CHAPTER IV
BUDDHIST MONASTICISM, WOMEN AND EDUCATION
The history of the evolution of Indian women’s education is spread over centuries. Women’s educational history cannot be viewed in isolation as it is intricately interwoven with the perception of their role by women, men, and society at large. Oliver Abeynayake\(^1\) writes about two misinterpretations regarding women’s position within Buddhism. The first view as put forward by Altekar and others is that Buddha paid no appropriate attention to women; he either ignored them or condemned them. The position of women in Buddhism and Jainism as put forward by Altekar is “Both these were ascetic religions, and they have not devoted much attention to the duties and ideals of lay women. The founders and leaders of these movements showed the indifference to, or contempt of women, which is almost universal among the advocates of the ascetic ideal. The Buddha was reluctant to admit women…”\(^2\) The other view is that Buddhism can be seen as the earliest women’s liberation movement and that Buddhism has great affinity with the present day feminism. The proponent of this view is Rita M. Gross who identifies four great similarities between Buddhism and feminism. “First, contrary to most of the Western philosophical and theological heritage, both Buddhism and feminism begin with experience, stress experiential understanding enormously, and move from experience to theory, which becomes the expression of experience. Allegiance to experience before theory leads to a second important similarity between Buddhism and feminism, the will and courage to go against the grain at any cost, and to hold to insights of truth, no matter how bizarre that seems from a conventional point of view…Thirdly, both perspectives use their willingness to hold to experience over convention and theory and their tenacious courage to explore how mental constructs operate to block or enhance liberation. For


Buddhism, this exploration has involved the study of conventional ego, its painful habitual tendencies, and the underlying freedom of the basic egoless state. For feminism, this exploration involves looking into ways in which the social conditioning that produces gender stereotypes and conventional gender roles trap both women and men in half-humanity, encouraging mutual incompetence and threatening to destroy the planet...Finally, both perspectives speak of liberation as the point of human existence, the aim toward which all existence strains. The language conceptualizing liberation is superficially different in the two perspectives...”  

Thus, Rita M. Gross tries to say that Buddhism supports feminism more than any other religion. Oliver Abeynayake categorically rejects both the views as not representing the true position of women under Buddhism. He writes, “…the attempts in Buddhism are not to bestow equality on women but to keep women in their due place. As far as Buddhism is concerned this is a historical achievement. As Buddhism understands, the concept of imposition of equality on women is superfluous. The Buddhist recommendation regarding women is akin to its fundamental approach of avoiding extremes taught in early Buddhism. I call this the middle path which transcends the concepts of equality and non-equality.”

With the emergence of Buddhism and Jainism largely as a reaction to the dominance of the Brahminical thinking and rituals, issues related to women were debated for the first time. “During the Buddhist epoch there was a change. Women came to enjoy more equality, and greater respect and authority than ever hitherto accorded to them. Although their activities were confined within certain spheres – principally the domestic, social and

---

4 Oliver Abeynayake, *op.cit.*, p.14
religious – their position in general began to improve.”5 An analysis of the Buddhist literature suggests three major roles to women of that age. They were role of a wife and mother, courtesan and bhikkuni.6 The first option was the most common one and widely followed. They could become bhikkunis or nuns, even though they were considered subordinate in status to the male monks. During this period, marriage for girls was not a must as one finds many unmarried girls becoming nuns with the permission of their parents. Even widows entered the sangha as widowhood was not frowned upon and many became bhikkunis. These factors had a great influence on women taking to monastic education by entering the Buddhist sangha. But they had to obtain prior permission either from their parents or husband as the case may be. This in itself demonstrated the patriarchal structure of the society which Buddhism was not able to do away with. But, once a woman entered the bhikkuni sangha, she was free from the rules of the mundane world and free to carry on the spiritual learning. But to maintain the sanctity of the bhikkuni sangha, the inmates were to follow the rules of Patimokka as specified in the Vinaya text. Entering nunhood was an escape from the rigid Brahmanical social structure and gaining access to the Buddhist educational system. The first organized effort towards women’s education was witnessed in Buddhism but within the monastic order. The inception of nuns was approved by Buddha after initial reluctance and a proper provision for their education was made within the sangha.

Buddhism as a religion and philosophy preached that women and men are inherently equal, but the fact remains that the two sexes were not considered equal as far as ordination to the sangha, the monastic order was

5 I. B. Horner, Women in Primitive Buddhism, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 2007 (reprint) p.2
concerned. Within the male dominance of Buddhism, many women lived as well educated nuns and laity as is attested by the Buddhist text *Therigatha*. Buddhist perspectives on gender are many, diverse and also at times contradictory, varying widely over time and space. The contradictory images of the feminine are seen within the texts of all Buddhist sects. In some passages women are depicted as weak intellectually, sexually uncontrollable and fit only for a wife’s role. The *Anguttara Nikaya* says: “Monks, women end their lives unsated and unreplete with two things. What two? Sexual intercourse and child-birth. These are the two things.”⁷ The *Jatakas* also project a low opinion of women. In one of the *Jatakas*, the theme revolves around the wickedness of women; it opines “women like flames devour their prey, women like floods sweep all away, women are pests, like thorns are they, and women for gold oft go astray.”⁸ *Siksa Samuccaya*, a Mahayana text written by Santideva (ca.650-750) mentions “Women are ever the root of ruin and of loss of substance; when men are to be controlled by women how they can gain happiness?” And again says, “A woman is the destruction of destructions in this world and the next; hence one must ever avoid women if he desires happiness for himself.”⁹ Then, we have the views on early *bhikkunis* which counteract this andocentric view. We have references to nuns who were well versed in the teachings of Buddha. The *Therigatha* was perhaps the earliest text in the world to have been composed by women. It “presents strong, liberated women who gave voice to the central Buddhist message that enlightenment was not gendered.”¹⁰

---

⁷ A.N., I.76  
⁸ Kunala Jataka(no.536)  
¹⁰ Elizabeth J. Harris, ‘Gender Studies: Buddhist Perspectives’, *Encyclopedia of Monasticism*, vol.1,p.519
The views on gender expressed in the Buddhist textual discourse may be different from the actual status of Buddhist men and women historically. Women are described in various contexts as being able to attain spiritual goals including nirvana. The age of the Buddha attracted many women adherents and many attained arhathood and were known for their learning, meditation and moral conduct. But the gender discrimination in the day to day affair of the Buddhist monastic order was very much evident. The Buddha himself established the Buddhist community in four groups as a ‘fourfold community’- the monks (bhikku), the nuns (bhikkunis), laymen (upasaka) and laywomen (upasika). In this grouping, the differentiation by gender is as fundamental as the differentiation between the laity and the monastic. Thus, in the early Buddhist literature the marginalization as well as the complementarities of the two genders is well marked. One’s gender was to be declared at the time of ordination as people of ambiguous genders were not allowed to enter the sangha. The early Buddhist attitude towards women and gender take different forms.  

In the Mahayana Buddhism, the views on gender were a continuity of the previous period. The goal of ‘arhat’ in early Buddhism gave way to achieving the status of ‘bodhisattva’. The bodhisattva path was open for both men and women. The Mahayana texts are not clear on the issue of the level of bodhisattvahood a woman can attain without changing into a man. Some texts claim that women can achieve bodhisattvahood at an advanced stage, but they ultimately have to become a man. The notion of sex change from female to male has been interpreted in different ways within the Mahayana

---

notion of *Sunyata* (emptiness). The Tantric or Vajrayana Buddhism lays emphasis on the category of gender in a totally different way. The tantric thought is closely linked to gender ideology. “The gender symbolism involving the union of male with female qualities to produce the ultimate goal of enlightenment comes to full force and becomes explicitly sexual in tantric Buddhism, especially in the highest and most esoteric class of *tantras*, the *Anuttarayoga Tantras* (*Highest Yoga Tantras*)… Even monastic tantric practitioners bound by the vow of celibacy engage in this sexual yoga-although in their case, the union takes place within the mediator’s own mind. The symbolism of sexual union is thus basic to tantric ideology and practice.”

The Buddha was perhaps the first to declare that spiritual enlightenment has no correlation with gender. It was beyond gender differentiation. Women, whether single, married or divorced are free to strive for their own salvation through their own efforts. Spiritual life was open for women either as a layperson or as a member of the *sangha*. Here, we need to differentiate between *bhikkunis* as per Buddhist canons and women who live like *bhikkunis* but are not *bhikkunis* according to the Buddhist law or tradition. A *bhikkuni* is a woman who has received both the lower ordination [*pabbajjai* (Pali)/*pravrajya* (Skt.)] as well as the higher ordination [*upasamadas*] in the *sangha* and was required to follow the *Vinaya* rules of monastic life strictly. The other category of women living like nuns without full ordination is *anagarikas*, who renounce worldly life.

---

12 Reiko Ohnuma, *op. cit.*, pp.304-305
14 Many Buddhist sects arose and faded away with passage of time and each sect had its own *Vinaya* rules including ordination tradition for *bhikkunis*. The *bhikkunis’* ordination tradition of the Dharmaguptaka school of China has survived until today and *bhikkunis* of this tradition are found in China, Taiwan and Korea where the *bhikkuni* tradition is still surviving and is strong.
and live as per the ten precepts of novices. The system of fully ordained bhikkunis went from India to Sri Lanka during 3rd century BC during the reign of King Asoka and later spread to China, Korea, and other regions of Asia. In both Theravada and Mahayana traditions, the transmission of Buddhist monastic ordination of men has been unbroken and strong compared to that of valid transmission for the ordination of women. Specifically, in the Theravada countries, it is certain that transferring full monastic ordination for women was no longer continued. It is generally believed that the tradition of valid ordination of nuns ended in Theravada traditions in 456 A.D. After the lineage of nun ended in Sri Lanka, women in Southeast Asia were never ordained. Instead of fully ordained nuns, there are local nuns in each country who hold much lower position in comparison to monk. In contrast to this, in all Mahayana countries there have always been women in religion. For example, in countries like Taiwan, Hong Kong and Vietnam, the full monastic ordination for women is available. The nuns’ monastic orders have been important institutions in East Asia - China, Japan, and Korea. It historically provided an opportunity to women to live an active and respectable life outside the traditional family structure.

Women under Buddhism have chosen the path of bhikkunis (nuns) for both spiritual and social reasons. “As an institutionally sanctioned role women within otherwise patriarchal religions, life as a nun has allowed women to express spiritual visions of divinity or the mysteries of life that come from their experiences as women…The relative freedom women have

---

15 We do not find fully ordained bhikkunis in Theravada countries like Sri Lanka, Burma/Myanmar and Thailand most probably since 10th century AD. The present day nuns in Sri Lanka call themselves dasa sil matava or dasa sil maeniyo (ten-precept mother), those in Thailand mae ji and in Myanmar tilashin (one who possess morality). Many of them live and behave like a bhikkuni and reside in nunneries.

historically found in the monastic or cloistered life has been, however, an attenuated one within patriarchal institutions in which the highest positions of power are held only by men.”\textsuperscript{17} The fact was that males were considered superior to females as the \textit{bhikkuni} order was subordinate to \textit{bhikku} order as the former has to depend on the latter for the confirmation of their ordination. There are other issues within the monastic rules which depict the imbalance between the men and women.

