

Arriving at the Noble Realm  
**Awakened Women:  
Surpassing Great Brahma**

Questions and Answers:  
Phra Payutto and Dr. Martin Seeger

Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacariya  
(P. A. Payutto)

# Arriving at the Noble Realm Awakened Women: Surpassing Great Brahma

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by Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacariya (P. A. Payutto)

translated by Robin Moore

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## Anumodanā

For many years, Prof. Dr. Martin Seeger has taken a keen interest in the subject of women in Buddhism. In 2004, he conducted a lengthy interview with me on women and higher ordination, culminating in the book titled *The Buddhist Discipline in Relation to Bhikkhunis*.<sup>1</sup> Since that time, I have been aware that Dr. Martin Seeger has continued his research on this subject, including a study of *maechis*<sup>2</sup> and the role of women in Buddhism over the past century.

Following on from the above-mentioned interview on bhikkhunis, Dr. Martin Seeger, when visiting Thailand on later occasions, continued to visit me and to make inquiries into additional matters pertaining to the subject of women and Buddhism. In 2012, he sent me a letter with several concise questions that resulted in extensive answers. In that same year, the questions and answers were published as another book.<sup>3</sup>

On 23 March 2013, Dr. Martin Seeger visited me again in the provinces and posed several more questions on the theme of women in Buddhism. Afterwards, he expressed the wish to publish the content of our conversation as yet another book. I recognized the merits of this undertaking and began to expand and polish the answers.

In any event, this work coincided with numerous other book projects that had been put on hold for a long time. I therefore had to interrupt the work with the wish that were I to live to a ripe old age, the project would be complete before I reach the age of 100.

Recently, I was informed by the community at Wat Nyanavesakavan that Khun Peeranuch Kiatsommart has expressed the wish to publish the English translation of the second book - *Arriving at the Noble Realm, Awakened Women: Surpassing Great Brahma* - translated by Robin Moore, an accomplished translator of Dhamma books. She also wishes to reprint the original Thai edition. Both of these books will be published for free distribution as a 'gift of the Dhamma'.

Khun Peeranuch Kiatsommart is endowed with great faith and generosity. For many years, she has supported the translation and publication of Dhamma books into English, shouldering all financial responsibility. Her meritorious actions contribute eminently to the far-reaching study, practice and realization of the Dhamma.

Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacariya (P. A. Payutto)

1 March 2021

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<sup>1</sup> Original Thai edition (ตอบ ดร.มาร์ติน: พุทธวินัย ถึง ภิกษุณี) published in 2010; English translation published in 2013. [Trans.: the full title of the English edition: *The Buddhist Discipline in Relation to Bhikkhunis: Questions and Answers - Phra Payutto and Dr. Martin Seeger.*]

<sup>2</sup> Trans.: white-robed nuns in Thailand who keep the eight or ten precepts.

<sup>3</sup> Thai title: ตอบ ดร.มาร์ติน: ดลถิ่นอริยชน สตรีหลุดพ้นขึ้นเหนือมหาพรหม. [Trans.: the Thai edition of the book you now hold in your hands.]

## Preface

The subtitle to this book—*Questions and Answers: Phra Payutto and Dr. Martin Seeger*—is identical to the subtitle of a previous book: *The Buddhist Discipline in Relation to Bhikkhunis*.<sup>1</sup> Both of these books have arisen as a reply to questions posed by Dr. Martin Seeger. Whereas the previous book resulted from a series of interviews conducted over several years, this book is a reply to questions sent in a single letter.

This book is naturally an extension of the previous book, because the questions sent in the letter refer to points contained in *The Buddhist Discipline in Relation to Bhikkhunis* (except for the final question).

It is my wish that these answers enhance and develop on the material contained in the previous book by clarifying certain points, thus promoting a deeper understanding of these issues.

May I express my appreciation to all the individuals involved in preparing this publication whose efforts generate blessings through the investigation of truth and the cultivation of wisdom.

Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacariya (P. A. Payutto)<sup>2</sup>

23 August 2012

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<sup>1</sup> Trans.: *The Buddhist Discipline in Relation to Bhikkhunis: Questions and Answers - Phra Payutto and Dr. Martin Seeger*; © 2013, Wat Nyanavesakavan.

<sup>2</sup> Trans.: at that time the venerable author's ecclesiastical title was Phra Brahmaganabhorn.



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## Letter from Dr. Martin Seeger

Bhanu House, 26 July 2012

Dear Venerable Tahn Chao Khun Ajahn:<sup>3</sup>

After I had the opportunity to visit you at Wat Nyanavesakavan on the 18<sup>th</sup> of this month, I carefully reread the book by Bhikkhuni Subodhā titled *A Reply to Dr. Martin on 'The Buddhist Discipline in Relation to Bhikkhunis'*.<sup>4</sup> (The venerable author of this text recently passed away from cancer.) In this book, Ven. Subodhā states:

*I have written this book as a reply to Dr. Martin Seeger.... Those people who oppose the restoration of the bhikkhuni sangha frequently refer to Tahn Chao Khun Ajahn's 'The Buddhist Discipline in Relation to Bhikkhunis'. I feel that this book acts as a sort of final verdict on this matter, which I cannot accept. Indeed, I speculate that this was the author's prime objective in writing this book.... It has now become a kind of definitive scripture or canon used by those who object to the restoration of the bhikkhuni sangha.'*<sup>5</sup>

Although I feel that Ven. Subodhā may not have fully understood the objective of *The Buddhist Discipline in Relation to Bhikkhunis*, she raises some interesting and thought-provoking points. Having said this, it is also my impression that many

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<sup>3</sup> Trans.: an honorific used for monks of high ecclesiastical status.

<sup>4</sup> Thai title: ตอบ ดร.มาร์ติน พุทธวินัยถึงภิกษุณี; Bhikkhuni Subodhā; © 2012. [Trans.: the Pali spelling for a fully ordained Buddhist nun is *bhikkhuni*; for simplicity I have most often used 'bhikkhuni'.]

<sup>5</sup> *A Reply to Dr. Martin on 'The Buddhist Discipline in Relation to Bhikkhunis'*, pages 7, 3, and 2, respectively.

of her doubts and questions are already clearly explained by Tahn Chao Khun Ajahn. Therefore, I have compiled only those noteworthy or principal points in her book to bring to your attention.

In addition, there is a fourth point which is not directly related to Ven. Subodhā's book. It does, however, have to do with the status of women in Theravada Buddhism, and it has been a perplexing matter for me for a long time. My students at Leeds University have often asked me about it, but I never felt that I have been able to give them a satisfactory reply.

Here are my four questions:

1. On page 15 in the book *A Reply to Dr. Martin...*, Ven. Subodhā writes: 'Ven. Sāriputta told the bhikkhus who lived in a monastery close to his family home that if anyone claims to be his younger brother and asks for ordination, they should ordain him without seeking his parents' approval, because his parents hold wrong view (*micchā-diṭṭhi*). Afterwards, Revata indeed snuck away from home and asked for ordination. The monks gave him ordination as requested by Sāriputta. From this story we can see that Sāriputta was aware of the Vinaya rule that ordainees must first receive their parents' permission, but he deliberately disobeyed this rule in exchange for having his brother be ordained which was a worthwhile action.' How do you view this matter? What actually happened?

2. In reference to the Buddha's prescription that a female preceptor (*pavattinī*) may only give ordination to one bhikkhuni every two years, Ven. Subodhā states: 'Ven. Mahinda Thera invited the arahant Ven. Saṅghamittā Therī from India to travel along with eleven other bhikkhunis in order to establish the bhikkhuni sangha in Sri Lanka.

