

# The Buddha's Intention to Establish the *Bhikkhuni Saṅgha*

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## Introduction

One of the significant factors that give rise to the conflict on *Bhikkhuni* ordination in present-day Thai society is the different beliefs and understanding about the Buddha's real intention to establish the *Bhikkhuni Saṅgha* in Buddhism, both among its opponents and advocates. Those who oppose to the ordination often maintain that the Buddha did not really intend to ordain *Bhikkhuni* in the first place. Their presence in the Buddha's lifetime was due to certain circumstances or external factors that eventually led the Buddha to permit their ordination. The advocates, on the other hand, generally insist that it was the Buddha's real intention to establish *Bhikkhuni Saṅgha* in the religion in the same way as he did the *Bhikkhu* counterpart. Such divergence of views is not simply a matter of religious principles that legitimately demand proper investigation, but it also affects how the *Bhikkhuni* issue will be resolved. If society does not regard *Bhikkhuni* as something that the Buddha intended to establish, devout Buddhists may not want to see the *Bhikkhuni* ordination revived. Naturally, the intention of the founder carries a significant weight in considering whether or not *Bhikkhuni* ordination should exist. On the other hand, if society believes otherwise, the attitude towards the issue may be different. Therefore, for the sake of academic clarity and fairness to all parties concerned, it is

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important to arrive at a clear perspective on the matter, especially regarding the Buddha's intention.

### **1. Conflicts about the Buddha's intention to establish *Bhikkhuni Saṅgha***

For the sake of a better understanding, it is best to return to the time when *Bhikkhuni Saṅgha* was first established and consider the source of the difference in viewpoints. According to *Bhikkhuni Khandhaka*, in the fifth year after the Buddha's Enlightenment during which he was in the midst of propagating his teachings, he returned to Kapilavastu to teach Dhamma to his royal father, King Suddhodana, and other relatives. As a result, his father attained Arahantship (*Arahattaphala*), and several of his relatives joined monkhood. After his father's death, Queen Mahapajapati visited the Buddha who was staying at Nigrodharam in the city of Kapilavastu. The queen was his aunt who nurtured him after his mother died seven days after giving birth to him. She expressed her wish to be ordained and live a religious life in the Buddha's school, saying "Please allow a woman to leave home and live a monastic life, practicing Dhamma-Vinaya as you the Buddha have proclaimed." The Buddha replied in the negative, saying "Don't, Gotami! Do not take delight in the path of a woman leaving home to live the life of a monastic (*Pabbajita*) as I have proclaimed (*Bhikkhuni* [in Thai] 7/402/313).

According to the Pali Canon or *Tipitaka*, she made her request three times, each time being refused by the Buddha. She was heart-broken and returned home. Later on, the Buddha travelled to the town of Vesali and stayed at a lodge in the Great Forest. There, he taught Dhamma to his relatives of Sakya and Koliya clans who subsequently joined the monkhood. On that occasion, Queen Mahapajapati and about 500 other female novices and apprentices who were wives of the Buddha's relatives and never gave up on their intention to be ordained, had their heads shaved and put on the same kind of robes as the Buddha. They followed him on foot to Vesali but did not dare to come near his residence. Ven. Ananda found the queen weeping at the entrance and made an enquiry. After he learnt about the cause, he went back to the Buddha and made a plea on her behalf three times. The Buddha replied in the negative just as he had done earlier to

Queen Mahapajapati, saying, “Don’t, Ananda! Do not take delight in the path of a woman leaving home to live the life of a monastic (*Pabbajita*) as I have proclaimed” (*Bhikkhuni* [in Thai] 7/402/315).

Ven. Ananda wondered whether the Buddha’s refusal of the request might be based on the assumption that women do not have the ability to attain Dhamma and ventured to ask, “Is it possible for a woman, who has left home to lead a religious life following Dhamma-Vinaya as proclaimed by the Buddha, to attain *Sotāpatti-phala*, *Sakadāgāmi-phala*, *Anāgāmi-phala*, and *Arahatta-phala* (*Bhikkhuni* [in Thai] 7/402/315)? The Buddha replied, “Ananda, it is possible for a woman, who has left home to lead a religious life following Dhamma-Vinaya as proclaimed by the Buddha, to attain *Sotāpatti-phala*, *Sakadāgāmi-phala*, *Anāgāmi-phala*, and *Arahatta-phala* (*Bhikkhuni* [in Thai] 7/402/316).

Having heard thus, Ven. Ananda requested once more the Buddha’s permission for Mahapajapati’s ordination, saying “If it is possible for a woman, who has left home to lead a religious life following Dhamma-Vinaya as proclaimed by the Buddha, to attain *Sotāpatti-phala*, *Sakadāgāmi-phala*, *Anāgāmi-phala*, and *Arahatta-phala*, would you permit Queen Mahapajapati, who is your aunt, has taken good care of you, fed you with milk, and after your mother died breastfed you, and who requested your permission for a woman leaving home to lead a religious life following Dhamma-Vinaya as proclaimed by the Buddha, to do so (*Bhikkhuni* [in Thai] 7/402/316)? Finally, the Buddha agreed to Mahapajapati’s ordination. In *Tipitaka*, mention is made of the Buddha giving instructions for her to follow, which are known as *Garudhamma* 8:

1. A *Bhikkhuni* who has been ordained for a hundred years must prostrate before, rise to welcome, salute with joined palms, and do proper homage to a monk ordained but that day. This Dhamma the *Bhikkhuni* must uphold, respect, worship and not violate throughout her life.
2. A *Bhikkhuni* must not spend the rainy season in retreat in a residence where there are no monks. This Dhamma the *Bhikkhuni* must uphold, respect, worship and not violate throughout her life.

3. A *Bhikkhuni* shall desire to do two things: every half month ask the monks about the Vinaya rules (Uposatha), and receive their advice. This Dhamma the *Bhikkhuni* must uphold, respect, worship and not violate throughout her life.

4. A *Bhikkhuni* who spends the rainy season in retreat shall invite both orders of the *Saṅgha* to advise her on three matters, namely what was seen, what was heard, and what was suspected. This Dhamma the *Bhikkhuni* must uphold, respect, worship and not violate throughout her life.