Regarding the nunneries, we don’t have descriptions in the Buddhist canonical texts. They describe the monasteries in detail. The structure of a nunnery may have resembled that of the monasteries in general and must have located near the men monasteries. In the excavations carried out at various Buddhist sites, none have been definitely identified as a nunnery. As per the Buddhist norms, the \textit{bhikkunis} were required to live in sheds, in newly built or private houses, and in nunneries with at least one accompanying nun. Nunneries were built in areas where settlement already existed. An inscription belonging to 2\textsuperscript{nd} century AD found at Junnar in Maharashtra mentions the establishment of a nunnery in the town for the \textit{bhikkunis} belonging to \textit{Dharmottariya} sect.\textsuperscript{18} Nunneries were always to be established near monasteries as the rule stipulated that nuns must live in a settlement within a monks’ residence (\textit{avasa}) but separately. “From about the second century B.C. to the fourth century A.D., India must have had centers of nuns in and around Bharhut and Sanchi (Madhya Pradesh); in Pauni, Kanheri, Kuda, Nasik, and Karla (Maharashtra); in Mathura, Sarnath, and Samkasya (Uttar Pradesh); and in Amravati (Andhra Pradesh). A great number of inscriptions show nuns from these areas as donors, making it

highly possible that nunneries existed there. In the seventh century A.D., nuns lived in Nalanda (eastern India), the world-famous monastic university. It is not known whether they dwelled in a nunnery or whether they only had separate quarters within the monastery. In the sixth to eighth century A.D., three nunneries existed in Valabhi (Gujarat) that were linked together to an administrative unit (the Yaksasuraviharamandala). Thereafter, references to nuns are rare. It is not known when the nuns’ ordination tradition died out in India.”

The First Ordination and the establishment of Bhikkuni Sangha

The Buddhist education for women began with the ordination of the first nun and the establishment of bhikkuni sangha. The identical story of the first ordination is mentioned in almost every Vinaya texts of all sects of Buddhism. The Buddha, twelve years after his Renunciation and six years after his Enlightenment, visited his hometown, Kapilavastu. Queen Mahapajapati Gotami (Skt. Mahaprajapati), the Buddha’s aunt and foster mother, asked him to ordain her as a bhikkuni. Buddha did not accept the request at first may be due to the fact that she was accustomed to a life of ease and luxury in palace and would face difficulty in leading a life of austerity and hardship in the sangh. Secondly, Buddha was apprehensive of the earlier decline of the sangha, if women were admitted into it. Later on, Ananda, a disciple managed to convince the Buddha that women, being spiritually equal to men, were entitled to a life of recluse and entry into the sangha. The Buddha finally agreed and then ordained Mahapajapati as the first bhikkuni. But there is also another important aspect of milk debt attached to this whole incident. In Buddhism, the bonding between Buddha and his mother Maya is represented as an enduring milk-bond. As per the

19 Ibid., p.1403
later Buddhist tradition, Mahapajapati is said to have convinced Buddha to establish the *bhikkuni sangha* based on the logic of milk debts; she gave to him her milk and in return he should ordain her as a nun.\(^{20}\) Mahapajapati was accompanied by some five hundred women of the Sakya clan whose husbands had already left the household life, to Vaisali where Buddha was camping and they were all ordained after her. It is hardly conceivable that Mahapajapati should have been accompanied by such a large number of women. In the *Therigatha* commentary, some twelve women are recorded to have renounced the world with her.\(^{21}\) Thus, it was Mahapajapati Gotami, who was ordained as the first nun by none other than Buddha himself. She is credited with starting the *bhikku* ni lineage and in a short time attained arahantship. After Mahapajapati, many women left their homes and were ordained as *bhikkunis*. But the fact was that it was not a new idea. Earlier also, there had been female wanderers or ascetics.\(^{22}\) The existence of nunneries in India was not without precedent. Lord Mahavira, the 24\(^{th}\) *Tirthankara* of Jainism did not enjoin the monastic life exclusively for men. Women were also permitted to join the monastic life as nuns. He too organized his followers into four orders—monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen just as we see in Buddhism. A detailed analysis of the ground situation about the place of women comes from the study of the rules and life stories of women in Buddhism that is presented in the following pages.

**Eight Main Rules for Bhikkunis**

---


\(^{21}\) *Therigatha* Commentary on iv, v-x, xiii, xiv, xv, xviii, xxv

The beginning of the monastic education for the women within the sangha certainly began with the acceptance and understanding of the Eight Main Rules [garudhamma (Pali), gurudharma (Skt.)]. The women were admitted into the sangha by Buddha on the condition that they should adhere to the Eight Main Rules which are stated below:\textsuperscript{23}

I. An almswoman (bhikkuni/nun), even if of a hundred years standing, shall make Salutation to, shall rise up in the presence of, shall bow down before, and shall perform all proper duties towards an almsman (bhikku /monk), if only just initiated. This is a rule to be revered and reverenced, honoured and observed, and her lifelong never to be transgressed.

II. An almswoman is not to spend the rainy seasons (of Vassa) in a district in which there is no almsman. This is a rule … never to be transgressed.

III. Every half-month (fortnight) an almswoman is to await from the Chapter of Almsmen two things, the asking as to (the date of) the Uposatha ceremony, and the (time when the almsman) will come to give the exhortation, that is to preach the doctrine. This is a rule … never to be transgressed.

IV. After keeping the rainy season (of Vassa), that is, at the end of the monsoon retreat, the almswoman is to hold Pavarana (to enquire whether any fault can be laid to her charge) before both sanghas – as well that of the Almsmen as that of the Almswomen – with respect to three matters, namely what has been seen, and what has


251
been heard, and what has been suspected. This is a rule … never to be transgressed.

V. An almswoman who has been guilty of a serious offence is to undergo the Manatta discipline (a sort of temporary probation/penance for half-month) towards both the sanghas (Almsmen and Almswomen). This is a rule … never to be transgressed.

VI. When an almswoman as novice, has been trained for two years24 in the Six Rules/Precepts (the five lay vows and the additional vow of not eating after noon), she is to ask leave for the Upasampada initiation from both sanghas (as well that of the Almsmen as that of the Almswomen). This is a rule … never to be transgressed.

VII. An almswoman is on no pretext to revile or abuse an almsman. This is a rule … never to be transgressed.

VIII. From henceforth official admonition by almswomen of almsmen is forbidden, whereas the official admonition of almswomen by almsmen is not forbidden. This is a rule … never to be transgressed.

The term garudhamma (Pali), gurudharma (Skt.) is significant as the term guru relates to a teacher or preceptor while dhamma was righteousness. Thus, the women within the sangha were to treat these rules as their first teaching coming from the guru none other than the Buddha himself. So, it was quite significant and noteworthy for all the bhikkunis.

The Buddha gave these eight extra rules in addition to already established rules. These rules were concerned with the social behavior and the safety of the ordained women. It is debatable why the Buddha did this,

---

24 It is to be noted that bhikkus/monks could be ordained at any time when they wished, provided they met the age requirement of minimum 20 years.
except the reason being probably to establish a social norm for the Buddhist 
sangha to operate under. This led some to consider bhikkunis to be lower in 
social order than bhikkus. It would be interesting to analyze some of the 
eight rules. First, the first rule regarding Salutation clearly shows the innate 
superiority of the male. But as Horner points out that: “Deference to be 
shown by women to men cannot … be regarded as a special vis a tergo in 
the formulation of this rule; it is but a particularisation of the current views 
on the relation of the sexes.”25 Regarding the second rule related to monsoon 
retreat, this rule is same as the 56th Bhikkuni- Pacittiya.26 This rule may have 
been formulated keeping in mind the safety of the bhikkunis. This also 
depicted the interdependence of the men and women sanghas. The third rule 
related to uposatha ceremony and exhortation was same as the 59th 
Bhikkuni-Pacittiya.27 The uposatha ceremony included confession and in this 
aspect, both bhikkus and bhikkunis were at par and were expected to attend it 
regularly. The list of offences being read out and the penance for a particular 
offence was same for both monks and nuns as per the rules specified in the 
Patimokkha. The exhortation was to be given by the monks probably due to 
the fact the bhikku sangha was well established by the time the bhikkuni 
sangha came into being. Thus, it seems to be male prerogative and continued 
as such and is still the same.

The fourth rule was linked to pavarana, that is, a bhikkuni must ask 
both the sangha whether anyone has seen, heard, or suspected anything 
against her. It may have acted as a deterrent and checked unbecoming or 
immoral acts/behaviors from a nun. The fifth rule was connected to violation 
of monastic rules by a nun and its expiation referred as manatta discipline to

25 I. B. Horner, op.cit., p.121
26 V. iv, p.313; a pacittiya offence required expiation.
27 V. iv, p.315
be undergone towards both the *sanghas*. The nature of the *manatta* discipline is not clear. Buddha made certain amendments later and he allowed *bhikkunis* only to carry out this disciplinary action.\(^{28}\)

The sixth rule was connected to the *upasampada* initiation. This rule was same as the one prescribed for male candidates. However, there seems to have been ten precepts for the male novices\(^ {29}\) as against the six for the female novices. The seventh rule concerned with the abuse of *bhikkus* by *bhikkunis* is same as the 52\(^{\text{nd}}\) *Bhikkuni Pacittiya*.\(^ {30}\) The last rule stating that monks can give admonition and advice to nuns but the vice-versa was not allowed clearly places the *bhikkunis* inferior to *bhikkus*. The acceptance of these eight main rules by Mahapajapati Gotami is taken to represent her initiation and the establishment of the *bhikkuni sangha*.

**The Procedure for Ordination of Women**

The requirement for the ordination of nun is somewhat different from that of a monk in Buddhism. The *Bhikkhuni* ordination requires a minimum of five *bhikkunis* followed by her admission ratified by a minimum of 5 monks on the same day. The *Pavattini* or *bhikkhuni* preceptor must be having 12 years standing as a *bhikkhuni* and be well versed both in Dhamma and *Vinaya*. She must be appointed as preceptor by both the *sanghas*. Each *Pavattini* was allowed to give ordination only every other year so that there was no problem of accommodation for the new nuns. The preceptor was to provide for teaching and training of nuns under her guidance, including taking care of them in case of illness. Thus, the process of education within the *sangha* started under a woman preceptor for a nun.

---

\(^{28}\) C.V., x, 6, 3  
\(^{29}\) M.V., i, 2.  
\(^{30}\) V., iv, pp. 308, 309
There are three forms of ordination in Buddhism. First, ‘ehi bhikkhu upasampada’, an ordination in which literally no formal ritual was given directly by the Buddha in the early period. The Buddha simply allowed "Do become a monk," which was considered a complete ordination. This type of ordination was seen in the case of Mahapajapati Gotami. Second method of ordination was that of accepting the Buddhist Triratna (Buddha, Dhamma and sangha). This was the form of ordination followed by teachers in the early period. Later on as the number of applicants for monkhood became larger, a formal type of ordination evolved. It was called natticatuthakammavaca, having a preceptor with two trainers and minimum ten monks to witness the ordination. This is the prevalent ordination given within a sangha.

