

## **Perspectives on Bhikkhunī Ordination, lecture 1:**

### **The Foundation of the Bhikkhunī Order**

by Bhikkhu Anālayo

#### **MĀ 116 – Discourse on Gotamī**

(Parallel to AN 8.51/ AN IV 274 = CV X.1 / Vin II 252)

Thus have I heard. At one time the Buddha was dwelling among the Sakyans, staying at Kapilavatthu in the Nigrodha Park, observing the rainy season retreat together with a great company of monks.

At that time Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī approached the Buddha, paid homage with her head at the Buddha's feet, stepped back to stand to one side and said: "Blessed One, can women attain the fourth fruit of recluse-ship? For that reason, [can] women in this right teaching and discipline leave the household out of faith, becoming homeless to train in the path?"

The Blessed One replied: "Wait, wait, Gotamī, do not have this thought, that in this right teaching and discipline women leave the household out of faith, becoming homeless to train in the path. Gotamī, you shave off your hair like this, put on monastic robes and for your whole life practice the pure holy life."

[same exchange happens again two times]

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AN 8.51 & CV X.1

"Bhante, it would be good if women could obtain the going forth from the household life into homelessness in the Dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata."

"Enough, Gotamī! Do not favor the going forth of women from the household life into homelessness in the Dhamma and discipline

proclaimed by the Tathāgata."

[same exchange happens again two times]



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MĀ 116

The venerable Ānanda saw Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī standing outside the entrance, her bare feet soiled and her body covered with dust, tired and weeping with grief. Having seen her, he asked: "Gotamī, for what reason are you standing outside the entrance, your bare feet soiled and your body covered with dust, tired and weeping with grief?"

Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī replied: "Venerable Ānanda, in this right teaching and discipline women do not obtain the leaving of the household out of faith, becoming homeless to train in the path."

The venerable Ānanda said: "Gotamī, you just wait here, I will approach the Buddha and speak to him about this matter."

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### MĀ 116

Then the venerable Ānanda approached the Buddha, paid homage with his head at the Buddha's feet and, holding his hands together [in homage] toward the Buddha, said: "Blessed One, can women attain the fourth fruit of recluse-ship? For that reason, [can] women in this right teaching and discipline leave the household out of faith, becoming homeless to train in the path?"

The Blessed One replied: "Wait, wait, Ānanda, do not have this thought, that in this right teaching and discipline women leave the household out of faith, becoming homeless to train in the path.

"Ānanda, if in this right teaching and discipline women obtain the leaving of the household out of faith, becoming homeless to train in the path, then this holy life will consequently not last long. Ānanda, just like a household with many women and few men, will this household develop and flourish?"

The venerable Ānanda replied: "No, Blessed One."

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### AN 8.51 & CV X.1

"Just as, Ananda, prowling burglars easily assail those families that have many women and few men, so in whatever Dhamma and discipline women obtain the going forth from the household life into homelessness, that spiritual life does not last long."

[in AN 8.51 this occurs after promulgation of the *garudhammas*]

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## MĀ 116

[The Buddha proposes eight "principles to be respected", *garudhamma*, as the condition for allowing Gotamī to go forth]

- 1) a nun should seek higher ordination from the monks;
- 2) a nun should every half-month approach the monks to receive instruction;
- 3) in a dwelling-place where no monks are staying, a nun cannot spend the rainy season retreat;
- 4) a nun who has completed the rainy season retreat should ask in both assemblies regarding three matters: seeking [invitation] in regard to what has been seen, heard or suspected;
- 5) if a monk does not permit questions by a nun, the nun cannot ask the monk about the discourses, the *Vinaya*, or the *Abhidharma*;
- 6) a nun cannot expose a monk's offence; a monk can expose a nun's offence;
- 7) a nun who has committed an offence requiring suspension has to undergo penance in both assemblies for fifteen days;
- 8) although a nun has been fully ordained for up to a hundred years, she should still show utmost humility toward a newly ordained monk by paying homage with her head [at his feet], being respectful and reverential, speaking to him with hands held together [in homage].

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| MĀ 116                          | AN 8.51 & CV X.1                                      |
| 1) higher ordination            | = 6) <i>sikkhamānā</i> from both <i>saṅghas</i>       |
| 2) instruction ( <i>ovāda</i> ) | = 3) ask about date of <i>ovāda</i> & <i>uposatha</i> |

|                                   |                           |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 3) rainy season retreat           | = 2)                      |
| 4) invitation ( <i>pavāraṇā</i> ) | = 4)                      |
| 5) ask questions                  | = 7) not insult or revile |
| 6) expose offences                | = 8) not admonish         |
| 7) penance ( <i>mānatta</i> )     | = 5)                      |
| 8) pay respect                    | = 1)                      |

in both versions Gotamī happily accepts these 8 principles

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### 3 types of attitudes toward women in early Buddhist texts

- soteriological inclusiveness,
- institutional androcentrism,
- ascetic misogyny.

