



Female Practitioners at the Crossroad: The Organization and Identification of Bhikkhunis in Taiwan

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Abstract

Buddhist nuns in Taiwan have shouldered educational, cultural, economic, and social responsibilities, in such a way that Chinese Buddhism has been transformed in Taiwan and overseas. In recent years, nuns in Taiwan have established various associations to accomplish their goals and satisfy their needs. This paper will focus on three main questions: 1. How can a Buddhist organization be distinguished from a temple? 2. Does the constitution of female Buddhist organizations reveal gender conflicts in Buddhism? 3. How can nuns in Taiwan establish their identity by associating together? This paper will mainly study on the Chinese Buddhist Bhikkhuni Association (CBBA), because it has attracted members together to work for religious causes and social needs since 1996. However, with a mission to promote female practitioners' role in Buddhist circles, the CBBA has not contributed much to gender equality in Buddhism. The present research argues that the CBBA has not managed to unite nuns in Taiwan, because it has not supported nuns' education, nor recruited highly educated ones. In conclusion, the research suggests that the CBBA should: 1. Connect with Buddhist organizations in order to achieve unity. 2. Revolutionize the Buddhist hierarchical system by creating a space for younger generations' development. 3. To allocate financial contributions from social charities to nuns' education in order to foster an active female presence role in Buddhism in the future.

Keywords: Bhikkhuni networking in Taiwan, Chinese Buddhist Bhikkhuni Association.

Introduction

During the writing of this research, a historical event regarding the restoration of *bhikkhuni* (fully ordained Buddhist nun) sangha took place in Bodhgaya, India. Ogyen Trinley Dorje, the 17th Karmapa of the Karma Kagyu lineage, kept his promise to reinstate Buddhist nuns' full ordination back to what Tibetan Buddhist tradition had been on March 11, 2017. Under several great Tibetan *lamas*' supervision, a total number of nineteen Tibetan nuns received their *getsulma* vows from *Bhikkhuni* masters of Nan Ling Monastery, Taiwan, and they will finally receive the *gelongma* vows to be a fully ordained *bhikkhunis* in the near future.¹ According to the 17th Karmapa, "the priority is that there is no gender discrimination in Buddhism. Everyone should have an equal opportunity and ability to propagate Buddha's teachings regardless of one's gender".² Ironically, more than a decade ago, the well-known *Bhikkhuni* professor in Taiwan, Hengching, already recognized the important role of *bhikkhunis* in Tibetan Buddhism by pointing out that Buddhist scholars constantly argued that Tibet could not be considered as "a 'central' land of the Dharma" due to lack the of a *bhikkhuni* order.³ The *getsulma* ceremony was a milestone in Tibetan Buddhism that took years of hard work and efforts to realize, and the light at the other end of tunnel is beginning to appear.

Whereas Tibetan nuns have just begun to rebuild their orders, Buddhist nuns in Taiwan have already been recognized for their roles and contributions in the history of Buddhism. On November 19, 2016, the Chinese Buddhist Bhikkhuni Association (CBBA) held "The 1st Global Awards for Outstanding Contributions of Commentated Bhikkhuni in Celebrating the 20th Anniversary of the Chinese Bhikkhuni Association" at Jhong Jheng Stadium in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. There were hundreds of thousands Buddhist nuns with diverse nationalities coming together to celebrate their achievements. It took more than six decades for them to be able to get on the stage to claim their true identities, since the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (BAROC) relocated and re-established the Buddhist order in Taiwan, in 1949. From the beginning, female Buddhist practitioners were invisible and underappreciated;

¹History in the Making: The First Step Toward Full Ordination for Tibetan Buddhist Nuns. Retrieved from Web: <http://kagyuoffice.org/history-in-the-making-the-first-step-toward-full-ordination-for-tibetan-buddhist-nuns/> on May 3, 2017.

²Buddhist Door Network: To Work for Bhikkhunis and This Should be A More "Feminine" Time – Interview the 17th Karmapa Retrieved from Web: http://gyalwangkarmapa.blogspot.tw/2016/12/blog-post_31.html on May 14, 2017.

³Heng-Ching Shih. (2000). "Lineage and Transmission: Integrating the Chinese and Tibetan Orders of Buddhist Nuns," *Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal* 13, p. 505.

they worked on chores at temples as kitchen maids or cleaning ladies with an inferior status despite the fact that they outnumbered Buddhist monks in Taiwan. The tide had turned with the lifting of martial law in 1987. The amendment of the Organization of Civil Groups Law in 1989 created an opportunity for *bhikkhunis* in Taiwan to blossom.

Both law changes gave Buddhism a new field to develop with many possibilities on the island. According to Dr. Yu-Chen Li, the BAROC lost its authority to individual temples and became decentralized in Buddhist circles in Taiwan.⁴ Freedom from the BAROC's authority results in a new age for Buddhism in Taiwan; new and huge temples were built, Buddhist educational programs were created, and Buddhist social participation led to a great number of people to enter the monastic orders. In particular, an increasing *bhikkhuni* population with good training and education help *bhikkhuni*'s status to a higher level after the 1990s. It was indeed a golden age for *bhikkhunis* in Taiwan. Several recognizable *bhikkhuni* orders and associations were established during the 1990s, and the CBBA is one of them.