There is yet another type of ordination provided for bhikkunis. There was a case in which a woman ordained by the bhikkuni sangha could not reach the bhikkhu sangha in another village on the same day as per the ordination requirement. There were some thieves waiting on the way to abduct her. The Buddha allowed Dutenasampada, ordination through a nominated representative, that is, another bhikkuni was assigned by the bhikkuni sangha on behalf of the bhikkuni-to-be to represent her in front of the bhikku sangha. This was also a sanctioned ordination for the nun. The age qualification for bhikkuni ordination was minimum twenty years; prior permission of her parents/ husband, and having no serious disease were other essential requirements. She must have undergone two years training as sikkhamana and must be able to obtain the basic material requirements like robes, bowl, etc.
It’s worth noting that while men have only two levels of ordination, women have three levels of ordination. To receive the *upasampada* (full ordination), a male had to go through three stages—*pravājja, sramanera* and *bhikku*—with no intermediary probationary period. He had to fulfill the minimum age requirement of 20 years to attain full ordination. “…he theoretically can receive the *pravājja* (going forth), the ten precepts of a *sramanera*, and then ordination as a *bhiksu* in quick succession, proceeding swiftly from the status of a layman to the status of a *bhiksu* in a single day. In actual practice, this accelerated ordination procedure is quite common in both Theravada and Mahayana countries. For a woman, these same stages must be completed, plus one additional stage… a woman must complete a two-year probationary period as a *siksamana*. This requirement is enshrined in the *gurudharma* and is evident in the precepts related to ordination.”

Thus, there are five types of ordination, two for men and three for women. *Samaneri* (female novice) is a lower ordination (*pabbajja*) with only ten precepts. The ten rules for the novice were: (1) she may not kill; (2) she may not steal; (drink alcohol); (3) she may not have an unchaste behavior; (4) she may not lie; (5) she may not drink alcohol; (6) she may not wear flowers or perfumes; (7) she may not sing, dance, or make music, or go to see singing, dancing, and music; (8) she may not use a high, large, or big bed; (9) she may not eat at an improper time (i.e., after noon); and (10) she may not possess gold, silver, or valuables. The ten precepts are in the form of negative injunctions that is, what is not to be done. They were same for a novice monk too. The minimum age fixed to become a novice was seven years. Earlier, it was that one must be old enough to drive away crows off the paddy field. Women aspiring higher ordination (*upasampada*) must be

---

20 years of age having normal physical conditions, that is, no physical deformity and disease so that she can carry out the responsibility of a bhikku ni properly. A married woman may be ordained at the age of 12 with permission from her husband.

The beginning was marked by sikkhamana, training or educating period which was instituted later on. The term sikkha (Pali)/siksha (Skt.) is related to education. Women were trained or educated and made fit for the full ordination later on. In this sense, it was the initial process of education within the sangha. There was a case of a married woman who was ordained without knowing that she was pregnant. This came to notice later on. Therefore, to avoid such incidents in future, a rule was formulated that women have to go through Sikkhamana, training for two years. They were required to observe six anudharmas, the first six precepts in the ten precepts for novices during this period. However, a sikkhamana is considered having a training level higher than novice even though the latter received only six precepts. It is required that a sikkhamana must finish two years of training without any transgression or violation; otherwise she will have to start afresh. Thus, the process of full ordination had few stages. The entrants had to undergo the pabbajja (initial initiation) ceremony. Before applying for full ordination, they have to spend two years in training following the Six Rules (chasu dharmesu). The six rules varied from Vinaya to Vinaya.

These rules of the Pali Vinaya and of the Dharmagupta are probably the earliest one. The first four rules are same as the first four parajika rules for

---

32 The number and content of the six rules of siksamana differ in various Vinaya texts. In the Theravadin and Dharmagupta schools, there are six rules as mentioned above. In the Sarvastivadin school, the four rules are the same but the fifth and sixth are touching a male with desire in one’s mind; and taking a man’s hand, touching his clothes, talking with him, etc. with desire in one’s mind. The 12 sikasmana rules of the Mulasarvastivadin school and the 18 rules of the Mahasanghika school do not duplicate the sramanerika precepts; they are probably intended to be observed in addition to the sramanerika precepts.—Karma Lekshe Tsomo, op.cit., n.29, p. 71.
bhikkus and bhikkunis, the violation of which led to lifetime expulsion from the sangha. These four rules prohibited (1) sexual intercourse, (2) stealing (3) taking human life, and (4) lying about one’s spiritual achievements. The other two rules emphasized (5) that a probationer may not eat at an improper time (i.e. after noon) and (6) that she may not drink alcohol. The violation of the last two rules led to the extension of the probationary or training period. Thus, we find that these six rules included the five silas, precepts which are at the heart of Buddhist morality; while the addition of the sixth, abstention from eating at the wrong times, narrowed that morality to within monastic limits. One who had observed these rules unbroken and untainted for the two years was then eligible for full ordination.

A point of introspection is the fact that the bhikkunis followed more precepts (sikkhapada) as compared to the monks. In Theravada Buddhism, the bhikkus follow 227 precepts while the bhikkunis follow 311 precepts. I. B. Horner while translating from Pali lists the precepts exclusively meant for the bhikkunis as they appear in the Bhikkhuni Vibhanga while the precepts which are common with the bhikkus appear separately in the Bhikkhu Vibhanga. It may appear to us that nuns followed some 84 more rules in comparison to monks. But an analysis of these rules points a different picture. Of the 311 precepts or training rules for bhikkunis, 181 are common with the 227 rules of the bhikkus. Thus, 130 rules are exclusive to bhikkunis while 46 rules are exclusively meant only for the bhikkus. This difference needs clarification. A comparative study of the Patimokkha,33 rules for

---

monks and nuns shows that if one goes by sections, *bhikkhus* observe eight sections in comparison to seven sections by nuns. One section called "*Aniyata*" is exclusively for monks and contains two rules introduced by Visakha, a famous female laity in early Buddhism. The two rules are: the first forbids the monks from staying alone with a female in a covered place and the second rule forbids monks from staying alone with a female in an open place beyond hearing of others.

The first section of the *Patimokkha-Parajika* is concerned with severe offences. There are four rules for monks and eight rules for nuns. The extra rules that nuns have to observe in this section may be found for monks under *sangha vasesa*, the second section which is less severe. A monk will have to go through 'manatta' period, a temporary self-expulsion from the *sangha* in case he violates any rule of this section. It may be that classification of the rules took place at a later period in the hands of the monks. In another section, *Patidesaniya*, there are eight rules for *bhikkhunis*. The *bhikkhus* have the same content of the rules but they are counted as one and classified under *Sekhiya*, another section. This may be one of the reasons for the inflated number of rules for *bhikkhunis*. Likewise, in the *Pacittiya* section, *bhikkhunis* follow 166 rules as compared to 92 by *bhikkhus*. There are 70 common rules shared by both the *sanghas*. Then, the *bhikkhus* have another set of 22 rules meant exclusively for *bhikkhus*; the *bhikkhunis* have another set of 76 rules exclusively for *bhikkhunis*. Within these 76 rules meant exclusively for *bhikkhunis*, it is worth noting that there are many rules related to ordination which the *bhikkhus* also have to follow, but for them they are not counted in the *Patimokkha*. 
A view point is that the Bhikkuni sangha was established some five years after the Bhikku sangha and the former ‘inherited’ many of the precepts of the latter. “From a comparison of the Bhiksu and Bhiksuni Pratimoksa Sutras, it is obvious that the majority of the nuns’ precepts were formulated in response to the misbehavior of monks… 181 were formulated on the basis of a monk’s misconduct, but 130 were formulated on the basis of a nun’s.”

The above arguments clearly put forward the reasons for the nuns having more rules than the monks. The rules were in a sense meant to build a moral setting for the spiritual training and upliftment of the nuns. The control over the body and its correlation to the mind was a well established notion in the Buddhist system of education. These rules, in fact prepared individuals for the higher levels of learning and insight. This has been discussed in detail on chapter dealing with meditation.

**Women within the Buddhist Sangha**

Many women entered the bhikkuni sangha during Buddha’s time and later on. The Buddhist texts refer to learned bhikkunis and lay women. Horner viewed the association of large number of educated women with early Buddhism as Buddha’s contribution towards the emancipation of women. But it is also argued that these learned women were the product of the Brahmanical society and not that of Buddhism. Thus, their intellectual level cannot be viewed as the outcome of early Buddhism. They just accepted the teachings of the Buddha. But there can be a counter argument in favor of Buddhism. These women who are mentioned in the Therigatha or other texts may have been literate and educated but the acceptance of Buddhism and its precepts gave them a better understanding of the mundane

---

world and they were able to challenge some of the social norms of that period, for example the patriarchal setup showing the ill behavior of the husband and many more discriminatory social ills. Secondly, they gained in the spiritual insight which is certainly depicted in their psalms. My personal view is that some of them belonging to the lower social strata may not have been literate in the sense that they may not have been familiar with writing or reading but it does not necessarily mean that a person may not be wise enough to utter words of wisdom. As the earlier Pali texts were in oral tradition and compiled and written down later on, some of these wise women may not have been educated in the literal sense but composed verses in the oral form.

It has been argued by some that the authorship of the psalms in the Therigatha cannot be ascribed to the woman who sang them.\(^{35}\) “Be that as it may, there is no gainsaying of the fact, in the absence of any historical truth to the contrary that in the Buddha’s days women who broke through the fetters of worldly life and gained the joys of asexual rational beings, sang extempore learned and thoughtful verses on many occasions…”\(^{36}\) B.C. Law opines that the gathas sung by some women and the intelligent attainment of individual ladies show a developed literary culture during the days of Buddha.

The Therigatha (Psalms of Elder Nuns) consists of 73 poems and 522 verses and depicts the intellectual achievements in literary as well as the spiritual field of women under Buddhism. “Therigatha passed on orally for six centuries before being committed to writing in Sri Lanka in 1\(^{st}\) century

\(^{35}\) Santosh Kumar Das, op.cit; p.252
\(^{36}\) B.C. Law, Women in Buddhist Literature, pp.61-62
B.C.E. in the literary language of Pali.”37 Seventy-one poems are supposed to have been composed by individual bhikkunis, and two are ascribed to two groups of followers of Patacara, all of them contemporaries of the Buddha. Patacara is said to have almost 500 followers. The social/caste status of these women is as follows38:

- Royal and Noble Families - 23
- Families of Setthis (Merchants) - 13
- Eminent Brahman Families – 7
- Lesser Brahman Families – 9
- Poor Brahman Families – 2
- Other Castes – 4
- Castes not specified – 11
- Courtesans – 4

The analysis of the composers of *Therigatha* points to the fact that the women who became bhikkunis were mostly from the upper three varnas (Brahman, Kshatriya and Vaisya) and some may also have been Sudras whose caste or varna is not specified. Majority of them came from economically sound family background. Thus, women entered the sangha, hailing from different parts of North India and from different walks of life. There was nothing in to check them from attaining arhantship.39 They all

---

38 *ibid.*, pp.167-168  
39 Cf. Therigatha, ccliv, Lxxiii
became proficient in some aspect of monastic activities and religious activities.

The eminent bhikkunis from royal family were Mahapajapati Gotami, the first bhikkini; Kisa – Gotami,\(^{40}\) related to Buddha who became chief among those who wore rough clothes (lukhacivaradhara) and Khema\(^{41}\), the consort of Bimbasara (ruler of Magadha) who was known for her great wisdom and insight. From the families of setthis (merchants) we have Dhammadinna,\(^{42}\) regarded as foremost among the bhikkunis who could preach (dhammakathi)\(^{43}\); Sukka,\(^{44}\) who was also known as a good preacher; and Patacara,\(^{45}\) who was well versed in the Vinaya pitaka.\(^{46}\) There were many more learned and wise eminent bhikkunis coming from the family background of Brahmins like Bhadda,\(^{47}\) Nanduttara,\(^{48}\) Sakula,\(^{49}\) and Sundari.\(^{50}\) Among the lay women, the most famous was Visakha, one of the greatest benefactors of the sangha. Her references are found in the Dhammapada commentary, the Vinaya and the Udana. A long dialogue between her and Buddha is mentioned in the Anguttara Nikaya.\(^{51}\) She is said to have constructed a vihara at the eastern side of Savatthi/ Sravasti and presented the same to the sangha.