5. A *Bhikkhuni* who has broken any of the Garudhamma shall undergo penance before both orders of the *Saṅgha*. This Dhamma the *Bhikkhuni* must uphold, respect, worship and not violate throughout her life.

6. A *Bhikkhuni* shall seek opportunity for ordination under both orders of the *Saṅgha* for a female novice (*Sikkhamānā*) who has completed training of six Dhamma rules for two years. This Dhamma the *Bhikkhuni* must uphold, respect, worship and not violate throughout her life.

7. A *Bhikkhuni* must not scold or revile a *Bhikku* in any way. This Dhamma the *Bhikkhuni* must uphold, respect, worship and not violate throughout her life.

8. Starting today, a *Bhikkhuni* is forbidden from teaching a *Bhikku*, but not vice versa. This Dhamma the *Bhikkhuni* must uphold, respect, worship and not violate throughout her life (*Bhikkhuni* [in Thai] 7/403/317).

Ven. Ananda brought the message to Mahapajapati who readily accepted the conditions, saying “Ven. Ananda, I accept the eight Garudhammas and will observe them the rest of my life, just like a young woman or young man who likes to dress well, who, after they have bathed and are given garlands of flowers, will carry them over their heads” (*Bhikkhuni* [in Thai] 7/403/319).

According to the *Tipitaka*, after the ordination permission was given to Mahapajapati and other royal female family members, the Buddha discussed with Ven. Ananda about its possible effects on Buddhism in the

future and about the significance of the 8 *Garudhammarules*. The Buddha stated, “Ananda, if no woman leaves her home to live the life of a monastic (*Pabbajita*) as I have proclaimed, *Brahmacariya* (holy life) will last for a long time and the true Dhamma will last for 1,000 years. Now that a woman has left home to live the life of a monastic (*Pabbajita*) as I have proclaimed, *Brahmacariya* will not last for a long time and the true Dhamma will last for only 500 years. Ananda, *Dhammadvinaya* which includes women who have left home to live the life of a monastic (*Pabbajita*) will not last long just as a family that has many women but few men is vulnerable to attacks by bandits. Ananda, *Dhammadvinaya* which includes women who have left home to live the life of a monastic (*Pabbajita*) will not last long, just as wheat-rich fields that have pests descend upon them will have their life shortened. Ananda, *Dhammadvinaya* which includes women who have left home to live the life of a monastic (*Pabbajita*) will not last long, just as sugar plantations that have aphids descend upon them in abundance will be short-lived. Ananda, I issued *Garudhamma* 8 for all *Bhikkhuni* who must not break them all their lives just like a person who sets up a barrier around a big pond to prevent water from flowing in (and out) (*Bhikkhuni* [in Thai] 7/403/320).

Those who oppose *Bhikkhuni* ordination, however, argue that it was not really the Buddha's intention. The existence of *Bhikkhuni* was merely a result of external circumstances or conditions. Evidently, such is the common understanding of Thai society, as voiced by one of the monks of the highest *Saṅgha* order, His Holiness Supreme Patriarch Krommaluang Chinaworasiriwat, that “One should truly consider the Buddha's intention from the beginning. Queen Mahapajapati had greatly assisted the Buddha in so many ways. When she came to ask for permission to be ordained, it would be easily granted, as it should, as a gesture of gratitude – as a personal favor. He must have known whether in the future *Bhikkhuni* or *Sāmanerī* could benefit or harm the religion. With great benevolent grace, he forbade her several times. However, he also saw that she could keep *Garudhamma* 8 the rest of her life and therefore gave his permission. Then, he told Ven. Ananda that, with *Bhikkhuni* in the *Dhammadvinaya*, *Brahmacariya* will not last long. With no *Bhikkhuni* in ordination *Brahmacariya* will last for

a long time. This statement by the Buddha indicates that he did not favor the existence of *Bhikkhuni* or *Sāmanerī* (Referenced in Manop Nakkanrian, 2002: 177-178).

This is in line with the view of Phra Phromwachirayan, a member of the Supreme *Saṅgha* Council, who gave an interview concerning this issue that “the Buddha did not wish to have women ordained. It was recorded in history that Queen Mahapajapati sought ordination three times and her request was declined even on the third occasion. It was not until Ven. Ananda asked whether women could not attain the Dhamma and the Buddha replied in the positive that Ven. Ananda pleaded on her behalf, citing all the care she has given him during his childhood after the his mother’s death. Only then did the Buddha agree for her to be ordained (Referenced in Jairat Udomsree, 2002: 76).

The above views show that a part of Thai society believes that *Bhikkhuni* was certainly not the Buddha’s intention. As such views come from the *Saṅgha* which is considered to be the true source or the center of knowledge on Buddhism, most people who are their followers naturally share the conviction. Thus, it may be said that the belief about *Bhikkhuni* not being the Buddha’s intended order is fairly widespread. Yet, in the midst of such belief, the advocates of the *Bhikkhuni* order may not agree. They maintain that the Buddha intended to establish *Bhikkhuni* just as he did with *Bhikkhu*. It is not quite correct, therefore, to hold an opposing view which is not only irrational but also goes against a number of facts. Chatuman Kabilasing argues that “the fact that the Buddha hesitated to permit women to be ordained and live a life of a *Bhikkhuni* led to the interpretation that he did not really intend to have *Bhikkhuni* in the *Saṅgha*. He finally agreed to it because of Ven. Ananda’s plea. Such a conclusion is an affront to the Buddha’s intelligence. We must not forget that the Buddha was *Sammāsambuddha* (the Fully Enlightened One) who could see through everything. He was free from influence from other people’s thoughts. (He did not give his permission straight away because [the author]...) He had other factors to consider; once he realized that all the obstacles could be overcome, he gave his permission for women to be ordained” (Chatuman Kabilasing, 1992: 43-44).