The founding of the CBBA signifies *bhikkhuni*'s collective identity and unity in Taiwan. There are several features that make the CBBA unique. First, it is the only *bhikkhuni* association that overcomes various Buddhist lineages and practices by unifying them under the same mission and purpose. The majority of *bhikkhuni* organizations in Taiwan are established within their own temples with same lineage, practice, and teacher, and do not allow outsiders to participate. Second, the CBBA remains in touch with the BAROC, thus showing that *bhikkhunis* can respect *bhikkhus* while claiming their independence. The goal of the CBBA is not to focus on overpowering *bhikkhus*, instead, its goal is to raise awareness for gender equality and fair opportunities in the Buddhist world. According to Master Yinshun, "Buddhism has made no distinction between men and women in faith, correct practice, wisdom ... Women and men, both and alike, can practice the Way and reach liberation ... Women are wise and strong, and, at the same time, not inferior."⁵ Third, engaging in social charity and preaching Dharma are the mainstream in contemporary Buddhism in Taiwan, and the CBBA ensures that teaching Dharma is still their priority despite many charitable contributions that they have made to society.

Every association has its concern for the future, and the CBBA is no exception. Lack of promoting *bhikkhuni* education may create a generation gap within the association.

⁴Elise Anne DeVido. (2010). *Taiwan's Buddhist Nuns*, Albany: State University of New York Press, p. 7.

⁵Ibid., p. 17.

Due to the fact that most elected officials are seniors, how to bring in new leaders will be a major challenge. Recently, members of the CBBA began to build up a network for *bhikkhunis* around the world, and to promote the CBBA at an international level. With these intentions, the association has to improve in attracting highly educated *bhikkhunis* and helping them to contribute with their skills to the association.

The CBBA: An Association Beyond Buddhist Lineages

The CBBA is the only *bhikkhuni* association with members from different lineages and temples in Taiwan. The association was established in the southern part of Taiwan, Pingtung, on November 23, 1996, under the supervision of the Ministry of the Interior (MOI), ROC. As a nonprofit Buddhist organization, the CBBA aims to unify *bhikkhunis* in Taiwan and connect with Buddhists abroad the world in order to promote *bhikkhunis*' social status, protect the Buddha's teachings, advocate religious traditions, and provide social services both inside and outside the Buddhist world.

The leadership of the CBBA reveals an interesting and balanced geographical network. The First president, *Bhikkhuni* Jingding, came from southern Taiwan; the Second president, *Bhikkhuni* Shaohong, came from eastern Taiwan; the Founder and also the Third president, *Bhikkhuni* Mingzong, came from northern Taiwan; and the current president, *Bhikkhuni* Puhui, is in central Taiwan. Among the officials of the CBBA, twelve *bhikkhunis* are in central Taiwan; ten *bhikkhunis* are in the south; five *bhikkhunis* are in the north; and two *bhikkhunis* are in the eastern part of Taiwan. They carry the mission of Dharma by preaching and working for the well-being of others.⁶ Members are not only geographically diverse, but their Dharma lineages and practices are also distinct from each other; some of them come from the Chan lineage and the Pure Land lineage of Mahayana Buddhism; some combine Mahayana with Theravada Buddhism, and some practice Vajrayana Buddhism. The different practices and lineages make the CBBA more like an organization rather than a temple, which has traditionally one lineage under the same Dharma master.

Members of the CBBA create a network of friendship-in-Dharma in order to support each other. They have frequently participated and supported each other's activities or ceremonies at members' temples. They also supported each other in the following ways:

⁶Chinese Buddhist Bhikkhuni Association. Retrieved from Web: file:///Users/zenmaster/Desktop/Bhikkhuni/中華佛教比丘尼協進會.webarchive on April 22, 2017.

three member birthday gatherings, two in members' promotions, two in opening ceremonies of temples of members, members' funerals, and they even attended funerals of members' masters or parents on four occasions in 2016. The communication and assistance from members proves that the CBBA is a friendly and supportive association for *bhikkhunis* in Taiwan. In addition, the vice president of the CBBA, *Bhikkhuni* Hongan, sponsored an annual event at Miao Chong Temple to celebrate World Earth Day and pray for world peace.⁷ The majority of members of the CBBA were there to support the event. The World Earth Day celebration – which focuses on how to raise people's awareness in protecting and respecting the environment – became a worldwide event beginning in 1970. Celebrating World Earth Day became an opportunity for people to realize that *bhikkhunis* care for the well being of people in society. Moreover, the celebration is also an educational program related to environmental education, and promoting education is one of the founding principles of the CBBA.

However, a strong supportive network may also be the CBBA's weakness due to the fact that members spend the majority of their time within their own circle instead of participating with other Buddhist organizations. Lack of connection with people other than their own may reduce opportunities to learn from others. It may also isolate the CBBA from other Buddhist communities. In order to achieve their goal of unifying *bhikkhunis* in Taiwan and around the world, the CBBA may need to adjust their practices in order to accomplish their stated goals.

The CBBA Has A Unique Structure

The CBBA has a democratic system for electing the president, vice president, directors, and supervisors. Members make sure they have a fair and transparent transition when approaches the time of election. This modern and democrat method sets the CBBA apart from many traditional temples in Taiwan that still follow an ancestral way of selecting the next heir through personal connections. The CBBA's president and directors serve a four-year term and can be re-elected. Besides having an electoral system, the CBBA's membership also has a unique system. If we compare membership status in both the CBBA and the Tzu Chi Charitable Foundation (or Ciji) in Taiwan, the former has a collective membership while the later is based on individual membership. In order to become a member of the CBBA, the *bhikkhuni* should be either president or the representative of a Buddhist temple or organization.