Let’s discuss some of the achievements of these women as far as learning and teaching was concerned. Sukka was a great teacher and

\(^{40}\) Therigatha, Lxiii
\(^{41}\) Therigatha, Lii
\(^{42}\) Therigatha, xii
\(^{43}\) Cf. A. N., i, 25.
\(^{44}\) Therigatha, xxxiv
\(^{45}\) Therigatha, xlvi.
\(^{46}\) Cf. A. N., i, 25
\(^{47}\) Therigatha, xxxvii
\(^{48}\) Therigatha, xliii
\(^{49}\) Therigatha, xlv
\(^{50}\) Therigatha, lxix
\(^{51}\) I.B. Horner, op.cit., p.345
preacher. It’s said that one day she taught the nuns the doctrine of Buddhism in such a wonderful way that the audience listened to her in rapt attention. Even lay people came and listened to her.\(^{52}\) She once delivered a sermon to a large gathering at Rajagriha as mentioned in the *Samyutta Nikaya*. This makes it clear that a well versed woman within the Buddhist sangha taught the bhikkunis within the sangha as well as outside to the common people.

The references above are testimony to the educational accomplishment of women within the Buddhist order. Later, after the passing away of the Buddha and the gradual spread of Buddhism we have references to females like Sanghamitra, daughter of King Asoka who went to Sri Lanka and taught *Vinaya Pitaka*, the five collections of the *Sutta Pitaka* and seven treatises of the *Abhidhamma*. This is well documented in the Ceylonese Chronicles like *Dvipavamsa*. Then, there were women teachers like Uttara, Malla, Pabbata Pheggu, Dhammadasi, Pasadapala and Aggimitta who taught the *Tripitaka* like Sanghamitra at Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka. There were many more like Hema, Sivala, Maharuha, Anjali Samuddanava, Sumana, Mahila, Mahadevi, Paduma, Hemasa, Kali, Aggimitta, etc. who taught all or part of the *Tripitaka*.\(^{53}\) There are references to women engaged in the study of Buddhist texts at nunneries at Sri Lanka where Buddhism went from India and the involvement of Indian women starting from Sanghamitra and five nuns and many more must have been there. This may also reflect the Indian scenario to a greater extent.

The women entrants to sangha were required to furnish details regarding their health/disability, debts and not being in the King’s service. These were additional information to be furnished besides the eligibility of age. The sangha was open to widows, married women and as well as the

\(^{52}\) *Therigatha Commentary*, 57-61

\(^{53}\) The references are from various Buddhist texts. Refer, Santosh Kumar Das, *op.cit.*, pp.253-254
unmarried girls from all sections of the society. The life in the sangha centered on austerity, chastity and obedience, collecting alms and performing monastic activities as specified in Vinaya rules. The sangha in the beginning adhered to the practice of austerity but later with the institutionalization of the sangha, the monasteries became established centers of learning and economically sound due to increased donation from the royal patrons and mercantile community. It is clear from the fact that the bhikkunis were supposed to possess only eight things - three robes, the alms bowl, razor, needle, girdle and water-strainer, the bare necessities of livelihood. These items were their only legitimate belongings. The bhikkunis were supposed to go on the alms-round for food every day to the laity. There are numerous references to this daily visit in the Pali literature. From the alms collected during the alms-round, some food was given to special individuals and some to the sangha as a whole. The daily meal was taken in common before midday as per the six rules. The only hierarchy known in the Buddhist sanghas was that of elders and novices and no other hierarchy existed at least theoretically. The life story of Yashodara illustrates this aspect. In the Gautama Buddha’s era, Bhaddakaccānā Theri was a person of importance, considered as arahatā. Before she attained arahatā, she was princess Yasodharā, the wife of Bōdhisattva Siddhārtha, who later became Gautama Buddha. Princess Yasodharā was born on the same day and year with Bōdhisattva Siddhārtha. Final life’s Princess Yasodharā was referred to as Bimbādevī, Bimbaasundarii and Rāhulamātā or Rāhula’s mother. Because Princess Yasodharā committed good deeds by performing meritorious acts in her past life, when she became a Bhikhuni as Bhaddakaccānā Theri, she attained Arahantship. In the meantime, she also

54 C.V., x, 15, 1.
55 Ja.II,392; IV,478.
practiced for the attainment of supernormal powers (mahābhiñña). She had been able to recall former incarnations, infinite number of times. The Buddha ranked Bhaddakaccānā Theri as foremost chief among Bhikhuni, among those who was in the possession of supernormal powers. (mahābhiññaappattānam).

It is quite evident that Bhaddakaccānā Theri’s life history has come down to us largely based on her own saying before she passed away to unconditioned state or Nibbāna at seventy eight years before the Buddha attained Nibbāna. So, Bhaddakaccānā Theri informed the Buddha that she took leave of him. The Buddha requested her to sound people about her wholesome action as a deed done in various previous lives. This is summarized from the Apadāna of the Khuddaka as Bhaddakaccānā Theri in the previous existence. She lived like the shadow of Bodhisatta for many kappas. She resolved to support Bodhisattva’s determination not only in the final life but also in many previous births.

The bhikkunis possessed only three robes over which each bhikkuni had proprietary rights. The three robes were long and loose, and consisted of the cloak or toga, the civara, and two others. They were symbolical of the asexuality of the monastic life. The upper or outer robe was called the uttarasanga, and the lower or inner one, the antara-vasaka. The three together were called the ticivara. They were the same for the bhikkunis as for the bhikkus, and are constantly referred as the yellows robes (kasava vatthani) or the patch-work cloth, (bhinnapata).

---

56 A.I.104,263;It.25,55. Wholesome action or Kusala-kamma
58 Cf. V.,iv,281.
59 I. B. Horner, op.cit., p. 223
60 V., iv, p. 214; and C.V., x, 10, 4.
a bodice, the *samkacchika*""^{61} and sometime wore a wrapping cloak, the *tharanapavurana*.\textsuperscript{62} Each *bhikkuni* was expected to take a bathe in the *vihara* bathing places, a river or a pond and wash her clothes.

The *bhikkunis* were allowed initially by Buddha to weave some bathing dresses (*udakasatika*) as mentioned in one of the *pacittiya*.\textsuperscript{63} But another *pacittiya* rule which is said to be of later times, weaving was made an offence for *bhikkunis*. Weaving of thread was banned, because it was considered a worldly occupation.\textsuperscript{64} The gift of dresses for monks and nuns was welcomed and encouraged as a pious act. Many manual works were forbidden including agriculture, gardening, etc. in the daily routine, mainly due to the notion of *ahimsa* (non-injury) as there was possibility of killing living creatures in the soil.

One wonders what could have been the daily routine as far as the learning and education was concerned within the nunnery. Writing or recording the sacred literature was perhaps not in the daily routine in the earlier phase as the *Vinaya* text has few references to manuscripts and writing apparatus. The writing materials existed but were seldom used. The *bhikkunis* probably never used them at all. The *bhikkunis* were definitely asked “not to devote themselves to worldly wisdom (*tiracchanavijja*)”\textsuperscript{65}. The *Vibhanga* makes an exception in favor of learning what is written.\textsuperscript{66} One does not know when this rule was formulated. Probably, this must have been done when written form became common. The earlier teaching and learning was oral; hence the emphasis must have been on memorizing what was

\textsuperscript{61} V., iv, p.345
\textsuperscript{62} V., iv, p.289
\textsuperscript{63} V., iv, pp.278-279
\textsuperscript{64} V., iv, pp.229-300.
\textsuperscript{65} I. B. Horner, *op.cit.*, p.238, refer n.2
\textsuperscript{66} V., iv, 305.
taught by the women elders or preceptors. Thus, learning by heart was the main method of teaching and learning.

The monks were allowed to learn the *Suttanta* so that they don’t ‘fall into oblivion’ and allowed to travel even during the rainy season to learn the same.\(^{67}\) It is not clear whether the *bhikkunis* were allowed to learn the *Suttantas*. “It is only decreed that they were not allowed to dissipate themselves in learning a half or quarter line of poetry (*pade pade*, one letter or syllable after another).\(^{68}\) What they had rather to do was to concentrate upon knowledge of the rules.”\(^{69}\) Thus, the main focus was on the oral learning of the *Bhiksuni-Vinaya*, the manual of discipline for the Buddhist nuns. Unlike the later phase, there was no work related to the reading of texts, or copying of the manuscripts. As there were no written texts, the question of a library doesn’t arise.

The training of novices, preaching and meditation were also important aspects of education within the *bhikkuni sangha*. The last two aspects were also related to the spiritual guidance of the laity and maintaining the *sangha*-laity reciprocal relationship. The laity provided the economic support and alms to the monks and nuns and they in turn educated them in religious and spiritual aspects. Besides, the discourses on various aspects of the *Dhamma*, the elders were required to prepare novices (*antevasibhikkhuni*) for the *Upasampada* ceremony. The stages of training of novices included control of the action, senses, food, and to be vigilant, mindful and purposeful. The training was probably much like those narrated in the Dialogue between Buddha and Ganaka – Mogallana.\(^{70}\) The Elders taught and the novices learnt

---

\(^{67}\) M.V., iii, 5,9; M. V., ii, 17

\(^{68}\) V., iv, p. 305.

\(^{69}\) I. B. Horner, *op.cit.*, p.239

\(^{70}\) M.N., iii, 2, 3
and in return served and looked after the Elders. Studying was necessary for
unless study were properly and earnestly engaged upon, it was not possible
for a woman to obtain the *Уpsampada* ordination. Initially, they spend two
years’ training as a novice amongst the *bhikkunis*, entering the *sangha* after
the *pabbajja* ordination. The main thrust of learning was on the *Vinaya* text
and persevering in the Six Rules. In a way, they were getting used to the life
which they hoped to adopt in due course. “Some of the almswomen, besides
training the novices for whom they were particularly responsible in the Six
Rules, also taught and preached to lay-votaries of religion and possibly
also to the other almswomen. These outlets for educational enterprise would
have been welcomed by the more intelligent and active-minded among them;
for although they were under no formal obligation to preach, there were
among them some who were born teachers; who would be at their best in
personal contact with different kinds of people; and whose love towards the
*Dhamma* would inspire them to convert the unconverted, and to go out and
preach for the good of the many-folk as the first male converts had been told
to do.”

The *Dharmagupta Bhiksuni Pratimoksa* gives indirect hints towards
the teaching and learning affairs of the *bhikkunis*. In the section on the ‘178
*Payantika-dharma’*, it is written that these rules are from the *Pratimoksa Sutra*
and is to be read every fortnight. The reading of these rules was a part
of the curriculum meant for women. They can recite the sutras and teach not
more than five or six sentences of dharma to a man in the presence of a
learned woman (Rule 6 and 9 respectively). They are more in the form of

---

71 For the relations of preceptor and pupil, see M.V., i., 35, 6-24 ; i., 26, 1-11
73 Rule 6: If a *bhiksuni* recites the sutra together with someone who has not received the [full] precepts,
she commits a *payantika*; Rule 9: If a *bhiksuni* teaches more than five or six sentences of Dharma to a
man, unless a knowledgeable woman is present, she commits a *payantika*. 
negative injunctions than positive directives. Rules 52 to 58 clearly state the
category of persons whom Dharma should not be taught while Rules 86 to
92 and 96 to 100 specifies the posture of teacher and the people to be taught. 
*Mulasarvastivadin Bhiksuni Pratimoksa* in Rules 84 to 109 mentions the
posture and the category of people who are not to be taught. This shows that
a *bhikkuni* was entitled to teach others including men, the Dharma and
Sutras in specified condition.