Similarly, Suwanna Satha-Anand argues that the fact that the Buddha did not give an immediate permission for female ordination or showed certain hesitation in doing so cannot be taken to mean that he was not willing or did not intend to have *Bhikkhuni* ordination. It is more likely that he was giving some thought on possible repercussions to the *Bhikkhuni* themselves and to Buddhism. On this topic, Suwanna said “What does it mean when after some hesitation the Buddha gave his permission? It could only mean that he considered ordination an important means to enlightenment; otherwise, he would not have come up with the ordination process. It can also be taken up further that if he viewed ordination as an important part of the practice of Dhamma, he would never want to deny this opportunity to half of the humanity. The hesitation occurred for cultural and social reasons as to how this might affect society and the family at large. At that time the propagation of Buddhism had only just begun for 5-6 years. It was important for him that this issue be socially accepted. Therefore, female ordination was a matter of considerable importance. In my opinion, the hesitation was caused by these circumstances (Referenced in Montree Suebduang, 2008: 327).

Evidently the divergence of views on the part of the opponents and advocates of *Bhikkhuni* ordination is a result of different interpretations of the event. It can be said that this is so because there is no clear statement by the Buddha in Buddhist texts, or in particular in the *Tipitaka*, whether or not this was his intention. The argument has been a result of interpretation mostly based on circumstantial evidence, as can be seen above. However, since this is a significant issue, it is important, therefore, to pursue the matter further.

## 2. The Buddha's intention to establish the order of *Bhikkhuni*

Since there is no clear-cut conclusion on the establishment of the *Bhikkhuni* order in the Buddha's time, in an attempt to clarify the issue, the author thinks it important to consider three issues that have given rise to doubts about the Buddha's intention. They are (1) the meaning and implication of the fact that the Buddha did not grant his permission readily; (2) the meaning and true implication of *Garudhamma 8*; and (3) the proof of the Buddha's intention regarding *Bhikkhuni*, the details of which are as follows:

## 2.1 The meaning and implication of the fact that the Buddha did not grant his permission readily

One of the most important reasons cited against the intended establishment of the *Bhikkhuni* order was that the Buddha did not grant his permission straight away when Queen Mahapajapati made her request. She requested three times, and each time it was refused. Only when Ven. Ananda requested on her behalf did the Buddha agree to let her and her followers be ordained. Based on this evidence, it is concluded that the Buddha did not intend to establish the *Bhikkhuni* order.

On the basis of the studies, the author thinks that the fact that the Buddha did not grant the permission readily does not provide sufficient grounds to conclude that he did not intend to establish the *Bhikkhuni* order. As a general principle, the time taken to make a decision on any matter is not a conclusive indicator of the decision maker's willingness. A decision is usually made in a certain context or under a set of circumstances. With regard to the establishment of the *Bhikkhuni* order, in the author's view, the most likely reason is that the Buddha wanted to assess how the society at large and his *Bhikkhu* circle would react to the event and to ensure proper recognition of the *Bhikkhuni*. One could even say that the permission was not granted immediately but was delayed. Many stories have been told to the effect that the delayed permission was a strategy employed to ensure the sustainability of the *Bhikkhuni* in the *Saṅgha* and in the society at the time. In a sense, it can be argued that the Buddha tried to lessen possible adverse effects on Buddhism in general. It is equally important to understand the social conditions in the Buddha's time, for it will help us better appreciate his act.

Buddhism came into existence in India in the dominantly Brahman context in which human differences were accentuated in the forms of castes (*Vanna*). People were classified into *Khattaya*, *Brāhmaṇa*, *Vessa*, and *Sudda*. Each caste was predetermined by the Gods; therefore, one's status must be forever maintained and cannot be changed (Lecturers of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2007: 7).

There have been academic explanations that the caste system was designed to solve social problems by the Aryans who migrated into *Jambūdīpa* or present-day India then populated by the Dravidians. The caste system made it possible for the Aryans to legitimately establish themselves as superior. At the same time, it was used as a tool to keep their pure blood or to prevent cross-breeding with other ethnic groups. To ensure strict observance, it was referred to as being designed by God. Whether this was real or merely a rhetorical discourse created by the Aryans for their own specific purposes, the caste system has been practiced from the Brahman time to the present day. Buddhism came into being amidst such beliefs and was bound to be influenced by them to a greater or lesser extent. The belief in the caste system must have had some bearing on the issue of *Bhikkhuni* as well as on the status of women. In the spirit in which humans were considered different and were classified into castes, gender was another determinant that society had used to differentiate people. In other words, under the caste system, women of every caste were clearly inferior to men.

Even before the Buddha's time, back in the early Vedic period (800-300 years before the Buddhist Era), women's status was not so different from that of men (compared to later times). Women enjoyed a number of rights, including the right to study the Vedas. There was a record that some Vedic verses were composed by women. For example, *Rig Veda* 5.28 was composed by Visvara, *Rig, Veda* 1.179 by Lopamudra, *Rig Veda* 10.39-40 by Gosha, and 8.80.1-7 by Apala (referenced in Suwimon Prakopwaithayakit, 1978: 8-9). Even in the late Vedic period there were a number of distinguished female sages, e.g. Maitreyi, wife of Yajnavalkaya, who was a "Brahmavadini" (referenced in Watsana Ai-rarat, 1979: 2). That women could compose hymns or played the role of a sage indicates that they were not barred from education. Generally speaking, education provided a basis for other opportunities. Nevertheless, this might not entirely guarantee or prove the status of women in those days, as a person's status in society depended on a complex combination of conditions. Be that as it may, at least it could be said that the status of women in that period was not so low compared to later times.

Later in the early Brahmanic period (300-100 years before the Buddhist Era), women were subjected to a much lower status. Such decline could be linked to the phenomenon of the popularity of having male offspring and the emphasis on qualities that desirable women should have. This was the period in which the Brahmins exerted great social influence. Whatever they believed or advised was adopted and followed. They were believed to have the power to communicate with gods. With regard to the notion of having male offspring, the *Taittiriya Samhita* mention is made of the three kinds of debt that a person is required to pay off: (1) debt to the rishi to be paid off by being pure and studying the Vedas, (3) debt to the gods to be paid off by performing ceremonious rites, and (3) debt to the ancestors to be paid off by producing a son (referenced in Maejee Kritsana Raksachom, 2007: 16). Additional explanations were given that if a family did not have a son, the father would go to *Putta* Hell when he passes away. Having a son, then, brought great luck, preventing the father from going to Hell. A son also played an important role in performing religious rituals for the souls of his parents upon their deaths to go to Heaven. In the family system at that time, the man was the nexus or head of the family. He owned everything in the family. Family names and heritages followed the male lineage. The point is that a family could equally produce male and female offspring. In such a belief system, having a daughter would be considered bad luck. In the Brahmanic scripture, it was clearly mentioned that “to have no son is such a bad luck. A woman who cannot bear a son is a disaster” (referenced in Maejee Kritsana Raksachom, 2007: 16). The disaster brought about by a woman both as a child-bearer and as the born originated from such a belief.