⁷Ibid.

Once the *bhikkhuni* becomes a member of the CBBA, all residing *bhikkhunis* of the temple automatically become members of the association as well. In 2016, there were more than 300 members in the association, but we do not know exactly how many individual members there are. Contrastingly, Ciji's membership is based on individual laypeople and is divided into different groups in order to accomplish different responsibilities with the foundation.

In the CBBA, members emphasize unity, when they appear in public. They understand that they represent the association and not an individual. This is a way to practice the selfless teachings of the Buddha and to prevent one leader from dominating power in the association. Both the CBBA and Ciji have *bhikkhunis* as leaders. The current president of the CBBA is *Bhikkhuni* Puhui, and *Bhikkhuni* Zhengyan is the only leader of Ciji since its establishment in 1966. In the CBBA, they choose a new leader every four or eight years, according to the bylaws. For Ciji, it seems like *Bhikkhuni* Zhengyan will remain as the leader of the foundation until the last breath of her life. The majority of members in Ciji are fond of their leader's personal charisma and image but that may not be the case for members of the CBBA toward *Bhikkhuni* Puhui. According to the Weberian sociological tradition, charisma is "an inborn personal magnetism that arises in the interaction between leader and follower."⁸ However, leadership in the CBBA is not necessarily lacking charisma, instead, it is more accurate to say that the CBBA emphasizes a collective image rather than a personal figure like *Bhikkhuni* Zhengyan in Ciji.

Overall, the major concern for the CBBA, is not a personal power issue but rather a generation gap that may weaken the structure in the future due to the fact that the majority of members are senior and aged. Those who are currently in charge of the CBBA, the presidents and directors, became *bhikkhunis* from the 1950s to the 1970s, with an average current age of 70. Whether they are willing to admit it or not, a generation gap is something that members of the CBBA will face in the next decade if they can not recruit more young *bhikkhunis* into the association.⁹

The generation gap of Buddhism in Taiwan appeared after the amendment of laws in 1989, which the BAROC granted temples the full freedom to administer activities and function on their own and allow temples to hold ordination ceremonies without the BAROC's

⁸C. Julia Huang. (2008). "Gendered Charisma in the Buddhist Tzu Chi (Ciji) Movement," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 12:2, p. 31.

⁹Chinese Buddhist Bhikkhuni Association. Retrieved from Web: file:///Users/zenmaster/Desktop/Bhikkhuni/中華佛教比丘尼協進會.webarchive on May 1, 2017.

permission and supervision. Multiple annual ordination ceremonies took place after the 1990s and that could be one reason why the population of *bhikkhunis* has increased tremendously. The increasing *bhikkhuni* population did not produce unity in the Buddhist world in Taiwan. Instead, several well-known *bhikkhuni* temples are individually run rather than joined together in a team and they are not members of the CBBA. For instance, *bhikkhuni* sanghas, such as Nanlin Bhikkhuni Sangha and Yide Temple, are not actively involved with the CBBA. These two *bhikkhuni* sanghas have a large number of young and highly educated *bhikkhunis* and they can do very well with or without the assistance from outsiders. Also, these two *bhikkhuni* sanghas regularly held *bhikkhuni* ordinations: Nanlin Bhikkhuni Sangha in 1999 and 2003, and Yide Temple in 2004, 2006, and 2012.¹⁰ These *bhikkhuni* sanghas represent the new generation and are capable to function independently. However, it is also true that disconnecting from the *bhikkhuni* circle in Taiwan may put *bhikkhunis*' unification at risk. Therefore, the CBBA must find a way to connect and communicate with these new generations of *bhikkhuni* sanghas and bring them on board in order to strengthen *bhikkhunis*' position in Buddhism.

Despite the weakness of the generation gap in the CBBA, the majority of *Bhikkhunis* in the CBBA are seniors that help the association to maintain a good image of compassion with a gentle approach, even when they have to stand up in the line of duty to protect the Buddha's teachings. Members of the CBBA would rather choose negotiation than confrontation when defending Buddhism. For instance, in a case on religious laws that might negatively affect Buddhism, the CBBA took a leading role as a negotiator to deal with the government. On April 28, 2014, *Bhikkhuni* Jianchao, the representative of the CBBA attended a meeting with officials from the MOI in order to discuss the regulations for non-union religious organizations. In order to be recognized and be registered as a religious organization outside the union, a religious organization must make its reports activity records available for the government to access and inspect, including background and details of an organization's members and officials, bylaws, and functions. The most controversial issue is rule #10 of the regulation which states that a religious organization must report its financial management on how to handle donations and expenses to the government. This regulation made religious communities in Taiwan feel that their privacy and freedom were threatened.

¹⁰Zhiyan Shi. (2013). "The Educational Development of Bhikkhunis in Taiwan (Taiwan Fojiao Biquini Jiaoyu Fazhang Gaikuang)." *Luminary International Buddhist Society Library Journal*. Luminary International Buddhist Society (LIBS), 56:6.