Saṅghamittā Therī bestowed ordination on tens of thousands of bhikkhunis.<sup>6</sup> We can thus observe that if there are sufficient monastic residences and the female preceptor has the ability to look after the newly ordained nuns, there is no need to allude to this Vinaya rule in order to impede the growth of the bhikkhuni sangha.<sup>7</sup> She goes on to say: ‘This story reveals the difference between a literal attachment to the Vinaya and a serious consideration of various conditional factors—of time and place, social context, regional necessities, etc.’<sup>8</sup> She is particularly referring to your comments about this matter on pp. 189-191 in *The Buddhist Discipline in Relation to Bhikkhunis*.<sup>9</sup>

3. From what I can discern, the following three passages reveal at least some of Ven. Subodhā’s primary intention for writing the book *A Reply to Dr. Martin....*:

*This shows that ever since the time of his awakening the Buddha was determined that the Buddhist religion would be comprised of the ‘four assemblies’ and that he would with certainty allow women to be ordained as bhikkhunis. All of the twenty-eight previous Buddhas had bhikkhunis amongst their most eminent disciples. How is it possible that the Buddha Gotama would permit for his era to be absent of the bhikkhuni assembly? The presence of the bhikkhuni sangha is of paramount importance. It cannot be compared with such debates as to whether one is ordained by one sangha or two. Similarly, raising the objection that the Mahayana school is of a different communion in order to discredit the ordination of women shows the ineptitude of*

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<sup>6</sup> The source of this information is Chapter 18 of the *Dīpavaṃsa*.

<sup>7</sup> ‘A Reply to Dr. Martin...’, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> ‘A Reply to Dr. Martin...’, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Trans.: page numbers refer to the English edition (p. 364 of the Thai edition).

*many Buddhists.*

*Buddhists claim that theirs is a religion of wisdom, but they end up grasping on to aspects of Vinaya and various rituals in order to obstruct progress. It is as if today's Buddhists are unable to distinguish between what is of major and minor importance. They are unable to distinguish between the true goal or essence of Buddhism and mere rules and customs.<sup>10</sup>*

*Of course, we all give utmost importance to 'ordination of the heart'. But this is not to say that conventional forms lack importance.... At first, Bhikkhu Pukkusāti was ordained by himself, outside of any formal procedure. But once the opportunity to be formally ordained arose he requested such an ordination.*

Ven. Subodhā believes there are historical precedents within the Theravada tradition of restoring the bhikkhuni sangha in order to regenerate something of such great value. I believe she is very sincere and well-intentioned in her attempts to restore the Theravada bhikkhuni sangha. Because she is convinced of the potential benefits, she is looking for historical examples to enable such a restoration. What do you think of her line of reasoning here?

4. This question does not relate directly to Ven. Subodhā's book, but it has to do with the status of women in Theravada Buddhism. According to the Bahudhātuka Sutta: 'It is impossible, it cannot happen, that a woman is':

- A perfectly enlightened Buddha (*sammāsambuddha*)
- A wheel-turning monarch (*cakkavatti*; universal monarch)
- The god Sakka

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<sup>10</sup> 'A Reply to Dr. Martin...', p. 62.

- Māra
- Brahma<sup>11</sup>

This appears to be an absolute truth (*paramattha*). I have the impression here that transcending gender is still somehow gender-specific.<sup>12</sup> It is as if a gender inequality exists even on an absolute level. Can you please clarify this matter for me?

If you think it would be beneficial, would you be so kind as to consider and explain these four points?

With gratitude and deep respect,  
Martin

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<sup>11</sup> Majjhima Nikāya, sutta no. 115.

<sup>12</sup> Trans.: unless otherwise indicated, I use the word 'gender' in this book as a synonym for 'biological sex', namely, the state of being either male or female. This should not be confused with the common modern usage of the word in the context of gender roles and gender identity.

## **Reply to Dr. Martin**

Thursday 9 August 2012

To Khun Martin, with compliments:

Having read your letter, it seems that you have been pondering the fourth question for some time, so I will address this matter first. Although this subject covers a broad range of material, there is only room here to touch upon some fundamental principles.