A daughter, though unexpected, once born was then expected by society to become something and perform certain tasks. Such expectations were made on the assumption that she was born with congenital faults. She was thus expected to exist for other people who were endowed with greater human dignity and worth, i.e. men. From birth to death, her function was to serve men at every stage of life. The only way she could improve her status was to get married and produce a son. The society at the time also demanded that a woman about to enter wedlock be a virgin. Virginity, it

was argued, would lead to the success and purity of the ceremonies for her husband and future children. To ensure this eventuality, the practice and the tradition were started whereby women must get married at a very young age. This practice is clearly stated in *Mānava-Dhammasattha* that a 30-year-old man may marry a 12-year-old girl that he loves, while a man of 24 may marry his beloved girl of 8. If a man, who is unmarried, cannot perform his religious duties, he may marry at once. (Referenced in Preecha Changkhwanyuen, 1999: 23-31[29])

As a consequence, women in that period lacked educational opportunity and knowledge. Many rights were denied to them. The quality of life plunged utterly; they became helpless and had to depend on men for practically every affair. A woman was the property of her owner, not a person with her own will. Chatsuman Kabilasing talked about this with reference to *Manu-Dhammasattha* or the Law of Manu (*Manava-Dhammasattha*), "When young, women were under parental care; when married, they were under their husbands' care; and when old, they were under their children's care" (Chatsuman Kabilasing, 1992: 42). As a result of the lack of educational opportunity, they were unable to escape the whirlpool in which they found themselves inferior in every aspect of life, whether personally, socially, or economically. Suwimon Prakopwaithayakit gives an interesting account of the effect of the lack of educational opportunity on women at that time as follows: "The deprivation of educational opportunity marks the most important point that saw women blindly subjected to social rules without any objection as well as losing all the inheritance rights. This made their life poorer and poorer" (Suwimon Prakopwaithayakit, 1978: 22-29).

Of course, marriage could elevate women's status to a certain extent, as women were still desirable and existed for the benefit of others. However, in a society in which being male was something to be desired, even when a woman was useful to a man, she was supposed to seek out her husband and was responsible for the dowry. Once married, she had to move to his house, be a good wife, produce sons and diligently wait on him and his parents. The elevated status simply means she was no longer single – a socially undesirable existence. If she could produce a male offspring, she was considered lucky, because then she could escape being abandoned. A

man had a legitimate right to abandon a childless wife. Marriage in no way could guarantee her independence or equality. No matter whatever status she occupied, the society expected her to be inferior to a man.

The lack of education not only took away a woman's ability to depend on herself or determine her own life but also gave rise to several negative aspects about her identity. Her fate became increasingly worse. For example, mention was made in the scriptures in this period that "women, *Sudda*, dogs and crows are falsehoods, sins, and darkness. They cannot control their own minds or take care of their own properties..." (Suwimon Prakopwaithayakit, 1978: 22-23) and "by nature women do not have true love for any man and are ready to cheat on their husbands who take good care of them. Women take pleasure in jewelry, are lustful, resentful, fraudulent, and evil." (Referenced in Chatsuman Kabilasing, 1999: 14-22[22]).

Although Buddhism is known for its teachings that go against Brahmanism in many ways, it came into being in the midst of the Brahman context and was likely to bear some Brahman influence. Buddhists at that time also found themselves in the same situation. For instance, King Pasendikosala who converted from Brahmanism to Buddhism favored having a son over a daughter. Once, the king learnt that Queen Mallikadevi bore a daughter but felt no joy. At the time he was conversing with the Buddha who knew what happened and comforted him by pointing out the value of women. Although what the Buddha said was not too dissimilar from the Brahman concept, it was given from a positive perspective very different from the social belief popularly held at the time. He said to King Pasendikosala thus, "...In truth some girls can be better-off. You had better nurture your child. There are women who are intelligent and moral, who take good care of their husbands' parents and god, and who are loyal to their husbands. Men born from such women will naturally be brave and great. The sons of such good wives can rule the country (*Samyuttanikāya Sagāthavagga* [Thai] 15/127/150).

The life history of Ven. Ilidāsī-therī before she became *Bhikkhuni* is another piece of evidence that clearly reflects the status of women under the Brahman culture. The story was told in the *Therī Hymn* that originally

she was the daughter of a millionaire in the city of Ujjennī. She married three times before her ordination. The first marriage was arranged by her father to an equally rich young man who later divorced her. Her father made the second arrangement for her to marry a man from the Brahman caste; again the marriage did not last. The third time, she was married to a beggar who subsequently annulled the marriage. More importantly here, this shows how much power the father wielded over the life of the daughter. He made her marry three times. Another point is that there was no life for a divorced woman. To be born in a rich family did not guarantee an independent life. She had to marry even a beggar. Iiḍāśī's description of how she lived with each husband gave a clear picture of the status of women at the time. For example, "I must pay respect to my husbands' parents every morning and night. I prostrated myself at their feet as I was taught. When I met their sisters or brothers, elder or younger, even for the first time, I had to show them that I was afraid. I gave them my seat, prepared rice, water, and snacks for them, brought them food and drink myself, and provided them with appropriate gifts. I had to get up at the appropriate time, enter my husband's abode, wash my hands and feet near the entrance, put my hands together to show him my respect, prepare a comb, facial powder, eye drops, and mirror for him. I dressed him as a servant was supposed to do, cooked, washed all the utensils, took care of him just as a mother would look after her only child, did all the duties required of me, left all the pride behind, worked diligently, and did not stay idle" (*Khuddakanikāya Therī Gāthā* [Thai] 26/402-431/622-626).