Preaching was an important factor in the spread of Buddhism; it went
on throughout the year. The *bhikkus* and *bhikkunis* preached the laity at the
place of the retreat during *Vassa* (monsoon retreat). This lasted for almost
three months. During the remaining nine months, they travelled from one
*vihara* to another *vihara*, preaching the *Dhamma* as they went. Many famous
women preachers disseminated the *Dhamma*. Sukka, Patacara, and
Mahapajapati Gotami, Khema, Thullananda were some of them.
Dhammadinna was referred to as the first among the *bhikkunis* who could
preach.74 Preaching was not considered as a compulsory duty for all the
*bhikkunis*. Preaching facilitated contact with the laity. As mentioned earlier,
this work of teaching the lay followers was to be restricted to interchange of
the *Dhamma* and of alms only.

The *Bhikkuni sangha* became centers of education for those who
entered the *sangha*. They mostly received instruction in the Buddhist
doctrines. The Elders among the *bhikkunis* acted as the teacher and preceptor
for them as evident from the passage in *Cullavagga* which refers to a
*bhikkuni* being the disciple of *bhikkuni* Uppalavana. It also mentions the
learning of the *Vinaya* by the concerned *bhikkuni*.75 We do not know

---

74 Thigatha Commentary on xii; A.N., i, p. 25
75 C. V., X, 8
whether instructions in secular subjects were given or not as was the case in monasteries for men. Some bhikkunis were said to visit lay women at intervals and this may have facilitated some oral discussion and teaching on religious issues for the women laity.

Meditation was considered to be a must within the sangha to gain insight into higher knowledge. “It was essential that every member should engage upon this, and should confer upon it an uninterrupted attention. It consisted of a series of pure acts of mind, unsupported as a rule by any material objects by means of which to focus concentration.”76 It was understood that insight achieved through meditation led to the attainment of nirvana.

Another aspect was the extent to which bhikkus and bhikkunis interacted. There was restriction as far as casual meeting was concerned but as part of the Buddhist sangha they were bound to interact. The ordination of the bhikkuni in the Bhikkuni sangha was carried out exactly like the bhikku sangha but had to be confirmed by the latter. As part of the learning process, the bhikkuni had to go twice a month to take instruction from the bhikku. They were supposed to take instruction from the bhikku by turn.77 A bhikku specially selected by the sangha imparted instruction in the presence of another bhikku. The bhikkunis were supposed to learn the precepts common to bhikkus and the bhikkunis with more focus on the precepts meant for the latter.78 The rules and duties of the bhikkunis were almost same like that of the bhikkus. An exception being that the solitary life was forbidden for the

76 I. B. Horner, op. cit., p.258
77 Vinaya Pitaka, II, pp.253-55.
78 Vinaya Pitaka, II, pp.258
bhikkunis. The bhikkus usually addressed the bhikkunis as ayya and the lay women as bhagini making a difference between the two. The laity also addressed the bhikkunis as ayye, showing certain amount of respect and deference. Buddha and his disciples were in frequent communication with the laity, advising them and providing religious solace and solutions to their day to day problems. The gift of food was considered meritorious and was not confined to alms alone. The laity also used to give food regularly, as “bequests perpetual.” There were families who supported the bhikkunis on a regular basis. There are records specifying that there were bhikkunis who enjoyed a continuous supply of food (niccabhattika). But the gifts of dwellings to the sanghas were made not to an individual but to the whole community of monks or nuns. The bhikkunis were forbidden to go alone into a village. They were also forbidden to cross a ferry alone with a man.

Exceptions were also there where we find women well versed in Vinaya rules and also preaching. The story of Patācārā is one of them. In Therīgāthā, she is foremost among those who were well versed in the rules of the sangha: Etad aggaṃ vinaya-dharāna, yad idaṃ paṭācārā.

---

79 In Pali, the term ‘ayya’ is a polite way of address used both for males as well as females, laypersons and monks. The word is derived from ‘ariya’ ‘which denotes ‘noble, distinguished, of high birth.’ The Buddhist believed that nobility was linked to virtuous conduct, and not to caste or birth. Hence, they used the term ‘ariya’ for themselves. ‘Ariya’ was shortened to ‘ayyo’ for men and ‘ayya’ for women within the sangha. Cf. ‘Did you know? Notes on terms of address for Women in Buddhism’, Women and Buddhism, a Special issue of Spring Wind, Buddhist Cultural Forum, Canada/USA, vol. 6, No. 1,2,3, 1986, p.287. I think the word ‘ariya’ should be ‘arya’.


81 V., iv, pp. 248, 255, 261

82 M.N., ii, 164, 184, 209


84 V., iv, p. 271; cf. V., iii, p. 237

85 V., iv .,pp. 228, 237.

86 Vinaya, Pac. Dhamma, 28.

is given as an example of one whose grief was assuaged by listening to the
Dhamma.\textsuperscript{88} Paṭācārā attained arahanta or worthy one and The Buddha
ranked Paṭācārā foremost of those who were versed in the rules of the
Order\textsuperscript{89}, \textsuperscript{90} and she also delivered sermons on Dhamma.

The life cycle within the sangha was regularity based on the norms of
the monastic life. There was Vassa (the rainy season retreat), ending with the
Pavarana and the Kathina ceremonies. The tour during the rest of the year
provided a refreshing change of scene and society and contact with variety
of geographical location and people. There were stipulated days for various
ceremonies, such as Ordination, Exhortation and Confession. The confession
lasted two whole days every fortnight. The recurring works of daily life
started with the alms-round, followed by the meal before mid-day, then
withdrawal for meditation, and preaching, learning and attending discourses
in the evening. “Life was regularized into a definite plan, to the satisfaction
of those who find comfort in routine; peace of mind in the thought of daily
item following on daily item according to a course mapped by authority; and
a spur to integrity of conduct in doing things which have to be done.”\textsuperscript{91} There
were instances of violation of rules within the bhikkuni sangha and it is
said that the bhukkinis complained to Buddha through the bhikkus who
acted as the intermediary, and not directly to him. This is again worth noting
as the male monks could approach Buddha directly whereas the female nuns
could not.

The women’s education is directly or indirectly referred in other
Buddhist texts besides the Tripitaka. Buddha said in Lalita-vistara, “I shall

\textsuperscript{88} DA.III.746; MA.I.188; UdA.127.5
\textsuperscript{89} A. I25
\textsuperscript{90} Thig 112-116. K.R Norman, The Elders’ Verses II Therigāthā, Pali Text Society Translation Series
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., p.240
need the maiden who is accomplished in writing and in composing poetry, who is endowed with good qualities and well-versed in the rules of sastras.”

This may be cited as an example that women studied *sastras* and had right to study and writing during the period of Buddha. But we all know that the art of writing was unknown to the Vedic and early Buddhist age and that Brahmi script was invented in the early Mauryan period. *Lalitavistara*, being a Mahayana text written in Sanskrit is certainly of later period (1st century AD) and must be reflecting the situation of the early centuries of the Christian era. Regarding the education of women in general, the focus was on practical training and domestic works. The *Jatakas* refer to weaving as a domestic occupation for women whereas the nuns were forbidden from weaving as mentioned earlier too. “… the weaving of thread was knocked off, because it smacked of worldly occupation.”

Women in general were supposed to be well versed in spinning, weaving and intelligent enough to manage household affairs and preserve the earnings of her husband. Pounding rice and cooking are enjoined as her household duties. The royal ladies were well educated. Xuan Zang describes Rajyasri, the sister of King Harshavardhan “of great intelligence, she was distinguished for her knowledge of the *Sammitiya* school doctrine of Buddhism and sitting behind the king was seen to follow with appreciation the learned discourse of Yuan Chwang on Mahayana doctrine.”

---

94 *Jataka*. VI., 26
95 V., iv, pp.229-300; cited in I.B. Horner, *op.cit*, p.233
96 A.N., IV, pp. 268-69
97 Dhammapada Commentary, III,p.41
98 S. Beal, *Life of Hiuen Tsang*, p.176
The Bhikkuni sangha outside India

As discussed above, the bhikkuni lineage or order started in India when Mahapajapati Gotami received this heritage directly from the Buddha. From India, it first went to Sri Lanka during the reign of King Asoka in the 3rd century BC. It is recorded in literary account (Dipavamsa, the Sri lankan chronicle of the 4th century AD) that Sanghamitra, daughter of Asoka accompanied 18 bhikkunis went to Sri Lanka and initiated the bhikkuni sangha. This was the first bhikkuni lineage outside India. This heritage then spread from Sri Lanka to China in about 433 AD when a group of Sri Lankan bhikkunis led by Devasara went there. The Chinese Bhikkuni order began with some three hundred committed nuns when they were ordained at the Southern Forest in Nanking. This formed the kernel of the bhikkuni sangha in China and later on diffused to Korea and has survived up to the present time in both the countries. The Chinese lineage of bhikkunis survives up to the present, but their stronghold is Taiwan where nuns outnumber the monks. There are interesting biographical details of Chinese bhikkunis recorded by a monk Pao Sheng/Pao Chang. Pi-ch’iu-ni chuan (Lives of the nuns) is the first of the two biographical accounts of Buddhist nuns in China and points to the early history of Chinese Buddhist women. It deals with lives of 65 nuns from the fourth to fifth centuries (326 AD-457 AD) and shows that the Bhikkuni sangha for the women was well established in China. Some of the details point to their spiritual activities and monastic education including meditation within the nunnery. Biography 1 says, “Gentle and intelligent, [Chin-sha] cultivated meditation and chanting all

along” (p.18). Biography 22 says, she “taught the book of monastic rules orally” (p.46). Biography 23 says, “Later [Fa-sheng] travelled to the capital, where she furthered her study of meditation and monastic rules and became thoroughly versed in contemplation and perfect wisdom” (p.49). The reviewer of the translation work had made certain changes and is quoted above in support of the practice of meditation and monastic rules which formed a vital component of the monastic education whether of men or women in China and in other Buddhist countries as well.

In other countries, invasions and famines resulted in lesser number of long-term ordained women members to officiate. Thus, women could have only the lower ordination in Sri Lanka, Burma/Myanmar and Thailand till recent times. In Sri Lanka, the bhikku and bhikkuni sangha faced a dark phase for almost five decades with the Chola invasion in 1017 AD. The bhikku lineage was revived from Burma/Myanmar and Thailand but the bhikkuni sangha could not be revived as it did not exist in both countries. The beginning of 20th century saw renewed efforts when Catherine de Alwis, daughter of a missionary who embraced Buddhism in 1905 and brought Silmata ordination from Burma/Myanmar. Renewed efforts took place in 1988 and again in 1996.100 In December 1996, the first group of Sri Lankan women received higher ordination and, although it is seen as highly controversial, the movement is gaining popularity and more and more Theravada women are becoming bhikkunis. But now, Theravada bhikkuni sangha is strong in Sri Lanka.