## Chapter 1: Women Can Surpass Great Brahma

The scriptural passage stating that it is impossible for a woman to be a perfectly enlightened Buddha,<sup>13</sup> a wheel-turning monarch,<sup>14</sup> Sakka,<sup>15</sup> Māra,<sup>16</sup> or Brahma,<sup>17</sup> does not in fact refer to an absolute truth.<sup>18</sup> Rather, it has to do with conventional reality<sup>19</sup> and pertains exclusively to the ‘mundane’.<sup>20</sup>

Instead of giving a lengthy explanation of this matter, let me present some related teachings by the Buddha, for example:

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<sup>13</sup> *Sammāsambuddha*.

<sup>14</sup> *Cakkavatti*. Also translated as ‘universal monarch’.

<sup>15</sup> Trans.: also known as Indra (Pali = Inda). By the time of the Buddha, the Vedic god Indra was generally identified with Sakka.

<sup>16</sup> Trans.: ‘Evil One’, ‘Tempter’. A deity who rules over the highest sense-sphere heaven realm: Paranimmitavasavatti. He hinders and obstructs people, preventing them from escaping the sphere of sensuality over which he holds sway.

<sup>17</sup> Trans.: Pali spelling: Brahmā.

<sup>18</sup> *Paramattha*.

<sup>19</sup> *Sammati*.

<sup>20</sup> *Lokiya*.

*Monks, the Tathāgata, the Arahant, the Perfectly Enlightened One, is liberated by disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, non-clinging towards form ... feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness, and is therefore called a Perfectly Enlightened One.*<sup>21</sup>

*So too, a bhikkhu liberated by wisdom is liberated by disenchantment, by dispassion, by cessation, by non-clinging towards form ... feeling ... perception ... volitional formations ... consciousness, and is therefore called one liberated by wisdom.*<sup>22</sup>

The term ‘one liberated by wisdom’ refers to the fundamental state of arahantship (or to the most basic kind of arahant).<sup>23</sup> Regardless of any exceptional distinction, even of being a perfectly enlightened Buddha, all arahants are equally ‘liberated by wisdom’. Simply speaking, one can say that the state of arahantship is grounded on liberation by wisdom.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, every arahant can be referred to as a ‘buddha’.

Liberation by wisdom is the absolute truth, the reality,<sup>25</sup> the essence, of all arahants. And every person, regardless of gender, is capable of being liberated by wisdom. According to this teaching, ultimately—or by their essential nature—men and women are equal.

This earlier passage goes on to state:

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<sup>21</sup> *Sammāsambuddha.*

<sup>22</sup> *Paññāvimutta.* S. III. 65-66. This passage is quoted in *Buddhadhamma* on p. 585 (of the English edition). [Trans.: *Buddhadhamma: The Laws of Nature and Their Benefits to Life*, © 2017 English edition by the Buddhadhamma Foundation.]

<sup>23</sup> Trans.: arahant: a fully enlightened person.

<sup>24</sup> *Paññāvimutti.*

<sup>25</sup> *Sabhāva.*



*What is the distinction, what is the disparity, what is the difference between the Tathāgata, the Arahant, the Perfectly Enlightened One, and a bhikkhu liberated by wisdom?...*

*The Tathāgata, the Arahant, the Perfectly Enlightened One, is the originator of the Path as yet unarisen, the revealer of the Path as yet unrevealed, the declarer of the Path as yet undeclared. He is the knower of the Path, the one adept in the Path, the one skilled in the Path.*

*His disciples who now dwell following that Path become joined with it afterwards. This is the difference between the Tathāgata, the Arahant, the Perfectly Enlightened One, and a bhikkhu liberated by wisdom.*

The distinction referred to in this passage pertains to worldly matters and to the conventional interactions between human beings. These worldly distinctions can be clarified by looking at the matter of wheel-turning monarchs. The following verse sheds light on the absolute truth or essential nature of such monarchs:<sup>26</sup>

*Paṭhabyā ekarajjena      saggassa gamanena vā  
Sabbalokādhipaccena      sotāpattiphalaṃ varam*

In the book *Buddhadhamma* I translate this verse as follows:

*Superior to sovereignty over the entire earth,  
Greater than going to heaven,  
More excellent than lordship over all the worlds,  
Is the fruit of entering into the stream of awakening.*

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<sup>26</sup> Dh. verse 178. Quoted in *Buddhadhamma* at p. 430 (of the English edition).