Religious organizations were never previously asked to reveal their financial statements to the government. The CBBA insisted that the government should respect religious freedom, privacy, and independence from political control, according to the Constitution. One month after the first meeting, President Puhui, along with the legal consultant of the CBBA, Huizhu Shen, attended a follow-up meeting at the MOI to negotiate the process of renewing the registration of Buddhist temples.¹¹

Again, on November 9, 2015, the CBBA co-sponsored a conference to discuss religious regulations that will be enacted by the government in the near future. Over 1,000 *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* participated in the meeting. The agenda of the meeting was to find a solution to protect Buddhist organizations from the government's interference. The *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* demanded religious freedom and equality under the Constitution of the ROC and to maintain religious autonomy.¹² In all cases in which the Buddha Dharma needs to be asserted, *bhikkhunis* of the CBBA will be there to show their courage and support. After the conference in November, several follow-up meetings also took place as *bhikkhunis* of the CBBA did their best to protect the Buddha's teachings. On March 5, 2016, President Puhui and Secretary Jianyin met with Senator Ruihsiung Zhuang in Pingtung to express their concern about an ongoing discussion on the potential discrimination of the legislation towards the adherents of religious organizations.¹³ Later, on May 24, 2016, both *bhikkhunis* Puhui and Jianyin went to Taipei to visit Senator Guoyong Xu with a similar intention of seeking support from him.¹⁴

Apart from dealing with the legislation to defend Buddhism, members of the CBBA also stood up to protect Buddhist traditions and culture. In 2013, an incident occurred when a Christian priestess, Q. Y. Liang, publicly criticized and attacked both Taoism's Mazhu and Buddhism's Guanyin as evil spirits. On January 16, 2014, the CBBA and other Buddhist organizations in Taiwan called a press conference to demand an apology from Liang.¹⁵ The priority of the press conference was not to condemn Liang's actions, but to call for a respectful, peaceful, and harmonious environment for all religions in Taiwan.

¹¹ Ministry of the Interior of ROC. Retrieved from Web: <http://glrs.moi.gov.tw/LawContentDetails.aspx?id=FL033997> on May 6, 2017.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Chinese Buddhist Bhikkhuni Association. Retrieved from Web: <file:///Users/zenmaster/Desktop/Bhikkhuni/中華佛教比丘尼協進會.webarchive> on February 9, 2017.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid

A Stable Finance for Social Charities

Members' stable financing also helps the association to freely engage in social charities. For the past twenty years, members have worked diligently to assist people in need in Taiwan and overseas. When a disastrous gas blast occurred in Kaohsiung on August 1, 2004, the CBBA donated \$100,000 USD to the Department of Social Services of Kaohsiung for relief. Meanwhile, special Buddhist ceremonies were held in order to spiritually sustain those whose lives had been affected by the tragedy. On March 1, 2011, when a huge tsunami struck Japan, members of the CBBA went to Japan twice in order to donate \$420,000 USD to those in need. On June 10, 2013, members of the CBBA raised \$176,000 USD for the reconstruction of Buddhist temples in Sichuan, China, which had been previously destroyed by a huge earthquake. On June 19, 2015, president Puhui and members gave \$266,000 USD to victims in Kathmandu, Nepal, after an earthquake of 7.9 magnitude traumatized the city and the surrounding areas. Three months later, they returned again to Kathmandu to organize a Buddhist ceremony and made financial contributions to 1,300 local Buddhist monks and nuns. On April 4, 2016, the CBBA donated \$139,000 USD to those who had lost loved ones in a huge earthquake of 6.4 magnitude that hit the southern part of Taiwan. Again, on August 8, 2016, members arranged a two-day trip to Taitung, to show their support and offer financial aid to those temples that were damaged by Typhoon Nepartak about one month earlier that year.¹⁶ Overall, as proven by the CBBA's charities, compassion and kindness are effective means to bridge differences between religions, countries, and cultures.

In the CBBA, *bhikkhunis* are the sole participants that perform acts of compassionate although the funding may come from lay people's donations. Members' entrance and annual fees represent the core funding of the association: all their charitable funds or emergency aid is derived from members' donations for special occasions or events. Charitable contributions have been the main reasons why Taiwanese recognize the CBBA, despite the main goal of the association being to build up a network and unify *bhikkhunis* around the world. This recognition may be a warning sign for this *bhikkhuni* association with respect to the direction it may take in the future. Surely, members of the CBBA do not want to be seen as charity workers, but rather as *bhikkhunis* with a special role in Buddhism.

To participate in social activities and charities is a way, according to *bhikkhunis*, to show people that Buddhists care about sentient beings as well as their religious practices.

¹⁶Ibid.

The “Buddhism for the human world” that Master Taixu promoted during the 20th century is to encourage Buddhists to act as “a moral agent” in order to follow the path of bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism.¹⁷ In contemporary Buddhism in Taiwan, Buddhist masters such as, Xinyun of Fo Guang Shan, Shengyan of Dharma Drum Mountain, and Zhengyan of Ciji, are promoters of humanistic Buddhism. They do this by approaching and helping people in society while practicing the Buddha’s teaching. However, there are also questions and concerns regarding the ways in which monastic orders are involved in society. How can monastic members maintain pure ethics and doctrines while engaging with the secular world? This may be a future challenge for all Buddhist *sanghas* in Taiwan.¹⁸ The CBBA similarly experiences this dilemma as most of their activities and functions focus on social engagement and charities.