Tibet

The Tibetan education system has a long history tracing its origin to the period of Tibetan emperors or even before. The traditional Tibetan education which began during the reign of Tibetan emperors comprised of three types—private education, government education and monastic education. Tibetan women’s education may have begun during this period but we have almost negligible records to substantiate it. Majority of Tibetan records, biographies, literary works, etc. are all male-centric. There are very few works dealing with women where references on their education can be discerned. The Dunhuang\footnote{Many manuscripts were discovered with other historical documents from the caves of Dunhuang in 1900 AD. Dunhuang is a small town in Gansu province of Central China at the edge of Gobi desert. The famous “Silk Road” passed through this geographical location and was a centre of silk trade.} manuscripts and some other documents show that a few women of royal family studied Tibetan language since the reign of Songtsen [Gampo] (Srong btsan sgam po).\footnote{Jangngopa Tseyang, ‘Traditional Tibetan Education and Tibetan Women’, tr. from Tibetan by Yeshi Dhondup, \textit{The Tibet Journal}, vol. XXXIII, No.3, Autumn 2008, p.71} This was entirely private education. The government education for lay and monk officials was carried out in Tsee khang and Tse schools, an important component of Tibetan traditional education. These two schools were exclusively meant for men and thus, there was gender discrimination in government education and in the recruitment for government jobs. With the coming of Buddhism to Tibet, the beginning of monastic education is seen. Buddhism attracted some royal and common women to its fold. ‘The private education system laid the foundation for the women from royal lineage to take interest in the monastic education’. Thus, the two types of education available to women were private education and monastic education and this continued till the 20th century. This led to many women emerging with certain level of education. A famous female Buddhist teacher was \textit{Ma gcig lab sgron} (pronounced Machig Labdron; 1055-1149 AD). Her name meant ‘Unique Mother, Torch of Lab’. She codified and disseminated the ritual meditation system known
as severance (gsod, pronounced cho). During her younger days, she studied numerous texts and commentaries on Prajnaparamita. She also studied under Grwa pa mgon shes and skyo ston Bsod nams bla ma in a monastic setting where she was employed to use her skills in ritual recitation and exegesis. Then, she became a tantric yogini. She transmitted the tantric Buddhist teaching to her disciples including women. The monastic education system played an important role in promoting Tibetan language and the basic knowledge of Buddhism among the general women. The emphasis was on Tantric Buddhism.

Although there were many nuns and nunneries in Tibet but there was no system of learning the Buddhist texts. This was in sharp contrast to the monks’ monastery where the curriculum focused on several Buddhist texts. So, we find some of the women incarnate studying the texts through private education in their homes. Dorje Phagmo (Rdo rje phag mo) is the highest female incarnation in Tibet, believed to be the reincarnation of the consort of wrathful deity Heruka. The lineage started with Chokyi Dronme (1422-1455), a princess. They were bestowed the title of ‘Hutoktu’ only after the tenth incarnation but were denied any educational title.

There are conflicting views regarding the presence of bhikkuni sangha in Tibet. Ven. Dhammananda writes, “Owing to geographical factors, fully ordained bhikkunis apparently never reached Tibet. In spite of the fact it is very popular for Tibetan families to offer at least one son for ordination, the daughters did not share the same honour. Instead they had to remain at home taking care of the family and looking after household chores. However, there

---

104 Hutoktu or Hotugtu is a Mongolian term, meaning ‘most venerable’ and it was bestowed as a title by the Chinese Manchu rulers on Tibetan and Mongol high lamas. Refer Jangngopa Tseyang, op.cit., n.5, p.76
have been *samaneris* (Pali) or *samanerikas* (Sanskrit).”\(^{105}\) This means that Tibetan Buddhism can offer only a lower ordination to women. In recent times, some of the new Buddhists, mostly the western women who have taken the Tibetan robe but achieved full ordination in Chinese or Korean tradition. The Chinese tradition ordination is available both in Hong Kong and Taiwan. “But with their closer connection with their root teachers who are usually Tibetan lamas, these women after having full ordination in the Chinese tradition still keep their Tibetan robe and followed their Tibetan lineage both spiritually and ritualistically.”\(^{106}\) Like the western women adherents of Tibetan Buddhism, a few Tibetan novice nuns too have taken full ordination (Skt. *upasampada*) in Hong Kong. “…there are Tibetan ‘nuns’ but no Tibetan *bhiksuni sangha* …One may wonder how there can be Tibetan nuns without having a Tibetan *Bhiksuni sangha*. From a *Vinaya* perspective, the Tibetan nuns are not fully ordained nuns (*bhikkuis*), but are novice nuns (Tib. *Dge tshul ma*, Skt. *sramanerika*). They are ordained by Tibetan *bhiksus*, instead of by *bhiksunis* as prescribed in the *Vinaya*; thus they belong neither to a *Bhiksuni sangha* nor to the *Bhiksu sangha*.”\(^{107}\) The first mention of Tibetan novice nuns occurs in the 11th /12th century in a Tibetan text (*The Blue Annals*).\(^{108}\) It mentions some twenty four nuns and their specialties.

Tibetan Buddhism follows Mahayana tradition with tantric elements and in most Mahayana communities the *Bhikkuni* tradition is strong. Women who wish to become nuns are trained under the guidance of senior *bhikkunis*, though they may learn meditation and Buddhist texts from either nuns or

---

\(^{105}\) Ven. *Dhammananda*, *op.cit.*, p.184

\(^{106}\) *ibid.*, p.185. Refer p.186 for the names of Western women who follow Tibetan lineage.

\(^{107}\) Jampa Tsedreon, ‘From Generation to Generation: Transmitting The Bhiksuni Lineage In The Tibetan Tradition’ in *Pabitrakumar Roy* (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp.21,22

\(^{108}\) George N. *Roerich* (tr.), *The Blue Annals*, vol.1&2 together, Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi,1996, pp.915-920
monks. Nuns of these communities gather every morning and evening to chant the *mantras*. In Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, the transmission of monastic ordination of men has continued without break compared to the valid transmission of ordination of women. Specifically, in the Theravada countries, it is certain that transferring full monastic ordination for women was no longer continued. In Tibet, traditionally, ritual arts and scholastic study have been a prerogative of the monks, with the ordained nuns receiving little or no training in these areas. However, this has been changing in the Tibetan exile community. *Anis* (the nuns) is now trained in classical Tibetan debates, ritual music, the creation of sand *mandalas* and other ritual arts. To a large extent, opportunities are granted equal to that of the monks.

Tibetan Buddhist nunneries were found in Tibet around the eleventh century AD. Among the well-known Tibetan female practitioners, many are nuns. The isolated setting of nunneries provided favorable conditions for religious practice and the earnestness of the nuns in their spiritual endeavors. Nunneries were heavily disrupted when China took over the country in 1959. The tradition of segregation of male and female monastic has an impact on nuns’ access to the study of Buddhist texts. The three great monastic centers of study re-established in south India are Drepung, Ganden, and Sera. Also in line is the institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala, where the systematic Buddhist studies programme is offered. The number of Tibetan nuns living in exile in India accounts for thousands and a large number of these nuns are engaged in contemplative practices, including meditation and tantric ritual practices of Vajrayana tradition. In the tantric tradition, it is believed that a person becomes enlightened in this very body, in this very life. Until the 1980s, most of the nuns in the Tibetan tradition focused
primarily on chanting, ritual, and meditation. They had access to the systematic study of Buddhist texts.

Tibet had a long history of nunneries (*Ani Gompa*) though some of the secondary sources are of the opinion that the history of nunneries is unrecorded. The nuns take part equally with the monks in preserving Tibet’s culture in general and Buddhist doctrine in particular. In recent times, with the kind consent of His Holiness Penor Rinpoche, a nunnery (Tsogyal Shedrub Dargyeling) was set up in 1992 in Bylakuppe in Mysore district of Karnataka, India for the Tibetan nuns (*bhikkunis*) at a distance of one kilometre from Namdroling monastery meant for the monks (*bhikkus*). This nunnery is a branch of the Namdroling monastery. This paved the way to provide equal and quality religious instructions and education to the nuns. It also created a congenial atmosphere for the nuns to study in their own surroundings. Its mother monastery is Palyul Monastery (Namgyal Jangchub Choling Monastery) in Tibet which follows the Nyingpa tradition. The Nyingma tradition is the oldest tradition of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism and it was found by the great Indian guru Padmasabhava (Guru Rinpoche in Tibetan) tracing its origin to the Vikramsila *mahavihara* of medieval India, located near Bhagalpur in Bihar, which was renowned worldwide for the Buddhist studies including the Tantric tradition which had a great influence on Tibet.

*Ani* (in Traditional Tibetan Buddhist), otherwise called nun is a woman who has taken special vows committing herself to religious life. This distances her from all the worldly pleasures. She lives a contemplative life of prayer and meditation within a nunnery and is an ascetic who voluntarily chooses to leave mainstream society. There is a shift in the contemporary period regarding the training of the nuns. *Anis’* are now trained in classical
Tibetan debates, ritual music, building sand *mandalas* and other ritual arts. The ordination of monks and nuns in Tibetan Buddhism distinguishes three stages Rabjung (Ma), Getshul (ma) and Gelong (ma).

In the academic pursuit, a Tibetan monk can go up to the Geshe degree as discussed in the previous chapter, but the situation of the nuns was different. Nuns had degrees that were less comprehensive.\(^{109}\) It may point to an inferior status for the nuns as far as the degree acquisition is concerned but in the sphere of teaching, women teachers can teach both monks as well as nuns. In the field of highest form of esoteric study, a monk or nun of the Gelugapa school could retire to isolated temples or caves for short or long periods to gain insight and then preach to their followers.\(^{110}\)

The highest monastic degree of *Geshe* was denied to the nuns. His Holiness the 14\(^{th}\) Dalai Lama has given his full support for the establishment of nunneries, education and improvement of life of nuns in exile. A historic decision was taken in May 2012 by the H. H. Dalai Lama that the highest degree of Geshema \(^{111}\)(the doctorate programme) be established for nuns. The first batch of 20 nuns is set to receive the highest degree soon and this will be for the first time in the Tibet tradition\(^{112}\). Traditionally, the Geshe degree was awarded to monks after 12 or more years of study. A nun in present times has to study five Buddhist texts over a period of 20 years to graduate with a doctorate degree. The pedagogy involves logical analysis and debate, combined with regular sessions of prayer and recitation.


\(^{110}\) M. N. Rajesh, *op.cit.*, pp.74-75

\(^{111}\) The highest degree when awarded to monks is known as Geshe and when awarded to a nun is called Geshema.

\(^{112}\) Kelsang Wangmo, a German national who spent 21 years training in India, became the first woman to receive the Geshema degree and title in 2011. H H the Dalai Lama advised the Institute for Buddhist Dialectical Studies, Dharmasala to confer the degree on the Western nun.
Korea

One remarkable point regarding the monastic life in Korea is that the life-styles of monks and nuns are almost identical and the educational curriculum as discussed in previous chapter is common to both. Since the introduction of Buddhism in Korea, many Korean women have become bhikkunis. There are examples including records of queens and women members of the court being ordained in the sixth century AD. Korea is the only country to have a clear, unbroken tradition of women receiving both ordinations (first that of a novice and later full ordination). Pomun-jong is the only all women Buddhist sect (Bhikkuni sect) in the world founded in Korea in 1972 by the Korean Buddhist nun Eunyeong Sunim (1910-1981). Since 1981, the traditional Chinese system of ordination, known as the Double Platform, requiring ten bhikkus and ten bhikkunis, all of ten years ordination, has been reinstated as well.