Here, ‘sovereignty over the entire earth’ refers to a wheel-turning monarch. ‘Lordship over all the worlds’ refers to dominion over all realms, including the realms of Sakka, Māra, and Brahma. And ‘entering the stream of awakening’ refers to the fruit of stream-entry.<sup>27</sup> This verse clearly indicates that in terms of ultimate reality the attainment of stream-entry is far superior to being a universal monarch, Sakka, Māra, or Brahma.

Universal monarchs, Sakka, Māra, and Brahma are all unenlightened (with the exception of some awakened individuals). They are still spinning around on the wheel of rebirth,<sup>28</sup> and they risk falling into the hell realms. So from the perspective of absolute truth,<sup>29</sup> birth as one of these powerful beings is practically meaningless.

Indeed, it is the attainment of stream-entry (up to the attainment of arahantship) that gives true meaning to life, is of ultimate importance, and is truly precious. Anyone, regardless of gender, is able to realize such attainment which marks true and genuine equality.

From an absolute perspective, any person—male or female, old or young, rich or poor, high-ranking or low—whose heart has been ‘ennobled’ (‘awakened’), is exalted and superior to all great monarchs and the entire host of celestial beings.

Making a public announcement, however, by declaring: ‘I am greater than a universal monarch,’ does not guarantee one’s safety. Powerful figures in the world may detain such a person eminent in the Dhamma and sentence him or her to death.

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<sup>27</sup> *Sotāpatti-phala*.

<sup>28</sup> *Saṃsāra-vaṭṭa*.

<sup>29</sup> *Paramattha*.

If, intending to help others, one makes a declaration that one is supreme in the world, then one must first perfect oneself both in spiritual and in worldly qualities. This is the case for a perfectly enlightened Buddha, who realizes the Dhamma and is also skilled in the ways of the world.

Let me repeat that the statement claiming that women are unable to be perfectly enlightened Buddhas, universal monarchs, Sakka, Māra, or Brahma is a matter pertaining to conventional worldly affairs, to human activities, and to people's perceptions of greatness.

Worldly valour and superiority depend to a large degree on physical attributes, for instance: physical strength to battle against obstacles; the ability to live in wilderness areas; venturing alone into dangerous places; confronting and vanquishing adversaries; protecting the safety of others; fighting wars; and passing beyond various forms of social turmoil in order to build a new chapter in human history. Examples include: a wheel-turning monarch takes his armies and conquers the four continents; Sakka is chief of the devas and foe to the Asuras; Brahma, considered by many to be the Almighty—the Creator—must occasionally combat with Māra; and Māra himself is so powerful that he instils fear in Indra and Brahma. Finally, the perfectly enlightened Buddha symbolizes the defeat over Māra; he is the supreme authority embodying the end of all iniquity and evil.

In terms of absolute truth (*paramattha*), we can assert that birth as a woman or man is easily subject to change, depending on people's proclivities and desires, which shape the course of their lives.

Returning to the passage: ‘It is impossible, it cannot happen, that a woman is a Brahma,’ if one claims to be speaking on an absolute level, others can justifiably raise objections because it is clearly documented how numerous women have developed the *jhānas*<sup>30</sup> and reached heightened states of consciousness. Some of these women were praised by the Buddha himself as foremost in the development of *jhāna*.<sup>31</sup> If one dies while abiding in *jhāna*, one is born after death as a Brahma (unless one is an arahant). According to this absolute principle, many women are born as Brahmas. So why is it stated that this is impossible?<sup>32</sup>

According to their essential nature, Brahmas are genderless—they are neither male nor female. So why is there an assertion that they must be male? According to the commentaries, although Brahmas are genderless, their form and appearance is that of a man.<sup>33</sup> Within the widespread religious tradition of Brahmanism, Brahma was revered as the supreme God, referred to as ‘Great Brahma’ (*Mahā Brahmā*). In this context, Brahma is considered the Almighty, the Creator of the universe.<sup>34</sup>

According to numerous religious traditions, such a

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<sup>30</sup> Trans.: meditative absorption.