In fact, secularization is a problem for all religions. Scholars including the contemporary American sociologist Peter L. Berger, criticized religion’s involvement with modern society, inasmuch as it would damage the purity and morality of a religion, and, therefore, its essence.¹⁹ In 1997, after having visited Taiwan for the first time, *Bhikkhu* Jungun of China wrote an article about how impressed and moved he was by the achievements that Buddhist organizations such as Ciji, Fo Guang Shan, and Dharma Drum Mountain have made around the world.²⁰ Two years later, after his second trip to Taiwan, *Bhikkhu* Jungun expressed his concern about how Buddhism in Taiwan was so deeply involved in social activities and less focused on Dharma preaching. *Bhikkhu* Jungun is not alone; there is much debate about whether social involvement can be defined as a sign of secularization in a religion. However, the CBBA’s involvement in social charities has only been a part of their function, therefore the association must not to be labeled as one of the social charitable organizations in the secular world, but rather as a *bhikkhuni* association that pursues *bhikkhuni* unity.

Despite social involvement, the CBBA held a huge ceremony to remind Buddhists in Taiwan that unity and promotion of *bhikkhunis* is still the association’s priority. The outstanding event for the CBBA was “The 1st Global Awards for Outstanding Contributions

¹⁷Scott Pacey. (2016). “Contemporary Chinese Buddhist Practice,” *The Buddhist World*, ed. John Powers, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 419-20.

¹⁸Pacey, “Contemporary Chinese Buddhist Practice,” p. 429.

¹⁹Peter L. Berger. (1999). “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,” *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter L. Berger, Washington, D.C.: the Ethics and Public Policy Center, p. 1.

²⁰Pacey, “Contemporary Chinese Buddhist Practice,” p. 429.

of Commentated Bhikkhuni in Celebrating the 20th Anniversary of the Chinese Bhikkhuni Association” at Jhong Jheng Stadium in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, on November 19, 2016. The ceremony aimed to recognize and honor *bhikkhunis*’ contributions around the world. The CBBA invited *bhikkhunis* from Asia, Europe, and the United States to attend the award ceremony. There were around 180 members’ temples of the CBBA listed as coordinators of the event.²¹ The celebration began at 4:30 pm. and finished at 9 pm., with performances by a high school’s marching band and Taiwanese doing aboriginal dance. The biggest moment for the night was the awards conferral ceremony.²²

The award ceremony revealed the future plans of the CBBA for making the association international with the creation of a global network for *bhikkhunis*. The recipients of the award had diverse backgrounds and nationalities and were chosen carefully prior to the day of the ceremony. On June 23, 2016, about five months before the ceremony, president Puhui went with several members to Bangkok, Thailand, in order to visit *bhikkhunis* Dr. Lee (USA) and Rattanaali (Thailand). They made this trip to invite them to be, respectively, the judge and the secretary of the event.²³ *Bhikkhuni* Dr. Lee is one of the pioneers in raising awareness of gender equality in Buddhism. After the United Nation in New York invited her to give a speech on how to raise awareness gender equality on International Women’s Day on March 8, 2001, *Bhikkhuni* Dr. Lee began to work with *Bhikkhuni* Rattanaali and established The Outstanding Women in Buddhism Awards (OWBA) in 2001. Both the CBBA and the OWBA carry a mission to promote female Buddhists in Buddhist circles. However, there is a slight difference in structure between them; the CBBA is an association only for *bhikkhunis*, while the OWBA is open to all female Buddhists. Despite their difference in membership, both associations share the same mission in recognizing female accomplishments in Buddhism, in proactively engaging in charities, and in promoting educational opportunities for Buddhist women in order to preach the teachings of the Buddha in the future.²⁴ Creating a bond between these two female Buddhist associations, during the CBBA’s first visit to *bhikkhunis* Dr. Lee

²¹ Chinese Buddhist Bhikkhuni Association. Retrieved from Web: file:///Users/zenmaster/Desktop/Bhikkhuni/中華佛教比丘尼協進會.webarchive on April 9, 2017.

²² 2016.11.19 The 20th Anniversary of C.B.B.A. Retrieved from Web: <http://cbbaroc.org/CBBA-ROC/node/84> on February 7, 2017.

²³ Chinese Buddhist Bhikkhuni Association. Retrieved from Web: file:///Users/zenmaster/Desktop/Bhikkhuni/中華佛教比丘尼協進會.webarchive on February 9, 2017.

²⁴ Outstanding Women in Buddhism Awards. Retrieved from Web: http://www.dhammadownload.com/index.php?title=Outstanding_Women_in_Buddhism_Awards on February 9, 2017.

and RattanaVali, members donated around \$10,000 USD to support the reconstruction of The International Women's Meditation Center after having heard that the center was intentionally burnt down by an arsonist.²⁵ This support showed that *bhikkhunis* are all disciples of the Buddha and belong to the same family.

The CBBA held its first award ceremony, entitled "The Academy Award", for outstanding *bhikkhunis* around the world.²⁶ However, the fact that the majority of the recipients were selected from members of the CBBA is questionable. There were, in fact, 50 *bhikkhunis* recognized as role models for female Buddhist practitioners, and 30 out of the 50 recipients are members of the CBBA, including the president, vice president, directors, and supervisors. Besides the 30 recipients from Taiwan, the other 20 recipients were, 4 from South Korea and the United States; 3 from China 2 from Thailand and Malaysia; and 1 from Sri Lanka, Singapore, Cambodia, the United Kingdom, and Austria. In addition, recipients came from three of the five continents, North America, Europe, and Asia, but no recipient came from South America, Africa, or Australia. Lack of participants from these continents may create a gap for the association's intention to unify worldwide *bhikkhunis*. The geographical distribution of recipients reflects the fact that the CBBA should work harder in order to truly build an international *bhikkhuni* network in the future. Again, in order to achieve their goal, members of the CBBA have to overcome differences in Buddhist cultures and lineages, nationalities, and show their sincerity regarding unity. In so doing, the CBBA needs to recruit highly educated *bhikkhunis* who are capable in various languages or familiar with diverse Buddhist cultures to serve the association's need. Alternatively, the CBBA may need to begin to promote and support *bhikkhunis*' higher education in view of future needs of the association. Living in an impermanent and multicultural world, this could be a solution for the association improvement and survival.

