

Dignity and Discipline

DIGNITY & DISCIPLINE

Reviving Full Ordination for Buddhist Nuns

Edited by
Thea Mohr and
Jampa Tsedroen



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The Eight Garudhammas

Ute Hüsken

PROponents AS WELL as opponents to the concept of a bhikṣuṇī ordination repeatedly refer to one specific version of the account of the establishment of the bhikṣuṇī order in the Theravāda tradition given in the Vinaya Piṭaka. The events depicted there do not allow for drawing a coherent picture of the events and the underlying attitude toward nuns during the time of the Buddha, leaving the historical event, along with the current debate, up for further discussion.

This legend forms the content and context of the eight so-called “heavy rules” (*garudhamma*) mentioned in the *Cullavagga*. It shall be demonstrated, on the basis of internal evidence, that diverse and at times even conflicting agenda are voiced in this canonical account. This leads to the more general question of what can be the touchstone of authenticity and authority when it comes to evaluating a tradition. Thus, although the texts analyzed in this paper do not stem from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, our reflections may have some relevance for the issue as to whether, and how, a nuns’ order in the Tibetan tradition can be established.

Apart from the *Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga*, few passages in the Vinaya Piṭaka exclusively or specifically relate to women. The tenth chapter of the *Cullavagga*, however, provides direct and indirect evidence regarding the Buddha’s attitude toward the establishment of a nuns’ order. His attitude is depicted as ambivalent, to say the least. According to the *Cullavagga*, although the Buddha in the end agreed to establish a bhikkhunī saṅgha, he:

1. only hesitatingly accepted women as members of the order;
2. admitted that women are capable of salvation;
3. compared women to diseases and weakening factors for the saṅgha and for the duration of the dharma; and
4. announced as a precondition for any woman's ordination the acceptance of the eight "heavy rules" (*garudhamma*).

These eight rules serve not only as admission criteria but also as rules that are to be observed for life by every nun. It is therefore striking that this set of rules in the Pāli Vinaya is not part of the *Bhikkhunīpāṭimokkha*. However, seven of these rules do in fact have parallels either in word or in content with other rules stated in the *Bhikkhunīpāṭimokkha*. Moreover, it is remarkable that these eight rules, although depicted as a precondition for ordination, are not at all mentioned in the ordination formulas for nuns, as given elsewhere in the *Cullavagga*. It is therefore possible that the eight *garudhammas* are a list of those rules that were deemed most important to later monastics who were in charge of transmitting the texts and became a significant aspect of the account during the editing process. At the same time, additional weight might have been attributed to this set of eight rules, as the number eight also seems to echo the eight *pārājika* rules for nuns.

Let us begin with a discussion of the fifth of these eight rules, as it directly hints at a general inconsistency regarding the *garudhammas* and the rules of the *Bhikkhunīpāṭimokkha*.

The fifth *garudhamma* stipulates that a nun who has broken one of the *garudhammas* must undergo fourteen days of *mānatta* (a probation period) before both orders. This *garudhamma* is the only one out of the eight rules without equivalent among the *pācittiya* rules of the *Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga*. The penalty for transgressing a *garudhamma* corresponds to that imposed on a nun when she breaks a *saṃghādisesa* rule: she has to spend a two-week probation period isolated from the main group of nuns along with another nun who is assigned to her as a companion for the probation period. This penalty, however, differs from the result of a breach of a *pācittiya* rule, which requires a simple confession. Listing identical rules as *garudhamma* (with two weeks probation) and as *pācittiya* (resulting in confession), as is the case with *garudhammas* 2, 3, 4, and 7 (these are identical to *pācittiya* 56, 59, 57, and 52), is an obvious inconsistency—given that the term *garudhamma* does not refer to "saṃghādisesa" in *garudhamma* 5.

Garudhammas 1, 7, and 8 deal with the relationship of individual nuns to individual monks. The first of the eight heavy rules makes quite clear that a nun is always beneath a monk in rank: “A nun, even if she has been ordained for a hundred years, is to greet respectfully, to stand up, to salute with joined palms, and to carry out other acts of homage toward a monk, even if he has been ordained only on that very day.” This is not the only rule emphasizing the general subordination of individual nuns under individual monks. *Pācittiya* 94 of the *Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga*, for example, states that a nun may not sit in the presence of a monk, and *Cullavagga* VI.6.5 states that women (including nuns, presumably) are not to be greeted by monks. The rule that nuns must greet monks, but not the other way around, is also emphasized later on in this section in the *Cullavagga* when Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī asked the Buddha to rescind garudhamma 1, which he explicitly and vehemently rejects, with reference to the customs prevalent among other ascetics.

Garudhamma 7 states that a nun is in no way allowed to insult or disparage a monk, and garudhamma 8 says that a nun may not address a monk (or admonish monks), whereas monks may address (or admonish) nuns.

Three more garudhammas regulate the relationship between the bhikkhunī saṅgha and the bhikkhu saṅgha. Garudhamma 2 fixes one aspect of the general dependence of the bhikkhunī saṅgha on the bhikkhu saṅgha: a nun may not spend the rainy season in a residential district where there is no monk. The reason given for this is that instruction, to be delivered by monks, and legal actions to be performed by the bhikkhunī saṅgha would not be possible otherwise. Implicitly, this rule presupposes a development described only later in the *Cullavagga*, specifically that the *kammās* to be performed by nuns are to be supervised by monks. At this stage, namely before any woman is accepted as a nun and before any of the formal procedures have been regulated, this rule seems slightly out of place, or premature.