<sup>31</sup> Of those disciples adept at *jhāna*, Ven. Kaṅkhā-Revata was foremost among the bhikkhus, Ven. Nanda was foremost among the bhikkhunis, and Uttara Nandamātā was foremost among the female lay disciples (there is no mention of a male lay disciple foremost in *jhānas*).

<sup>32</sup> Note that the literal translation of the Pali phrase *brahmatṭam kāreyya* is: ‘to accomplish the state of brahmahood’ = ‘to occupy the position as Brahma’. It does not literally translate as ‘being born as a Brahma’.

<sup>33</sup> Perhaps this refers to a physically strong and powerful appearance, without physical attributes of bearing or rearing children.

<sup>34</sup> As mentioned earlier, however, Brahma is bedevilled by his adversary Māra.

sovereign God, despite not being ascribed a specific gender, is conventionally referred to as male. This is also true for the concept of God's adversary (Māra, Satan, etc.). This is because, traditionally, it is the men who go into battle and fight with one another.

Although 'Great Brahma' is genderless, when revealed to human beings, or when appearing to people as a vision, such a sovereign deity is projected in the form of a man: strong-featured (the 'Almighty' is generally not conceived of as androgynous or genderless) and awe-inspiring (terrifying to evildoers and to Māra).<sup>35</sup>

The commentaries state that the Brahmas who cannot be women refer exclusively to these Mahā Brahmas. Note also that, from the perspective of the absolute, the Mahā Brahmas who appear to people as the Supreme Deity abide in only the third of the sixteen levels of Brahma worlds. Although women do not occupy this position of Mahā Brahma,<sup>36</sup> they are able to exist as higher Brahma gods, all the way to the very highest Brahma realms.

The subject of Brahmas is rather complex. Basically, there are twenty different Brahma realms, separated into the fine-material jhānas and the formless jhānas. There are sixteen kinds of fine-material Brahmas and four kinds of formless

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<sup>35</sup> The term 'Mahā Brahma' (*mahābrahmā*) is occasionally used in a broad sense, referring to those Brahmas who are prominent in a specific realm. For example, the Ābhassara Brahmas, who are prominent in the plane of the second jhāna (*dutiyajhāna-bhūmi*), and the Brahmas of the Pure Abodes (Suddhāvāsa), who are supreme in the plane of the fourth jhāna (*catutthajhāna-bhūmi*), are referred to as 'Great Brahmas' (*mahābrahmā*).

<sup>36</sup> Nor do they exist in the realm of non-percipient beings (*Asaññasattā*), one of the fourth-jhāna planes (*catutthajhāna-bhūmi*).

Brahmas. The sixteen kinds of fine-material Brahmas are as follows:

- Level of the first jhāna = 1. Brahmapārisajjā 2. Brahmapurohitā
- 3. Mahā Brahmā**
- Level of the second jhāna = 4. Parittābhā 5. Appamāṇābhā
- 6. Ābhassarā
- Level of the third jhāna = 7. Parittasubhā 8. Appamāṇasubhā
- 9. Subhakiṇhā
- Level of the fourth jhāna = 10. Asañña-sattā 11. Vehapphalā
- 12-16: Five Suddhāvāsa Brahmas

The Pure Abodes—the Suddhāvāsa realms—are the abodes of the five kinds of non-returners (*anāgāmi*): Avihā, Attapā, Sudassā, Sudassī, Akaniṭṭhā.