The CBBA: A Traditional Role Model or A Burden

The association possesses several features, such as the respect for elders and seniors, and living in harmony, as part of their Buddhist tradition. Many other religions as well as Buddhism are informed by the relationship between seniors and juniors. This relationship

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Taiwan Press Praises Buddhist Nuns. Retrieved from Web: <https://sravastiabbey.org/taiwan-press-praises-awards-buddhist-nuns/> 12/1/2016 on April 5, 2017.

in Buddhism determines the time when a *bhikkhu* or a *bhikkhuni* receives his/her full ordination. As a typical model of this tradition, members of the CBBA elect the most senior *bhikkhuni* among these candidates and give the presidency to her. They grant to the senior president the full power of authority to lead junior members. This senior-junior tradition has bounded members together very well. Under senior *bhikkhunis*' leadership, the CBBA became a stable, safe haven, and a non-conflict zone for members to practice, communicate, and support each other.

Taking leadership positions for *bhikkhunis* has become very common in Taiwanese Buddhism today. Regarding *bhikkhunis*' abilities to serve as leaders, Professor Chun-fang Yu argues that, "generally speaking, it is hard to detect much difference. In terms of their asceticism, ability to work miracles, willingness to sacrifice their lives for the Dharma, expertise in sutra exposition, and ability to achieve great feats of chanting scripture, the nuns noted were in no way inferior to monks."²⁷ For the past 20 years, the accomplishments of *bhikkhunis* of the CBBA can be considered as a living example of the significance of *bhikkhunis* meaning and significance in Buddhist circles and society. The function of the association is also an interpretation of "Buddhist women should lead Buddhist women."²⁸ Insofar as it is an association entirely administered and run by nuns, from leadership to members, *bhikkhunis* themselves work as a team for the benefit of sentient beings and defend the teachings of the Buddha in Taiwan.

As a traditional Buddhist association with seniors as the highest authority, the CBBA may also create obstacles for achieving their goals. One concern is that the so-called "respect and harmony" system, in which juniors must listen and follow seniors' direction without objections, may become a traditional hierarchy which blocks younger *bhikkhunis*' development. When we compare both CBBA and BAROC, they do share a similar hierarchical structure in the Buddhist tradition with an overlapped leadership and an identical structure. In fact, the majority of current and previous presidents, directors, and supervisors of the CBBA have served as directors or supervisors for the BAROC. This overlapping leadership indicates the close relationship between these two associations and the CBBA is still traditionally under the supervision of BAROC. This *bhikkhuni*-centered association is not as independent as

²⁷Chun-fang Yu. (2003). *Passing the Light: The Incense Light Community and Buddhist Nuns in Contemporary Taiwan*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, p. 13.

²⁸DeVido. (2005). *Taiwan's Buddhist Nuns*, p. 16. This was originally cited from Lingyu Li's Master's thesis, "A Study of 'The Movement of Taiwan's Buddhist Nuns' Feminism," Graduate Institute of Religious Studies, National Chengchi University, p. 70.

we thought from the BAROC *bhikkhu*-centred association, after all. Members of the CBBA may say this is a way to show their respect to *bhikkhus* because it is a traditional value and precept in Buddhism. Also, it is understandable that a traditional association like the CBBA does not want to create controversy or make trouble for the association. Obviously, one of the bylaws of the CBBA describes the desire of the CBBA to raise awareness of *bhikkhuni* contributions and to promote gender equality in the Buddhist circle of Taiwan. In reality, those promises and goals still need to be fulfilled. The first step for the CBBA is to be more specific on what direction the association wants to take in the future.

Another concern for the CBBA is a lack of young and highly educated *bhikkhunis* in the association. The leadership of the CBBA evidences a generation gap as president and vice presidents, received their ordinations between the 1950s to the 1960s. The founder *Bhikkhuni* Mingzong was born in 1938. The second president *Bhikkhuni* Shaohong was born in 1936. The current president *Bhikkhuni* Puhui was born in 1962. They belong to senior *bhikkhunis* in the Buddhist circle of Taiwan.²⁹ The new generation of Buddhists began when the *Bhikkhuni* population swelled after the amendment of the Law on the Organization of Civil Groups (LOCG) in 1989, which allowed Buddhist temples to hold annual ordinations with or without the permission from the BAROC.³⁰ The 2012 survey shows that there were 9,747 *bhikkhunis* ordained from 1989 to 2012 (seven temples did not participate in the survey).³¹ This new generation of *bhikkhunis* could provide the main resources for the development of the CBBA, but only members of the association are willing to step out of their comfort zone and thinking outside the box.