Thus, women's status and role in the society during the Buddha's time were clearly inferior and subordinate to men's. The Buddha did not grant permission to women's request for ordination easily or immediately, not because he did not want to have *Bhikkhuni*; it would go against the basic tenets of Buddhist teachings in many ways, which will be discussed later. It is more likely that he was considering a number of social determinants that were not favorable to the presence of *Bhikkhuni* who would enjoy the same status or dignity as their male counterparts. In terms of social psychology, starting a new value or concept that goes against social conventions is most likely to face stiff opposition. In a society in which women were held inferior

to men, *Bhikkhuni* ordination would be tantamount to promoting the status of women to equal that of men. In such a situation, the Buddha's assessment might be that a prompt permission would constitute an abrupt break with social norms. The delayed permission could be considered a strategy the Buddha employed to reduce social displeasure to a certain degree.

## 2.2 Meaning and implication of *Garudhamma 8*

Not only did a seemingly reluctant permission for *Bhikkhuni* ordination cause uncertainty as to the Buddha's intention, but *Garudhamma 8* which the Buddha required Queen Mahapajapati and other *Bhikkhuni* to strictly observe is also another contentious issue. The contents of the eight rules could be interpreted as discriminatory against women. To state even further, the *Garudhamma* rules have been cited as an instrument designed to do away with the *Bhikkhuni* order altogether. They could become conditions too oppressive for women to continue a life of *Bhikkhuni*. The Buddha's agreement to have women ordained with such severe prejudiced conditions could imply his lack of real intention. The presence of the *Bhikkhuni* order would last for a period of time and would be bound to disappear with the progress of time. In other words, there was no real intention on the part of the Buddha to establish the *Bhikkhuni* order. Is such an allegation substantiated? In this regard, it may be appropriate to look at the aforementioned *Garudhamma 8*.

After careful studies, the author finds that the above allegation or assumption is valid to a certain extent, but to conclude that the Buddha had no real intention to establish the *Bhikkhuni* order and resorted to the *Garudhamma* rules to do away with *Bhikkhuni* is not entirely justified. The contents of *Garudhamma 8* might indicate that *Bhikkhuni* were put in a position very subordinate to and dependent on the *Bhikkhu* counterpart even though both orders lived a similar monastic life. *Garudhamma* rules no. 2-6 reflect an inherent discrepancy of power structure. However, if one considers the issue in the socio-cultural context of the time, one may get a better understanding. The creation of the *Garudhamma* rules was designed to accommodate the socio-cultural values of the time and cause as little social friction as possible without adverse effects on Buddhism. In another perspective, *Garudhamma* rules no. 2-6 were intended to facilitate

the atmosphere in which *Bhikkhuni* and *Bhikkhu* could lend each other a helping hand. The *Bhikkhu* might appear to hold greater power, but this was simply because they were there first and therefore more experienced to provide advice to the *Bhikkhuni* just as elder brothers would do to younger sisters. In addition, the greater power enjoyed by the *Bhikkhu* in the rules was mandated under the Buddhist framework of wisdom which did not allow the *Bhikkhu* to exercise their power indiscriminately.

Yet, if one considers the issue objectively, despite the intended inter-dependent nature of *Garudhamma* no. 2-6, some rules are clearly discriminatory, especially Rule No. 1 (a *Bhikkhuni* must show her respect to a *Bhikkhu* first), Rule No. 7 (a *Bhikkhuni* must not scold or revile a *Bhikku* in any way), and Rule No. 8 (a *Bhikkhuni* is forbidden to teach a *Bhikku*), for they apply only unilaterally and put the *Bhikku* in a higher position. However, on closer perusal, Rules no. 7 and 8, despite their discriminatory content, relate to unimportant subjects. A *Bhikkhuni* must not scold or revile a *Bhikku*. A person who leads a monastic life is not supposed to commit such inappropriate acts as scolding. A *Bhikkhuni* is forbidden to teach a *Bhikku*. This could be considered a task beyond the *Bhikkhuni*'s call of duty. The *Bhikku* were in bigger numbers and were there before the *Bhikkhuni*. On the other hand, while the *Bhikku* were able to teach the *Bhikkhuni*, the Buddha laid down a number of conditions for them. To ensure proper teaching, a *Bhikku* must possess the following qualities:

1. He is virtuous, restrained in accordance with the fundamental rules of the Order (*Pāṭimokkha*), consummate in his behavior and sphere of activity, seeing danger in the slightest faults, observing and studying disciplinary rules.

2. He is a man of great learning, retaining and storing what he has learnt. He has absorbed whatever teachings are admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end. He has proclaimed a holy life complete in meaning and expression, perfect and pure, able to retain, express, discuss what he has learnt, and penetrate his views.

3. He is expert in *Pāṭimokkha* of both Orders, able to explain accurately, competently, and properly both in his discourse and in subsidiary points.

4. He speaks well and with a good voice.
5. He is liked by most *Bhikkhuni*.
6. He is able to teach *Bhikkhuni*.
7. He has never violated the *Garudhamma* rules practiced by the women who wear robes in ordination and dedicate their lives to the Buddha.
8. He has been in the monkhood for 20 or more years.

O, *Bhikkhu*, I give permission to a monk endowed with such 8 qualities to teach *Bhikkhuni*.

(*Mahāvibhaṅga*, [Thai] 2/145/321)

However, it is difficult to understand how *Garudhamma* no. 1 (a *Bhikkhuni* must show her respect to a *Bhikkhu* first) is not discriminatory, as paying respect is a tool or sign that society uses as an important means to show the level or status of an individual. To clarify this point further, the author will give a detailed explanation in the following.