The commentaries claim that the state of Brahmahood that women cannot occupy is the state of Mahā Brahmā (the third level of Brahmas and the highest level of the first jhāna).<sup>37</sup> They explain simply: ‘Women who have accessed jhāna and pass away enter the company of Brahma’s retinue (*brahmapārisajjā*).’ Later texts generally agree with this interpretation, stating that women who have accessed the first jhāna are reborn among Brahma’s retinue, but if they access higher levels of jhāna they are reborn in corresponding Brahma realms.

In general descriptions of Brahmas, as is frequently seen in the commentaries, higher Brahmas, for instance the Ābhassara up to the Suddhāvāsa Brahmas, are referred to as Mahā Brahmas. In more recent times, in countries neighbouring Thailand, some individuals have written new Pali texts in the

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<sup>37</sup> E.g.: MA. IV. 122.

manner of scripture. These texts state that the term ‘Mahā Brahma’ refers to those Brahmas dominant in each of the levels mentioned above. They thus claim that women cannot be born as Ābhassara or Subhakiṇha Brahmas. (They do not, however, claim that women are barred from being born as Suddhāvāsa or Akaniṭṭha Brahmas. Instead, they state that if women are born as Akaniṭṭha Brahmas, they act to serve the other Brahmas abiding in this realm.) These claims are clearly misinterpretations. In any case, as mentioned earlier, Brahmas are genderless.<sup>38</sup>

Mahā Brahmas dwell relatively close to the human realm and are frequently involved in human affairs. Many Buddhists are familiar with their names, both the virtuous ones (e.g. Sahampati Brahma) and those with wrong view (e.g. Baka Brahma). The scriptures clearly state that these Mahā Brahmas exist at the level of the first jhāna, comprising the third of sixteen kinds of (fine-material) Brahmas.

Here we are looking at this matter from the perspective of the absolute.<sup>39</sup> From this inspection, we will hopefully be able to distinguish between absolute truth and conventional reality.<sup>40</sup> The absolute and the conventional are seemingly antithetical. The gender conventions in this context are related to physical attributes of possessing and wielding power. In terms of higher spiritual purposes, there are no distinctions in respect to gender.

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<sup>38</sup> Trans.: as Brahmas are genderless, the original question of whether a woman can be a Brahma (or whether Brahmas can be female) is more accurately expressed as whether women can be reborn as Brahmas.

<sup>39</sup> *Paramattha*.

<sup>40</sup> *Sammati*.

Worldly conventions, both conceptually and practically, must be fully understood. When people are not subject to delusion, they are able to distinguish conventions from the absolute, which ideally lies concealed at the heart of conventions. This process requires skilful discernment which in the scriptures is referred to as being ‘skilled in understanding correct and faulty conclusions’.<sup>41</sup> For instance, one is able to understand the apparent paradox: ‘Women cannot be Māra, but they can surpass Mahā Brahma.’

Another clear example of conventional symbolism is that of a Buddha image (*buddha-rūpa*). In Buddhism, humanity at its zenith is represented by the image of the Buddha having vanquished Māra and sitting with a serene, compassionate smile. He has passed beyond all intimidation and transcended all gender dualism.<sup>42</sup>

This differs from traditional imagery of almighty Brahma who must combat and subdue Māra. His posture, gestures, and array of weapons all emphasize power and force and appear menacing and awe-inspiring.

As is evident in many suttas, the subject of the Perfectly Enlightened Buddha, wheel-turning monarchs, Sakka, Māra, and Brahma is connected to struggles between good & evil, merit & demerit, wholesomeness & unwholesomeness, etc.

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<sup>41</sup> *Ṭhānāṭhana-kusala*.

<sup>42</sup> Using symbolic language, one may say here that an emphasis on power and might, which are symbols of the masculine, are balanced and integrated with the gentleness of kindness and compassion, symbols of the feminine (or the maternal). Whereas before, strength was set against weakness, now strength is paired with gentleness, reaching perfect balance and precision. In other words, when awakened beings exist and the Dhamma of the noble ones arises, the feminine truly manifests.