The history of bhikkunis in Korea is an unbroken one since the inception of the Korean bhikkuni sangha. The low position of Korean women in society and the five hundred years of persecution of Buddhism during Choson rule (1392-1910) were probably responsible for the obliteration of most of the information that was recorded. Even regarding the Bhikkuni sangha of the Three Kingdoms of Korea, there are no existing records of Koguryo bhikkunis and we can only make a general assessment of their way of life and activities through the records of the Bhikku sangha. A Japanese record Nihon shaki compiled in 720 AD, states that in 587 AD

---

113 Samu Sunim, ‘Eunyeong Sunim and the founding of Pomun-jong, the first independent Bhikshuni Order’, Women and Buddhism, a Special issue of Spring Wind, Buddhist Cultural Forum, Canada/USA, vol. 6, No. 1,2,3, 1986, pp. 129-162
Koguryo Master Hyep’yon ordained three bhikkunis for the first time in Japan who then travelled to Paekje for study. Thus, there certainly existed an ordination ceremony for bhikkunis in Koguryo. Bhikkuni Popmyong of Koguryo taught these three Japanese bhikkunis in 587 AD. This shows that the Koguryo Bhikkuni sangha has formed its own system to practice and educate the people through their bhikkunis who were sufficiently experienced to become teachers. Some Japanese records show that Koguryo bhikkunis came to Japan to educate people there. The fact is that Buddhism diffused from Korea to Japan.

In the Kingdom of Paekje, its 27th ruler, Widok (554-593) in the year 577 AD sent sutras, Abhidharmas, the Vinaya, a meditation monk, bhikkunis, a magician, and technicians for building temples to Japan. The official dispatch of bhikkunis to Japan is worth noting. It is presumed that the Paekje’s bhikkuni sangha was well established and was in a position to send their representatives to other countries. In Silla, it’s not clear when Silla women began accepting Buddhism. It is presumed that it must have been some time after the official recognition of Buddhism in Silla in 527 AD. The first recorded bhikkuni in Silla was Sa-ssi, sister of a laity named Morye. It appears that she was ordained before the official acceptance of Buddhism in Silla. A Korean record says: “Morye’s sister, Sa-ssi, was ordained by master Ado who was being hidden in her house because he wished to spread Buddhism. She lived in a temple called Yonghung-sa at Samch’ ong-gi which was built by her. Later, when King Mich’u passed away (284 AD),

114 The nun Zenshin and her two disciples, Zenzo and Ezen were allowed by the Japanese royal court to join an official state embassy to Paekche/Paekje so that they could receive formal ordination. Refer Lori Meeks, ‘Buddhist Renunciation and the Female Life Cycle: Understanding Nunhood in Heinan and Kamakura Japan’ Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies, vol.70, No.1, June 2010, n.1, p.3.
people tried to kill Ado and so he returned to Morye’s house and eventually, died there. Buddhism could not be taught in Silla anymore.\textsuperscript{115}

Later, there is reference to \textit{bhikkuni} Myobop, queen of King Pophung (514 AD-546 AD), the 23\textsuperscript{rd} Silla ruler. He supported Buddhism and built Hungryun-sa temple and became a monk. According to \textit{Samguk-yusa}, he was given the dharma name of Pop-un (Dharma Cloud) and also the name of Popkong (empty Dharma). King Pophung’s queen also wanted to become a \textit{bhikkuni}. The queen was also ordained and she went to live in Younghung-sa temple built by Sa-ssi. She was given the dharma name Mypbop, meAning Marvelous Dharma. The queen would not have been ordained alone and lived in Younghung-sa temple alone. There may have been other women from aristocratic and the royal families who followed in the footsteps of Myobop. We don’t have any mention of ordinary women being ordained. Thus, the \textit{Bhikkuni sangha} was established in the kingdom of Silla. Later, during the reign of King Chinhung (540 AD-576 AD), special positions were created within the \textit{sangha}. His queen, Pak-ssi also became a \textit{bhikkuni} and lived in Yonghung-sa temple after her husband became a monk.

The \textit{Bhikkuni sangha} of Silla developed rapidly due to the great devotion towards Buddhism of the queens of Kings Pophung and Chinhung. This greatly influenced many aristocratic women of Silla and gradually Buddhism percolated down and reached ordinary women, and many of them must have been ordained. Some probably became \textit{bhikkunis} when they were young and unmarried, and some, like Chiso, the wife of General Kim Yushin, became \textit{bhikkunis} after the death of their husbands. The \textit{Bhikkuni sangha} must have held a high position in the contemporary society due to

\textsuperscript{115} \textit{Samguk-yusa}, Legends of the Three Kingdoms, 3\textsuperscript{rd} volume.
the presence of several royal and aristocratic women. The *sangha* developed rapidly, particularly the *Bhikkuni sangha* during the reign of King Chinhung. The class structure of the *bhikkunis* point towards a high class elite composition.

King Chinhung officially permitted everyone—men and women, to be ordained in the 5th year of his reign. This year also marked the completion of Hungnyun-sa, a great temple. The king also initiated a rank system of monks and nuns. This was meant to promote the well being of ordained persons and also to orgAnize the *sangha* in a better way. He himself became a monk later on and chose Sammaekchong (meAning sami, sramanera) as his posthumous designation. King Chinhung appointed monks to various important positions beginning from the 11th year of his rule. These officials were required to superintend other monks and nuns. Ani

*Toyunarang* was the head of the *Bhikkuni sangh*. The presence of this post throws light on the fact that the number of *bhikkunis* must have been considerable and also speaks about greater institutionalization of the *Bhikkuni sangha*. But, there are no record regarding their duties and activities. The word ‘Ani’ was used in Korea with the names of king’s mothers, queens, or king’s sisters. Originally the word ‘Ani’ is related to women used either as a proper noun indicating particular women, or used in reference to *bhikkunis*. Ani is the title used for *bhikkunis* (nuns) in Tibetan Buddhism even today. Likewise, according to the Korean text *Kyerim-yusa*, the *bhikkunis* during the Koryo Dynasty were called ‘Ani’ depicting that this was a usual way of referring the *bhikkunis*. The Buddha added eight additional rules especially for women along with the already existing rules. This was prevalent in Korea too. Due to this reason, *bhikkunis* were
considered inferior in the social order in comparison to the bhikkus, even in Korea during that period.

With the emergence of Unified Silla kingdom, the Bhikkuni sangha of Kogurya and Paekje seems to have been absorbed into the Silla Bhikkuni sangha without any difficulty. As most of the bhikkunis were from aristocratic families the Bhikkuni sangha probably enjoyed high status in Silla society. The Koryo and Choson periods witnessed a shift in the sense that more and more ordinary women became bhikkunis. The reasons behind it were both secular as well as philosophical.116 Some were ordained simply to spend their lives praying for their dead fathers; some were forced to be ordained by the fathers, for they had no money for their daughters to get married; wives and daughters of rebels were also ordained or became lifelong servants.117

The positive influences of Buddhism underwent change with passage of time. In the late Koryo period, Buddhist temples accumulated wealth due to patronage of kings, and this had an adverse effect on the sangha as it became corrupt. The impact was also felt on the bhikkuni sangha. The Bhikkuni sangha too became rich as it now focused its energy on producing various goods such as hemp cloth than on the meditative practices. The Choson Period was marked by anti-Buddhist approach of the ruling dynasty. Many young bhikkunis were forced to disrobe during this period. The Choson law which prohibited bhikkus and bhikkunis from entering the capital for almost five hundred years was revoked when Korea was

116 In Japan too, (where Buddhism went from Korea), by the mid-Heian period (794 AD-1185 AD), most educated women were expected to become Buddhist renunciants during the final years of their life. The Heian-period literature emphasizes renunciation as a step towards attainment of personal salvation, the Kamakura period onwards literature shows renunciation as a display of household loyalty. Some scholars have viewed the practice of female renunciation as evidence of female subservience and patriarchal oppression. Refer Lori Meeks. op.cit., pp.1-59
117 Arvind Kumar Singh, Buddhism in Far East Asia, MD Publications Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2009, p.157
colonized by Japan in 1910. The sangha was able to regain some of its freedom. The bhikkunis in Korea followed almost all the rules set by the Buddha. The ordained Buddhists in Korea wore grey monastic dress as in China and unlike Sri Lanka where the monks wore saffron/yellow.

The history of nunneries or convent for women is recorded in Korea. Pomun-sa was the largest convent established in 1115 at Seoul by Tamjin for the bhikkunis. Tonghak-sa was another nunnery famous as an educational center for bhikkunis. The nuns generally received the ten precepts and were ordained first as a sramanerika, that is, a novice. Four different levels of monastic curriculum were followed and among the Buddhist texts, the reading of Lotus Sutra was and still is much emphasized.\textsuperscript{118} The intensive study of Sutras and Vinaya was stressed in the nunneries. Meditation was also an important part of the life and learning in nunneries.

**Thailand**

The situation of nuns in Thailand is different. Historically, women’s ordination was prevalent in Thailand but the practice gradually came to an end. There is no evidence of bhikkunis during the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng (1283-1317 AD); the bhikkuni ordination must have ended before that. The reason for the bhikkhuni or female Buddhist nuns coming to an end was probably due to the rule that the female monks have to be ordained both by male bhikkus and female bhikkunis on the same day. The major objection to the re-introduction of a female monastic order is due to the monastic rules that require that five ordained bhikkus and five ordained bhikkunis be present for any new bhikkhuni ordination. So, it is not possible to ordain any new Theravada bhikkhuni as the required number of bhikkunis.

\textsuperscript{118} Samu Sunim, op.cit., pp.131-132
was not available in Thailand. In contemporary period, some Thai women have been ordained in Taiwan. The Thai hierarchy refuses to recognize ordinations in the Taiwanese tradition as valid Theravada ordinations, due to differences in philosophical teachings and monastic discipline. Although women in Thailand cannot ordain as bhikkhuni, they can take part in quasi-monastic practices at temples and practice centers.

The female Theravada bhikkhuni lineage or sangha was never established in Thailand unlike in Myanmar (Burma) and Sri Lanka. Hence, the general perception among Thais is that women are not supposed to play an active role in monastic life; instead, they are expected to live as laity. As a result, lay women primarily participate in religious life either as lay participants in collective merit-making rituals, or by doing domestic work around temples. The Thai women are initiated as lay nuns known as mae chii or mae ji. The evidence for the reappearance of mae chii or mae ji is from late 17th century onwards. “Mae jis shave their heads, wear white robes and observe either five or eight precepts while following a form of monastic life without formal ordination or proper ordination lineage.” They lived in communities similar and often adjacent to monks’ monasteries. They shave their heads and wear the white robes and vow to practice the eight precepts; these include the five precepts followed by all lay Buddhists. The stress is on chastity, refraining from taking food after noon to dawn, refraining from dancing, singing, listening to or playing music, seeing the play, refraining from using garlands, scent, unguents, wearing finery and using high beds and large beds. “These eight precepts governing the conduct of a mae chii should not be confused with the Gurudhamma, the eight stipulations made

119 In Thai language, mae means ‘mother’ and chii or ji refers to Buddhist monks, certain non-Buddhist (e.g., Jains), and to Buddhist women who shave their heads and wear white robes.
120 Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, Thai Women in Buddhism, Parallex Press, Berkeley, California, 1991, p.36
by the Buddha before he would permit women’s full ordination as *bhikkuni*.”