(Sponberg, Alan 1992: "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism", in *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*, J. Cabezon (ed.) 3-36, Delhi: Sri Satguru)

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### MĀ 116

Then, at a [later] time, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī was followed and surrounded by a great company of accomplished nuns, who were all elder and senior nuns, who were known to the king and who had been living the holy life for a long time. Together with them she approached the venerable Ānanda, paid homage with her head at his feet, stepped back to stand to one side and said:

"Venerable Ānanda, may you know that these are all elder and senior nuns who are known to the king and have been living the holy life for a long time. [In regard to] those young monks who have just started to train, who have recently gone forth and not long come to this right teaching and discipline, let these monks pay homage with their heads at the feet of those nuns in accordance with seniority, being respectful and reverential, greeting them with hands held together [in homage]."

Then, the venerable Ānanda said: "Gotamī, you just wait here, I will approach the Buddha and speak to him about this matter."

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CV X.1 / Vin II 252

Gotamī also asks for senior nuns to be respected by junior monks. The Buddha rejects her request.

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MĀ 116

The Blessed One replied: "Wait, wait, Ānanda, guard your words, be careful and do not speak like this. Ānanda, if you knew what I know, [you would realize that] it is not proper to say a single word, let alone speaking like this.

"Ānanda, if in this right teaching and discipline women had not obtained the leaving of the household out of faith, becoming homeless to train in the path, brahmins and householders would have spread their clothes on the ground and said: 'Diligent recluses, please walk on this! Diligent recluses, practice what is difficult to practice, so that we may for a long time get benefit and welfare, peace and happiness.'

[same for]: "brahmins and householders would have spread their hair on the ground" [etc.]

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MĀ 116

"... brahmins and householders, on seeing recluses, would have respectfully taken various types of beverages and food in their hands, stood at the roadside waiting and said: 'Venerable sirs, accept this,

eat this, you may take it and go, to use as you wish, so that we may for a long time get benefit and welfare, peace and happiness.'

"... faithful brahmins [and householders], on seeing diligent recluses, would respectfully have taken them by the arm to lead them inside [their houses], holding various types of valuable offerings and saying to those diligent recluses: 'Venerable sirs, accept this, you may take it and go, to use as you wish, so that we may for a long time get benefit and welfare, peace and happiness.'

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MĀ 116

"... even this sun and moon, who are of such great power, of such great might, of such great fortune, of such great majesty, would not have matched the majesty and virtue of diligent recluses, what to say of those lifeless and skinny heterodox practitioners?

"... this right teaching would have remained for a thousand years. Now it has been decreased by five hundred years and will remain for [only] five hundred years.

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MĀ 116

"Ānanda, you should know that a woman cannot assume five roles. It is impossible that a woman could be

- a Tathāgata, free from attachment, rightly awakened;
- a wheel-turning king;
- the heavenly ruler Sakka;
- King Māra;
- the great god Brahmā.

You should know that a male can assume these five roles."

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AN 8.51 & CV X.1

"If, Ānanda, women had not obtained the going forth from the household life into homelessness in the Dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata, the spiritual life would have been of long duration; the good Dhamma would have stood firm even for a thousand years.

However, Ānanda, because women have gone forth from the household life into homelessness in the Dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata, now the spiritual life will not be of long duration; the good Dhamma will last only five hundred years."

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### Change of Perspective

Vinaya can be read from different perspectives. Such as:

- 1) critical historical reading: comparing different transmission lineages to evaluate earliness and later accretions,
- 2) legal reading: studying one particular transmission lineages to appreciate its legal implications

A problem arises  
when these two modes of reading  
are confused with each other

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Legal Reading  
of remainder of foundation account  
in the Theravāda Vinaya



*garudhamma* 6: "A probationer who has trained for two years in six principles should seek for higher ordination from both communities."

### CV X.2

Buddha: "Monks, I prescribe the giving of the higher ordination of nuns by monks."

### CV X.17

Buddha: " Monks, I prescribe the higher ordination in the community of monks for one who has been higher ordained on one side and has cleared herself in the community of nuns."

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### **Summary points**

3 types of attitudes toward women in early Buddhist texts:

- soteriological inclusiveness,
- institutional androcentrism,
- ascetic misogyny.

2 ways of reading Vinaya:

- historical,
- legal.