they can revive an extinct *bhikkhunī* order, but the reverse is not possible.

The Disappearance of the True Dharma

Another aspect in evaluating the revival of the *bhikkhunī* order is the prediction of the disappearance of the true Dhamma, already mentioned briefly above. According to the *Cullavagga*, the Buddha predicted that this would occur after 500 years, due to the founding of an order of *bhikkhunīs*. Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 28) reasons:

as SN 16:13 shows, the ‘disappearance of the True Dhamma’ does not mean that no traces of True Dhamma remain. Instead, it means that counterfeit Dhamma has arisen . . . the Buddha’s prediction in Cv X.1.6—that the founding of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha would cause the True Dhamma to disappear in 500 years—was actually quite prescient, in that it was approximately 500 years after his death that the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* first appeared.

Since he already made this suggestion in an earlier internet posting, Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 29) then comments, in regard to Anālayo (*Foundation*), that in that publication

he doesn’t even acknowledge the existence of the criticism I made. To simply ignore a reasonable criticism of his ‘historical-critical’ argument in this way is bad enough. It shows that he is not really serious about pursuing a historical-critical approach to the texts. However, to ignore two reminders about the Canon’s meaning for the phrase, ‘disappearance of the True Dhamma,’ and to continue using a false meaning of the phrase to discredit the Canon, is something much worse. It moves beyond mere negligence to a lack of honesty.

The above is one in a number of instances of personal accusations in Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan”). I have decided not to respond to such criticism *ad hominem* in an attempt to bring an element of de-escalation to the already emotionally charged topic of the legality of *bhikkhunī* ordination.

Regarding the argument itself, I admit I had so far not considered the idea of putting all of the blame on *Prajñāpāramitā* texts as an instance of “reasonable criticism,” as it had appeared to me to be just another instance of polemics. Be it reasonable or not, closer inspection shows that

the Pāli discourse quoted does not support the argument. The relevant passage in the *Samyutta-nikāya* (SN 16.13) reads:

*na tāva, kassapa, saddhammassa antaradhānaṃ hoti yāva na
saddhammapaṭirūpakaṃ loke uppajjati.*

Kassapa, the true Dharma does not disappear so long as a counterfeit of the true Dharma has not arisen in the world.

The prediction of decline in *Cullavagga* X.1 reads:

*na dāni, ānanda, brahmacariyaṃ ciraṭṭhitikaṃ bhavissati, pañc'
eva dāni, ānanda, vassasatāni saddhammo ṭhassati.*

Ānanda, the celibate life will not be of long duration;
Ānanda, the true Dharma will last only five hundred years.

The terminology employed is different. The *Cullavagga* seems to be concerned with the *brahmacariya*, the “celibate life” or “holy life” as a foundation of the true Dharma that is in danger, and not with any counterfeit Dharma, be it *Prajñāpāramitā* or any other text.

Conclusion

After all this arguing forth and back, it is a relief to conclude on a note of concord. Ṭhānissaro (“Trojan” 4) affirms that “the prospect of being able to provide full ordination for women is an attractive one.” This is indeed the case and the foregoing should hopefully have shown that his apprehensions regarding the legality of the restoration of the missing one out of the four assemblies are understandable but, fortunately, unfounded.

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