There is no rule in the Pali canons for *mae chii* or *mae ji* initiation. But the rules followed for membership resembles that of a nun. “An aspirant must be a woman, must not be or become pregnant, must exhibit good behavior, must enjoy good health, must be free from debt, must be free from habit-forming drugs, must not be absconding from home or a government job, must not have a criminal record, must not suffer from infectious disease, must not be too old to perform religious duties, must not be lame, and must have permission to become a *mae chii* from her parents or husband.” The *mae chii* or *mae ji* ceremony is conducted by four monks and several *mae chiis*. This somewhat resembles the full *bhikkuni* ordination as both monks and *mae chiis* are involved in the process of initiation which is not technically ordination as they are lay women worshippers. During the process, one is reminded about the three refuges of Buddhism- Buddha, *Dhamma* and *sangha*. Further, meditation is considered her foremost religious duty and she is made aware of the eight precepts. The *mae chii* after initiation lives in monastic communities which are attached to *wats* (Buddhist temples). Each *mae chii* community is headed by a head *mae chii*. The number in a *mae chii* community may vary from six to three hundred at any particular time.

Technically speaking, they are still lay women but they are considered higher than general lay men due to their formal uniforms, precepts and practices. Though the institution of *bhikkunis* or female monks came to an end in Thailand, they were reborn in a different form as the eight-precepts-

---

122 ibid.
upasaka, the mae chii/mae ji, who occupy an honored place in the Thai society. The Thai Mae ji Foundation in Thailand under the patronage of Her Majesty the Queen of Thailand established in 1962 points to this fact. It is run by a nine member committee and funds educational programs for mae chii/mae ji, both in Pali and Buddhist teaching and in practical skills too.\textsuperscript{123} As far as their learning and teaching is concerned, the emphasis is mainly on the study of the Pali texts.

### III

#### Women within the Three Vehicles

Women within the Buddhist sangha make an interesting study. Buddhism faded away in India by the 12\textsuperscript{th} century and with that the bhikkuni sangha must have also gone into oblivion. The different strands of Buddhism witnessed different development within its monasticism as far as women were concerned. The bhikkuni sangha appeared soon after the bhikku sangha in India and moved from here to Sri Lanka (3\textsuperscript{rd} century BC), from there to China (5\textsuperscript{th} century AD), from China to Korea and then to Japan. In countries were Hinayana (Theravada) flourished, the women’s sangha almost became extinct in countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand. Some scholars believe that the bhikkuni sangha became extinct between the 11\textsuperscript{th} to 13\textsuperscript{th} centuries AD. As no bhikkunis were left to give ordination as per the Vinaya rules, hence no new bhikkuni could be ordained since then. It is precisely due to this reason that no woman could be ordained as a Theravada bhikkuni in Thailand. The Ecclesiastical Council of Thailand has issued a warning that any monk who ordains bhikkuni will be punished. Novice women adherents can be seen in some countries but they are not fully

\textsuperscript{123} Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, \textit{op.cit.}, p.55
ordained bhikkunis. They voluntarily take limited vows (8-10 precepts) to live a life of renunciation. White or pink robes are worn by them. They are referred to as Dasa sil mata in Sri Lanka, Thilashin in Mynamar, Mae ji/Mae chi in Thailand, Guruma in Nepal and Laos.

The bhikkuni sangha was revived in Sri Lanka in 1996 through the efforts of Sakyadhita Association of Buddhist Women. 11 Sri Lankan women received full ordination in Sarnath, Varanasi, India as per procedure laid down by Dodangoda Revata Mahathera and late Mapalagama Vipulasara Mahathera with assistance from bhikkus and bhikkunis of the Jogye order of Korean Seon Buddhism. Dhammananda Bhikkuni (earlier name Dr. Chatsumaran Kabilsingh), a Thai scholar was ordained as a bhikkuni in Sri Lanka and returned to Thailand to revive it where bhikkuni ordination is forbidden.

The issue of women within Mahayana Buddhism is a complicated one. We have two contradictory views emerging from its texts. The negative as well as positive feminine images exist within the texts. Ultimately, within Mahayana doctrine, nothing is male or female. It considers bodies of either gender as insubstantial and impermanent. The Buddhist discourse exists at two levels- ultimate and conventional. The question of gender becomes relevant only at the conventional level where women’s sexuality and sensuality distracting one from attaining spiritual goal is taken into consideration. Women’s bodies are often used as a metaphor for carnal desire. This is but one side of the story. On the other side, we have references to spiritual attainment by nuns and lay women and women teaching Dhamma and expounding the ultimate truth. In the Lotus Sutra, there is a story of young daughter of the Naga king. She had profound
wisdom and knowledge of what Buddha taught. Many people doubted her abilities. Ultimately, she transforms into a male and does all the practices of a bodhisattva, attains nirvana and expounds the Dhamma in front of these people. Thus, we can’t deny the fact that contradictory views regarding women exist within Mahayana scriptures. The transformation to male from female is worth noting as ultimately the male physical form prevails over the female body.

In the Vajrayana Buddhism, women play a very pivotal role. Within its pantheon of deities are Tara\textsuperscript{124}, the female Buddha and the dakinis\textsuperscript{125} (female wisdom beings) who play an important role in its development and spiritual paraphernalia. Padmasambhava is credited with the introduction of tantric Buddhism- Vajrayana in Tibet. One of his consorts, Princess Mandarva of Zahor, India was considered to be a dakini and since then has incarnated several times. Another consort was Yeshe Tsogyal, a Tibetan Yogini. She was instrumental in compiling the inconceivable teachings of Padmasambhava, who considered the accomplishments of both his consorts to be equivalent of his own. There are stories of several accomplished female practitioners (yoginis) in Tibet and other countries like Mongolia, Nepal and Bhutan where Vajrayana flourished. One of them is Machik/g Labdron, the great yogini, said to be the incarnation of Yeshe Tsogyal. She is credited with the origin and propagation of Chod practice, the only Vajrayana practice said to have originated in Tibet and then spread to India while generally it has been the vice versa. Women are considered to have a great capacity for wisdom. The female is also symbolic of compassion. They

\textsuperscript{124} Tara is said to have sprung from the tears of Bodhisattva Avolokiteshvara (Chenrezig in Tibetan) when he looked at the sufferings of the world.  
\textsuperscript{125} Dakinis reveal the teachings to practitioners who are willing to receive it. They also represent the Three Roots as they manifest as a guru, a yidam or a protector.
play an important role in the practices of Vajrayana and are essential in attainment of enlightenment.

**Rules for Women: A Critical Assessment**

A two year preparatory probationary period for the women was specified by the Buddha in his lifetime to check the entry of pregnant women into the *bhikkuni sangha*. But why two years was specified is not clear; even one year would have been sufficient to know about one’s pregnancy. A mother should fulfill her obligation of bringing up the child before taking a decision to leave her home and enter a life of *bhikkuni*. Perhaps this social obligation was taken into consideration by the Buddha while formulating this rule assuming the vital role of a mother in rearing a child. There should have been a rule for monks too so that they don’t leave their pregnant wives or small children. But here the onus seems to be on women only may be due to biological reason of giving birth to a child.

The ordination of a female was valid only if ratified by the monks while the vice versa was not there. The monk order was fully established by the time when the women order was established after initial reluctance from Lord Buddha and he may have wanted that no discrepancies occur in the process of ordination, so it was ratified by more experienced monks. This may have been the reason behind this rule or it just reflected the patriarchal nature of the contemporary society.

The number of monastic rules for the *bhikkunis* was more as compared to the *bhikkus*. The rules are mentioned in the concluding chapters of the *Pacittiya Pali* under *Vinaya Pitaka*. The broad classification of the rules of disciplines for the *bhikkunis* is exactly the same as that of the
bhikkus except the two Aniyata rules which are exclusively only for the bhikkus. This is clear from the table given below¹²⁶:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No.</th>
<th>Category of offences</th>
<th>Bhikkus</th>
<th>Bhikkunis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Parajika</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Samghadisesa</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Aniyata¹²⁷</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Nissaggiya Pacattiya</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Suddha Pacattiya</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>PatidesAniya</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Sekhiya</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Adhikaranasamatha</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

227 311

---

The different schools of Hinayana had their own version of the monastic rules for the monks and nuns. The eight categories of the rules of disciplines for monks and seven categories for the nuns are discussed in

¹²⁶ Guide To Tipitaka, op.cit., p.15
¹²⁷ These two offences relate to a bhikku sitting privately alone with a woman for an immoral purpose; it took care of “undetermined cases involving sexual matters”. Charles S. Prebish, Historical Dictionary of Buddhism, Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi, 1995 (1st Indian edition), p.216
detail in the first two books of Vinaya Pitaka.\textsuperscript{128} The number of rules increased with passage of time as evident from the monastic rules for different sects within Buddhism but in all the traditions the number of monastic rules for women was more in total numbers. They were in a subordinate position to the monks. According to Charles S. Prebish, the number of monastic rules ranged from 218 (of Mahasanghikas) to 263 (Sarvastivadins) for monks while for nuns it was 279 to 380\textsuperscript{129} while W. Pachow mentions 227 to 263 for monks and 290 to 480 for nuns.\textsuperscript{130} A close analysis of the rules exclusively meant for women point to the fact that they were concerned with women’s sexuality as well as security. The women within the sangha were subjected to the subordinate position and under the authority of the Bhikku sangha. Even a bhikku of one day was superior to a senior bhikkuni. The rules meant for women were ultimately enforced by the monks during Upostha and the punishment was also awarded by them. The only prerogative given to the Bhikkuni sangha was to hold the preliminary enquiry and then report it to the joint meeting of both the sangha’s and further proceedings was carried forward by the Bhikku sangha. A Tibetan nun in Sarnath when asked why bhikkunis have extra rules in comparison to bhikkus said that it may be due to several reasons like biological, social vulnerability, circumstances and conditions of the period when these rules were framed.\textsuperscript{131} Buddhism subsumed many social, economic hierarchies of that time and opened its gates to all irrespective of varna (social order), jati (caste), region, economic status and gender. But it


\textsuperscript{129} Charles S. Prebish, Historical Dictionary of Buddhism, p.216.

\textsuperscript{130} W. Pachow, op.cit., p.228

\textsuperscript{131} Ms. Lobzang Dolma, a Tibetan nun from Ladakh who graduated from CUTS, Sarnath, Varanasi. Interviewed by Ms. Shivani Khanna, MA/MCPR/FSS/BHU as a part of her MA Dissertation on ‘Feminine Spirituality and Its Dignity: The Position or Role of Women in Buddhism’, 2015-16 Session.
didn’t give away the gender differentiation in totality although it opened the
doors of *sangha* for the women. The concluding remarks for the status of
women within the *sangha* can be either of the two views. First, the monastic
rules for women were framed during the life time of Buddha keeping their
safety and feminine nature in consideration. Secondly, the view of W.
Pachao holds good when he writes, “It appears that the fair sex was treated
unfairly. The rationale was that woman is physically weaker than man;
therefore, nuns need protection and guidance from the *Bhiksu-Sangha.*
Under these circumstances nuns are in a subordinate position.”\(^{132}\) Thus,
Buddhism was not able to question ‘patriarchy’ and under this, the
subordination of the women by men within its monasticism.

Regarding the ordination of women, we can say that in India it died
out with the decline of Buddhism around 12\(^{th}\) century AD. In Tibet
(Vajrayana), only lower ordination was offered and is still continuing but the
process of full ordination is underway and the highest monastic degree of
Geshema is also being awarded to them. In Thailand (Theravada), full
ordination was never offered and still is denied to them but novice nuns do
live like nuns and the process of full ordination is led by Chatsumaran
Kabilsingh. It’s only in the Mahayana tradition that women’s ordination has
existed and survived till date and Korea is a good example of it. The
*Bhikkuni sangha* in Korea is a strong organization fulfilling all its religious
as well as social obligations.

\(^{132}\) W. Pachow, *op.cit.*, p.232