*Garudhamma* Rule no. 1 says that a *Bhikkhuni* must show her respect to a *Bhikkhu* first without regard to the years in monkhood he has spent. In the conceptual framework in which paying respect to someone is an acknowledgment of that person's ethical value, being the person to pay respect first implies his/her lower status. So, the rule that requires a *Bhikkhuni* to pay respect to a *Bhikkhu* first is equivalent to the notion that the former has a lower ethical value than the latter. Such consideration is not appropriate, for it does not correspond to the general rule of the practice of paying respect. It seems highly unlikely that being a *Bhikkhu* or a male monastic will always constitute his superiority to a *Bhikkhuni* or female monastic. Gender is not a condition of a person's ethics, nor is any external form of humanity an indicator of the ethical level. However, to make possible a practice of paying respect to each other without recourse to ethical proof or certification before such act, society in general has come up with some reasonable practical criteria that can be related to ethical level of the person concerned. Such criteria include seniority, qualifications, or birth status. In other words, an older person is supposed to have more experience or have accumulated more virtues than a younger one. A person with more

qualifications is supposed to have greater wisdom or more knowledge than a less qualified individual. A person born of a higher status is supposed to come from a family that has made more social contributions than that of a lower status. Yet, it is not possible to explain how a *Bhikkhu* is ethically superior to a *Bhikkhuni*, because gender by itself is only a physical indication of what a person can do in his/her life, e.g. a woman can give birth to a child, while a man cannot. Gender, therefore, is not an ethical reason in itself. To require a *Bhikkhuni* to pay homage or respect to *Bhikkhu* first, in essence, is unreasonable with regard to the general principles of respect paying.

In general, it is believed that a pure person will not do something impure. The Buddha is a pure Great Teacher. Is it possible that he established such impure or unjust things as the sexually oppressive *Garudhamma* Rule no.1? In the *Tipitaka* there is evidence that the Buddha established the eight *Garudhamma* rules, including Rule no. 1. He told Ven. Ananda to impart the message to Queen Mahapajapati about his permission for her ordination on the *Garudhamma* conditionality, saying “Ananda, if Queen Mahapajapati accepts the eight *Garudhamma* rules, the acceptance will constitute her ordination...” (*Bhikkhuni vibhaṅga*, (Thai) 7/503/316).

Besides, there is evidence that Queen Mahapajapati requested that *Bhikkhu* and *Bhikkhuni* pay respect to each other in accordance with the number of monastic years they spent, but the Buddha declined. About this issue, he said to Ven. Ananda: “Ananda, I am in no position, nor is this an opportunity, to permit paying homage, rising to greet, or giving due respect to women. Ananda, even those who follow other religions do not pay homage, rise to greet, or give due respect to women. So, why should I permit doing so (*Bhikkhuni vibhaṅga*, (Thai) 7/505/322)?

At the same time, the Buddha said further that any *Bhikkhu* who violated the instructions would be considered as having committed an ecclesiastical offence, thus: “O, *Bhikkhu*, a *Bhikkhu* shall not pay homage, rise to greet, or pay due respect to women. Anyone who does so commits an ecclesiastical offence (*Bhikkhuni vibhaṅga*, [Thai] 7/505/322).

The above evidence shows that the Buddha evidently set the *Garudhamma* rules. In general, when a person sets something prejudicial

he is said to have a prejudiced view. Can this principle be applied to the Buddha? In the author's view, the matter cannot be concluded in that simple manner. If one considers the constraints that the Buddha came up against in his time, one will understand why he decided that way. In the case of *Garudhamma* Rule no. 1, the author believes that it was established not on the basis of Dhamma but on the basis of cultural consideration. Paying respect has something directly to do with cultural practice. The issue at hand has an especially high social implication at stake. Respect paying is part of a way of life. An expression made by a person is a statement for or against the social norm. It is a received fact that culture mirrors the belief of a society at large. If one wants to do something acceptable to most people, one has to go along with them. Anything that goes against the social norms is most likely to face opposition. In the Buddha's time, society put men above women. People were accustomed to seeing women pay respect to men. If the Buddha had decreed the respect paying rule for *Bhikkhu* and *Bhikkhuni* in a way that was different from the social norms, it would not have produced a positive effect on the acceptance of *Bhikkhu* or Buddhism as a whole.

From the social psychological perspective, the rules about *Bhikkhuni* paying respect to *Bhikkhu* first could be interpreted as a social confirmation or a continuation of the low status of women. However, if one puts the matter in the social context of the time and in the context of the newly established Buddhism, one can see that women ecclesiastics were constrained by a great number of rules. The practice of paying respect between male and female ecclesiastics deeply touched the social and psychological chords. The rule about *Bhikkhuni* paying respect to *Bhikkhu* first did not truly reflect the world view of Buddhism. The rule, apparently influenced by the Brahman culture, should be viewed as the best possible option available then. The fact that the Buddha established the female monastic order carrying the same dignity as the male counterpart must have been a rather strange phenomenon at the time. More importantly, the phenomenon was something of a challenge to or a defiance of the belief in women's status. Certain rules set for female ecclesiastics were designed to comply with some existing beliefs, like that about *Bhikkhuni* paying respect

to *Bhikkhu* first. This could be considered a compromise or even a willingness to retreat one step. In a sense, *Bhikkhuni* ordination was a cultural progress or revolution. Therefore, *Garudhamma* Rule no. 1 requiring *Bhikkhuni* to pay respect to *Bhikkhu* first could be seen as principally intended to win social acceptance, even though its essence might go somewhat against the Buddhist principles. In Buddhism, there are no teachings that say that men and women are different in essence or by nature. The religion believes in Kamma or action, not gender. So, the rule does not reflect superiority on any party's status or value; rather, it is a way of mutual dependence in the social context of the time. It can be said, therefore, that the Buddha did not establish the rule out of prejudice – rather, he did so with a view to ensuring the existence and continuation of *Bhikkhuni* in a culturally-bound society. If the Buddha intended to see *Bhikkhuni* continued, it is a clear proof that *Bhikkhuni* was his intention.

If one considers the contents of *Garudhamma* on the basis of pure principles, especially on human nature as proclaimed by Buddhism, without taking into account the socio-cultural context of the Buddha's time, the eight *Garudhamma* rules are not fair to women. If humanity was equal, the rules should not suggest otherwise. The Buddha should not be held accountable for such injustice. It was rather the people in those times that lacked wisdom to create a just society. The Buddha came into being in such a limited world. He had to devise ways and means that would enable his disciples and religion to survive and continue. Making compromises by accommodating certain socio-cultural values was inevitable. The eight *Garudhamma* rules were a product of the circumstances. In such a case, they should not be raised as evidence that women were inferior to men. What is more important is the Buddha's intention to ensure the existence of *Bhikkhuni Saṅgha* and its continuation in a very difficult situation during his time.