The CBBA does not need to go too far to find a new generation of *bhikkhunis* with well-trained and highly educated skills who can help the CBBA's international network. From the 1990s to the 2010s, highly educated *bhikkhunis* in Taiwan became a phenomena that fascinated the worldwide Buddhist community due to several universities in Taiwan beginning to offer courses in religious studies. From 1988 to 1997, there were three universities, Fu Jen Catholic University (FJU), Aletheia University (AU), and Hsuan Chuang University (HCU), that started programs in religious studies at the graduate level; FJU was the only university to offer PhD degree at that time in religious studies. From 2000 to 2008, seven universities

²⁹Chinese Buddhist Bhikkhuni Association. Retrieved from Web: file:///Users/zenmaster/Desktop/Bhikkhuni/中華佛教比丘尼協進會.webarchive on April 8, 2017.

³⁰Pacey, "Contemporary Chinese Buddhist Practice," p. 420.

³¹Shi, "The Educational Development of Bhikkhunis in Taiwan." pp. 93-96.

joined the previous three to offer religious studies programs, they are: National Chengchi University (NCCU), Tzu Chi University (TCU), Chung Yuan Christian University (CYCU), Fo Guang University (FGU), Nanhua University (NHU), Tunghai University (THU), and Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts (DILA). In 2013, there were already 94 *bhikkhunis* and 14 *bhikkhus* that received M.A. degrees in religious studies from three Buddhist universities, NHU, HCU, and TCU.³²

However, I also suggest that there may be more *bhikkhunis* that should obtain either M.A. or Ph.D. degrees in majors or fields other than religious studies. For instance, two of my Dharma brothers obtained their Ph.D. in recent years respectively in Comparative Literature at FJU and in Oriental Cultural and Thought Studies at Huaan University (HFU). In addition, many *bhikkhunis* also went to foreign countries to study and came home with their degrees. However, there is no available data or survey to show a ratio between *bhikkhunis* who earned degrees in Taiwan or those who earned degrees overseas, or how many *bhikkhunis* earned their degrees in fields besides religious studies.

Even though Taiwan has the greatest number of highly educated *bhikkhunis* compared to *bhikkhunis* in other countries, studying majors other than religious studies, specifically in Buddhist studies, is still considered as non-traditional and inappropriate for a *bhikkhuni*. After discovering that I am a student at NCCU, several senior *bhikkhunis* asked me to transfer to other Buddhist founded universities because there is no reason for a Buddhist nun to study in a secular university. Concerning Buddhist education in Taiwan, both *Bhikkhuni* Wuyin and *Bhikkhu* Bodhi of the USA, point out that Buddhist education must focus on Buddhist traditions by combining practical and academic methods. Therefore, both religious and secular educations are deemed important for teaching Dharma effectively in the future.³³

The promotion of *bhikkhuni* education is an unfulfilled dream for the CBBA. It is *Bhikkhuni* Mingzong, the founder of the CBBA, who emphasized the importance of *bhikkhuni* education when she founded the association in 1996. *Bhikkhuni* Mingzong was born in Tainan in 1938. When she was only fourteen year old, she decided to enter a Buddhist order and became a novice nun in Lingyin Temple, in order to get an education. Women did not have many opportunities or options for higher education at that time. After realizing the importance

³²Ibid., p. 98.

³³Xun Zhang. (2011). "The Fair Sky of Bhikkhunis: Review 'The Sky of Bhikkhunis: 2009 Essays on International Conference in Buddhist Sangha,'" *Luminary International Buddhist Society Library Journal*. Luminary International Buddhist Society (LIBS), 52:6.

of Buddhist education for a *bhikkhuni*, she went to study at the Baisheng's Tripitaka Buddhist Seminary in Taipei, and continuously went to Japan for her education beginning in 1965.³⁴ Education plays an irreplaceable role in *Bhikkhuni* Mingzong's life. Therefore, she made *bhikkhuni* education as one of the founding bylaws of the CBBA.

The CBBA carries a mission of promoting *bhikkhuni* education. However, most of their recognized achievements have come from social charities rather than providing educational opportunities, financial aid, or scholarships for *bhikkhunis*. So far, all achievements and accomplishments in education from members of the CBBA have come from individual contributions of establishing schools for general education. This includes president *Bhikkhuni* Puhui and one of the directors, *Bhikkhuni* Changlu, both found and rebuilt schools in central Taiwan. *Bhikkhuni* Puhui, having been president of Shen Chai Tan since 1969, received praise as an educator after she became founder and president of the Shen Chai Elementary School, the first Buddhist elementary school in Taichung in 2004.³⁵ On March 8, 2016, *Bhikkhuni* Puhui received an award at the 15th Anniversary Outstanding Women in Buddhism Awards in Honor of the United Nations International Women's.³⁶ *Bhikkhuni* Changlu, an executive director of the CBBA, also served as president of Tzu Ming High School, Taichung. The school was founded in the 1970s, and was relocated, as well as rebuilt after being destroyed by a huge earthquake on September 21, 1999. Two years after the natural calamity, *Bhikkhuni* Changlu became president, and started 10 year project in order to rebuild the school. Currently, there are about 4,000 registered students at Tzu Min High School, Junior High, and Kindergarten.³⁷ *Bhikkhuni* Changlu also became the recipient of the 16th Anniversary Outstanding Women in Buddhism Awards in Honor of the United Nations International Women's Day. Finally, another member of the CBBA, *Bhikkhuni* Tizheng, did not establish schools as her two Dharma colleagues did, but rather contributed to Buddhist educational programs. Concerning the future development of Buddhist sangha, *Bhikkhuni* Tizheng regularly holds Buddhist conferences to discuss critical issues in Buddhism.³⁸ The achievements in education of those

³⁴Yu, *Passing the Light*, p. 59.