Garudhamma 3 further states that a nun must ask the bhikkhu saṅgha for instruction and for the *pāṭimokkha* date twice a month. The nuns thus have to comply with the monks’ calculation of the date and, in that respect, remain dependent upon them. One aspect should however be noted: later in the *Cullavagga* (X.6) a gradual development is described. At first the monks recited the *pāṭimokkha* formula for the nuns, but then this task was handed over entirely to the nuns. So the “asking for *pāṭimokkha*,” regulated in this garudhamma, is there depicted as the result of a development.

Garudhamma 4 again refers to legal acts of the saṅgha: the nuns must perform the *pavāraṇā* ceremony before both orders. Later in the same section of the *Cullavagga*, there is a description in which we read that at first the nuns did not perform the *pavāraṇā* ceremony at all, while later they performed it only within their own orders. So if the garudhamma prescribing the *pavāraṇā* ceremony before both orders had existed from the beginning, such a misunderstanding as described there would certainly not have happened.

However, the garudhamma that most conspicuously breaks the timeframe of the account is garudhamma 6, according to which a woman must live two years as a *sikkhamānā* before receiving full ordination. During this time she must follow six rules. Her full ordination then is to be performed by both orders. This rule partly corresponds to *pācittiya* 63 and 64 of the *Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga*, which deal with the special two-year probationary period for women. It is remarkable that the Buddha, at the very moment of granting the establishment of a Buddhist nuns' order, uses the term *sikkhamānā* without giving further explanation, although he evidently never used it before. The events leading to the institution of a *sikkhamānā*'s probation period are described differently in rules *pācittiya* 61 and 62 of the *Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga*: the two-year probation period was set up after pregnant and breastfeeding women had been ordained, designed to prevent difficulties arising from such situations. In the *Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga*, it is taken for granted that especially these rules stem from a time when the Buddhist order of nuns was already a permanent part of the Buddhist monastic community.

This is also suggested by the further events related in the *Cullavagga*. When Mahāpajāpatī accepted the eight garudhammas without hesitation, the Buddha expressed his misgivings about the admission of women into the Buddhist order and pointed out the negative consequences for the duration of the existence of the dhamma in this world. Women were equated with diseases, and their admission into the order was assumed to bring about an earlier decline of the Buddhist teachings. The Buddha made this statement not as the reason he is against the ordination of women but *after* he had already agreed to it. These statements are difficult to reconcile with the passage in which the Buddha had admitted without hesitation that women have the ability to attain enlightenment and that he eventually assented to

the establishment of a bhikkhunī saṅgha. This inconsistency might reflect the Buddha's personal ambivalence: accepting women as monastics certainly was a radical step, one bound to lead to conflicts within the wider social milieu. However, I am convinced that this inconsistent account is not a reflection of the Buddha's personal ambivalence, which we cannot now know, but rather gives expression to the fact that diverse and sometimes even contradictory currents prevalent at the time of the redaction of these texts are expressed.

This is even more likely if we take a closer look at the remaining passages of this section in the *Cullavagga*. There, immediately after Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī's acceptance of the garudhammas, a development of the Buddhist nuns' ordination is depicted: first the Buddha announces that nuns are to be ordained by monks. Later this procedure is modified again: in a next step women must be declared "pure" from the ordination obstacles (*antarāyikā dhammā*) by the nuns before they are ordained by the monks. Subsequently, a "double" initiation of women is decreed: first by the order of nuns, and then by the order of monks. This is depicted as a gradual development, which contradicts the account in the beginning of the tenth chapter of the *Cullavagga*, where the full-fledged form (double ordination) is proclaimed by the Buddha right from the beginning.

It is more than likely that the stories that explain how the individual *pāṭimokkha* rules came into being are younger than most of the rules themselves, and came into being possibly at the same time as *Mahāvagga* and *Cullavagga*. However, the discrepancy between the stories told in the *Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga* and in the tenth chapter of the *Cullavagga*, and the differences of the diverse accounts even within the tenth chapter of the *Cullavagga*, are striking. I am neither able to nor would I want to give precedence or attribute more authenticity to one or the other version. However, the simple fact that diverse accounts exist of one and the same event within a single text clearly shows that if we attribute authenticity to one story, the other definitely has to be rejected. In any case, we can assume that the establishment of the Buddhist nuns' order did not take place precisely as described here. It is much more likely that this textual passage has been extended gradually, and reflects rather the concerns of various editors who, moreover, did not have a uniform position. It is uncertain whether the Buddha himself formulated the eight garudhammas as preconditions for female

ordination, and it might be even uncertain whether it was in fact the Buddha himself who founded the nuns' order, as Oskar von Hinüber convincingly argues.

Be this as it may, there is an important aspect that emerges from this analysis, which should be emphasized as a conclusion: the ordination of nuns is a ritual and a legal act at the same time. It derives part of its attributed efficacy (as ritual) and of its legal obligation (as legal act) from the fact that the Buddha himself is said to have laid down the procedure. However, the ordination procedures of the diverse Buddhist schools also derive their efficacy and legal obligation from practice and practicability. If, in the course of the long history of the Buddhist order, actual practice, and with it the texts, had not been adapted to the local, historical, cultural, political, and social contexts in which they are embedded, the ordination procedures would have lost their relevance and their connection with the living world. It might therefore be time to again adapt the ordination procedures to the urgent need—felt by many Buddhists—to establish (or reestablish) the ordination of women into the Tibetan tradition, with the help of specialists of the tradition, in theory as well as in practice.