### **2.3 Proof of the Buddha's intention to establish the *Bhikkhuni Saṅgha***

Based on the studies undertaken, the author finds that there are a number of arguments to prove the Buddha's intention to establish the

*Bhikkhuni Saṅgha* in his time. First, the *Bhikkhuni Saṅgha* is something that always accompanies the Buddha, because it is a custom or nature of every Buddha, past, present, or future, to have four assemblies of Buddhists (*Buddhaparisā*): *Bhikkhu*, *Bhikkhuni*, *Upāsaka* (male lay Buddhists), and *Upāsikā* (female followers). In other words, when there is a Buddha, there are four assemblies of Buddhists. As *Bhikkhuni* are part of *Buddhaparisā*, an important element in Buddhist ecclesiastical orders, they are always with the Buddha. When such is the case, it is reasonable to conclude that it was the Buddha's intention to establish the *Bhikkhuni Saṅgha* in his religion. As *Bhikkhuni* are part of every Buddha's appearance, and *Samāna* Gotama is a Buddha, it is natural that they must accompany him. In other words, the current Buddha wanted to establish the *Bhikkhuni Saṅgha* in his religion just as other Buddhas had done before him. This argument can be found in *Buddhavaṃsa* Scripture in the *Tipitaka*. The scripture mentions *Bhikkhuni*, especially two distinguished female disciples (*Aggasāvikā*), for each Buddha as follows:

Dīpaṃkara Buddha was accompanied by Ven. Nandā-therī and Ven. Sunandā-therī as *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavaṃsa* [Thai] 33/25/595). Koṇḍañña Buddha was accompanied by Ven. Tissā-therī and Ven. Upatissā-therī as *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavaṃsa* [Thai] 33/31/600). Maṃkara Buddha was accompanied by Ven. Sīravā-therī and Ven. Asokā-therī as *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavaṃsa* [Thai] 33/24/606). Sumana Buddha had Ven. Soṇā-therī and Ven. Upasoṇā-therī as *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavaṃsa* [Thai] 33/27/611). Revata Buddha had Ven. Bhaddā-therī and Ven. Subhaddā-therī as *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavaṃsa* [Thai] 33/22/617). Sobhita Buddha was accompanied by Ven. Nakulā-therī and Ven. Sujādā-therī as *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavaṃsa* [Thai] 33/22/622). Anomadassī Buddha had Ven. Sundarā-therī and Ven. Sumanā-therī as *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavaṃsa* [Thai] 33/23/627). Paduma Buddha had Ven. Rādhā-therī and Ven. Surādhā-therī as *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavaṃsa* [Thai] 33/22/632). Nārada Buddha was accompanied by Ven. Uttarā-therī and Ven. Phaggunī-therī as *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavaṃsa* [Thai] 33/24/638). Padumuttara Buddha had Ven. Amitā-therī and Ven. Asamā-

therīas *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavamsa* [Thai] 33/25/644). Sumedha Buddha was accompanied by Ven. Rāmā-therī and Ven. Surāmā-therīas *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavamsa* [Thai] 33/24/649). Sujāta Buddha was accompanied by Ven. Nāgā-therī and Ven. Nāgasamānā-therīas *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavamsa* [Thai] 33/26/654). Piyadassī Buddha had Ven. Sujātā-therī and Ven. Dhammādinnā-therīas *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavamsa* [Thai] 33/21/659). Atthadassī Buddha had Ven. Dhammā-therī and Ven. Sudhammā-therīas *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavamsa* [Thai] 33/20/664). Dhammadassī Buddha was accompanied by Ven. Khemā-therī and Ven. Saccanāmā-therīas *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavamsa* [Thai] 33/19/669). Siddhattha Buddha had Ven. Sīvalā-therī and Ven. Surāmā-therīas *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavamsa* [Thai] 33/19/674). Tissa Buddha was accompanied by Ven. Phusā-therī and Ven. Sudattā-therīas *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavamsa* [Thai] 33/22/679). Pussa Buddha had Ven. Cālā-therī and Ven. Upacālā-therīas *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavamsa* [Thai] 33/20/684). Vipassī Buddha had Ven. Candā-therī and Ven. Candamittā-therīas *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavamsa* [Thai] 33/30/689). Sikhi Buddha was accompanied by Ven. Sakhilā-therī and Ven. Padumā-therīas *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavamsa* [Thai] 33/21/694). Vessabhū Buddha was accompanied by Ven. Rāmā-therī and Ven. Samālā-therīas *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavamsa* [Thai] 33/21/705). Kukakusandha Buddha was accompanied by Ven. Sāmā-therī and Ven. Campānāmā-therīas *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavamsa* [Thai] 33/21/705). Konāgamana Buddha had Ven. Samuddā-therī and Ven. Uttarā-therīas *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavamsa* [Thai] 33/23/710). Kassapa Buddha had Ven. Anulā-therī and Ven. Uruvelā-therīas *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavamsa* [Thai] 33/39/716), and the current Buddha, Gotama Buddha, had Ven. Khemā-therī and Ven. Upalavannā-therīas *Aggasāvikā* (*Khuddakanikāya Buddhavamsa* [Thai] 33/18/720).

The above examples could be used to testify that *Bhikkhuni* have existed alongside Buddhism all along. Thus, it is natural to infer that the Buddha intended to establish the *Bhikkhuni* order in the same tradition as

all the Buddhas. If the current Gotama Buddha had no intention to do so, he would be different from the other Buddhas. This would be against all reasons and against the custom or nature of the Buddhas. Women constitute about half of humanity. In the author's view, it is rather hard to imagine that the current Gotama Buddha would reject them. It is fair to say, therefore, that the belief that the Buddha had no intention to establish the *Bhikkhuni* order goes against the historical information concerning the Buddhas and clearly against the Buddhas' character or nature with regard to compassion for all humanity without discrimination.