³⁵Shen Chai Elementary School. Retrieved from Web: <http://www.sces.tc.edu.tw> on April 20, 2017.

³⁶Chinese Buddhist Bhikkhuni Association. Retrieved from Web: file:///Users/zenmaster/Desktop/Bhikkhuni/中華佛教比丘尼協進會.webarchive on February 9, 2017.

³⁷Tzu Ming High School. Retrieved from Web: http://www.tmhs.tc.edu.tw/webc/html/overview/index.php?num=35&u_power=0 on April 1, 2017.

³⁸Chinese Buddhist Bhikkhuni Association. Retrieved from Web: file:///Users/zenmaster/Desktop/Bhikkhuni/中華佛教比丘尼協進會.webarchive on February 12, 2017.

three members of the CBBA, Puhui, Changlu, and Tizheng, were begun long before they became key members of the association.

The major concern regarding the CBBA's lack of a plan to promote *bhikkhuni* education is that they do not financially support those *bhikkhunis* who are currently pursuing their M.A. or Ph.D. degrees. In reality, members of the CBBA hold very traditional perspectives. It will be interesting to see if they are willing to support those *bhikkhunis* who either study at colleges other than Buddhist colleges, or those who study other majors rather than religious studies. Can they support those *bhikkhuni* students without discrimination? There are so many questions and only time would reveal what direction or method the CBBA will go from here. One thing we can predict: in order to have new generations of *bhikkhunis* to be part of the CBBA, members of the association must show their sincere support to young and potential *bhikkhunis* for study, and create opportunities for devoting themselves to the teachings of the Buddha. In order to promote the association to at an international level, the CBBA needs to have intellectual *bhikkhunis* with highly educated qualifications in different fields and languages with skills in management, communication, and academic research to assist the association to reform, prosper, and achieve the higher goal of protecting the teachings of the Buddha in the future.

Conclusion: Bhikkhunis In Taiwan Are at A Crossroad

Bhikkhunis in Taiwan hold an international reputation because of gender equality, educational achievements and successful application of the Buddha's teaching. As a *bhikkhuni* association, the CBBA possess significant characteristics such as, unifying different Buddhist lineages and cultures; functioning under a unique systemized structure; having stable financial resources to engage in social charities, and has become a representative of the Buddhist tradition. For the past twenty years, members of the CBBA have supported each other and created a harmonious environment in the Taiwanese Buddhist circle. It has a democratic election system to make sure the association is not dominated by personal ambition but functions as a whole. In order to create a well-balanced association, members elect officials, presidents, vice presidents, directors, and supervisors from different areas of Taiwan. Members' diverse backgrounds and lineages provide them an opportunity to learn from each other. Due to the function of the senior *bhikkhunis* as authorities, the association is much more stable than most Buddhist associations in Taiwan. For the past twenty years, members of the CBBA have not found themselves involved in controversies because of their gentle approach even towards legal problems with the defense of Buddhism against the Taiwanese government.

This unique way of dealing with complicated issues has allowed the association to acquire a good reputation in Taiwan.

However, the CBBA's unique features may also entail weaknesses and shortcomings. First, the members' supportive network has been reserved to members only and has impeded a constructive dialogue with non-members. Therefore, their universal, unitarian ideal is only effective for members. Most *bhikkhunis*, especially those in large *bhikkhuni* orders, do not participate in the CBBA's activities. One might argue that members of the CBBA create a non-conflict zone, not because they are peacemakers, but because they maintain a distance from other Buddhist communities, thus building a safety-zone. As previously shown, the CBBA follows Buddhist traditions such as respect for seniors and elders. However, this tradition may be impractical and hinder an international ambition because of lack of opportunities for younger generations to have their voices heard within the traditional hierarchical system.

Inasmuch as it maintains itself as a traditional Buddhist association, the CBBA neglects the important issue of promoting *bhikkhuni*' education. As Dr. Karma Lekshe Tsomo points out, a lack of qualified Buddhist teachers might be the greatest challenge in contemporary Buddhism around the world. Buddhist temples or associations encourage *bhikkhunis* to pursue higher education as a contribution to the Buddhist world.³⁹ The founder of the CBBA, *Bhikkhuni* Mingzong, deems *bhikkhuni* education as the primary goal for the recognition of *bhikkhunis* in Buddhism. Today, as we know, those who chose to become *bhikkhunis* were educated before joining the sangha in the 1980s, with at least a 2-year or 4-year college diploma when they joined the sangha.⁴⁰ The CBBA can either recruit those highly educated *bhikkhunis* to take part in the function of the CBBA, or spend part of the association's funding to support *bhikkhunis* in academic studies. Both ways may be helpful for the future of the association.

³⁹ Karma Lekshe Tsomo. (2017). "Global Challenges to Buddhist Education: Crisis as Opportunity," 2017 *The Buddhist Sangha's Inner Practice and Outward Dharma Preaching Conference*, Taipei: Association of Buddhist Sangha Lifelong Education, 2017, p.18. The citation was taken from part of Dr. Tsomo's speech at the conference on March 4, 2017.

⁴⁰ Yu, *Passing the Light*, p. 71.

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