Another more recent piece of evidence in favor of the Buddha's intention regarding *Bhikkhunis* concerned the current Buddha. Soon after his Enlightenment, Māra invited the Buddha to enter into Nibbāna. This was supposedly the best time for the Buddha to do. It was Māra's view that the Buddha had achieved what he had set out to do, i.e. to attain Enlightenment. The Buddha turned down the invitation, for his task was not simply to attain Enlightenment and overcome all suffering for himself. He wanted to bring enlightenment to the four *Buddhaparisā* as well. On the subject of *Buddhaparisā* in particular, he said to Māra thus: "Māra, the sinful one, I will not go into Nibbāna for now as long as my female disciples are not yet truly wise, well-advised, courageous, learned, and equipped with Dhamma, as long as they have not practiced and followed Dhamma as is due to them, proper to them, as long as they study with their teachers but cannot promptly tell, show, set, determine, reveal, or classify what they learn, as long as they are still unable to explain Dhamma and every happening in a proper and legitimate manner" (*Dīghanikāya Mahāvagga* [Thai] 10/168/114).

The Buddha told Māra thus even before any *Bhikkhuni* was created. This means that the Buddha knew in advance that there would be *Bhikkhuni*. Analyzing the speech further, one can clearly see that he planned to establish the *Bhikkhuni* order with a list of action plans to strengthen them. It is rather impossible to interpret this as anything other than the Buddha's intention to see the order established. If there was a plan to have the *Bhikkhuni* order, it means that *Bhikkhuni* was something he had in mind.

It is reasonable, therefore, to conclude that he intended to establish the *Bhikkhuni* order. This is further reinforced when Māra later returned to remind him of his statement or promise about entering into Nibbāna now that he had fulfilled all the conditions. Here Māra raised the issue of *Bhikkhuni* as the ultimate condition, and the Buddha complied and decided to leave the world for Nibbāna three months from then. This is what Māra said to the Buddha: “O the Enlightened One, now that the *Bhikkhuni* who are your *Sāvikā* are truly wise, well-advised, courageous, learned, and equipped with Dhamma, and they have practiced and followed Dhamma as is due to them, proper to them, and they have studied with their teachers and can promptly tell, show, set, determine, reveal, or classify what they learn, and they are now able to explain Dhamma and every happening in a proper and legitimate manner, O, the Blessed One, please enter into Nibbāna now. This is the time for you to do so” (*Dīghanikāya Mahāvagga* [Thai] 10/168/114).

Not only does the Buddha's statement about the conditions for Nibbāna to Māra have significant implications on his intention to establish the *Bhikkhuni* order, but it also reflects the importance of *Bhikkhuni* to him. The Buddha must have attached great importance to *Bhikkhuni*. He mentioned what he planned to do with them, treating it as a critical agenda or mission on the basis of which to decide whether to continue to live or enter into Nibbāna. How much importance should be placed on this fact is something Buddhists should ponder upon, as well as decide why the Buddha had done so, and how, as his disciples, they should react.

The last evidence concerning the Buddha's intention about *Bhikkhuni* is related to the Buddhist principles. As a whole, it is evident that *Bhikkhuni* is something that the Buddha had in mind and certainly wanted to establish. It is well known that the aim of Buddhism is to liberate humanity from suffering. According to the Buddhist teaching, in order to escape from suffering, a person needs to undergo self-training or self-development to the required level. Leading a monastic life is a mode of being that the Buddha created as a condition for such a person to undergo training. Although Buddhism treats everyone, lay and cleric, as capable of attaining the highest aim of Nibbāna, the monastic life constitutes a

condition more favorable for reach the objective than does the lay life. The *Tipitika* clearly regards the monastic life as being of greater value than a lay one: “Living a lay life is uncomfortable. It is a path full of dusts. A monastic life provides a clear path. It is not easy for a lay person to live a virtuous life as pure as a polished conch” (*Majjhimanikāya Uparipañcarāsaga*, [Thai] 14/13/19). It comes to reason, therefore, that the Buddha wanted humanity, male and female, to lead a monastic life as *Bhikkhu* and *Bhikkhuni*, and do away with all the suffering. That is the aim or mission of Buddhism.

### 3. Conclusion

The Buddha’s intention with regard to the *Bhikkhuni Saṅgha* is an important issue not only as a part of the history of Buddhism but also as a decisive factor for or against the attempt to revive *Bhikkhuni* ordination in the Thai society. It is, therefore, important to come to a proper understanding. After careful studies, the author thinks it only reasonable to conclude that the Buddha intended to establish the *Bhikkhuni Saṅgha* in Buddhism. In other words, the establishment of the *Bhikkhuni* order was due to no other factor than the Buddha’s intention to do so. The act of creating the order by the Buddha himself was proof enough of the creator’s intention. The omniscient (*Subbaññū*) and free nature of the Buddha put him above any pressure imposed on him. The notion that the *Bhikkhuni* order was created out of other conditions than his intention is untenable in the face of important evidences. First, the *Bhikkhuni Saṅgha* has always accompanied the Buddha, i.e. in Buddhism, it is the custom and nature of every Buddha to have *Bhikkhuni Saṅgha*. It is, thus, reasonable to conclude that the current Buddha also had the intention to establish the order. Second, there was a statement made by the Buddha to Māra about not entering into Nibbāna when no *Bhikkhuni* had been established yet. He told Māra that he could not go into Nibbāna until *Bhikkhuni* were sufficiently strong. This constitutes evidence that the presence of *Bhikkhuni* was in his mind and that he planned to eventually establish the order in Buddhism. Finally, the aims of Buddhism are to free humanity from all suffering and to provide a way of life for that purpose through a monastic or virtuous life. This reinforces the argument for the existence of *Bhikkhuni* rather than against

it. The fact that the Buddha did not permit *Bhikkhuni* ordination when it was first requested, or set *Garudhamma* 8 as conditions, in no way implies that he did not intend to establish the *Bhikkhuni* order, but rather because he considered the possibility and scenario of it being accepted and its effect on Buddhism. The issue was primarily related to the social context at the time.

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