The Bahudhātuka Sutta, cited above, points to a reliance on Buddha-Dhamma<sup>43</sup> in order to pass beyond conventional reality and to arrive at the absolute. If one can make it past this barrier, one transcends any use of force in the subjugation of one's enemies.

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<sup>43</sup> Trans.: the teachings of the Buddha.



## Chapter 2: Providing Women with Optimum Opportunities

The topic of bhikkhunis, which Ven. Subodhā writes about in her book, is worthy of understanding and sensitivity. We should feel empathy for her and all the companions in her community because this matter has a direct bearing on their lives and they approach this topic with faith and good intention.

As Khun Martin has said, the book *The Buddhist Discipline in Relation to Bhikkhunis: Questions and Answers—Phra Payutto and Dr. Martin Seeger* focuses on the search for knowledge and emphasizes Buddhist principles. By investigating and gathering authentic information, we are provided with food for contemplation. We can then state that a particular principle leads to a specific conclusion. This is purely a matter of understanding; the principles do not dictate a course of action. In themselves, they do not thwart possibilities or get caught up in whether people observe them or seek alternative solutions.

Our actions should be based on clear and genuine knowledge and we should try to do what is correct. In terms of communal matters, we should act with concord and harmony. Sometimes, before we can arrive at the best decision, we must be patient. Ideally, we are able to find a solution that is correct and legitimate. We should try and avoid choosing a solution that only addresses part of an issue yet creates new, drawn-out problems.

It is good if people are able to uncover additional information, either consolidating what has been said before, or even contradicting it. This can clarify matters and facilitate research. The work by Ven. Subodhā is thus welcome and praiseworthy.

## **The Bhikkhunis and the First Recitation**

Before addressing the points in Ven. Subodhā's book that Khun Martin has brought up for consideration, let me take exception to one passage that I came across accidentally.

Not long ago, one of the monks brought me a copy of the book signed by the author. As I understand, Ven. Subodhā personally offered the book to Wat Nyanavesakavan, but as I have been convalescing in the provinces I was not there on that day. The monks thus received it and gave it to me afterwards.

As many people know, I am afflicted by several eye disorders and have been protecting my eyesight. It has been many years since I have read ordinary books. If it is necessary, I may read 2-3 pages of a printed book or document (while working on the computer I enlarge the font). When I received Ven. Subodhā's book, I did not read it; instead, I asked the monk who brought

it to me to read it on my behalf. A while later, he returned with the book, saying that Khun Martin had already read it in detail, and so he asked to be excused from reading it himself.

Soon thereafter I picked the book up in order to place it on the bookshelf, but flipped through it first. By chance, I came across this passage on page 37:

*The reason why Ven. Mahā Kassapa did not invite the bhikkhunis to participate in the [First] Recitation is most likely the same reason stated by Tahn Chao Khun on page 250 in ‘The Buddhist Discipline in Relation to Bhikkhunis’ that women during that era ‘did not sit in formal councils or assemblies.’<sup>44</sup>*

If one reads the material on page 250 carefully, one sees that:<sup>45</sup>

- I never claimed that the fact women in that era did not sit in formal councils was the reason bhikkhunis did not participate in the First Recitation.
- Nor did I claim that the bhikkhunis did not participate in the First Recitation.

It is true that in *The Buddhist Discipline in Relation to Bhikkhunis* I said that in Indian society at the time of the Buddha, women did not sit in formal assemblies. But with the establishment of the bhikkhuni sangha, the Buddha permitted women to sit in formal assemblies. This was a significant initiative and a revolutionary change.

In any case, according to the Vinaya, the bhikkhu sangha and the bhikkhuni sangha would each perform its own formal acts<sup>46</sup> separately.

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<sup>44</sup> Trans.: ‘Recitation’ is a translation of *saṅgāyanā*; this term is often rendered as ‘Council’.

<sup>45</sup> Trans.: p. 137 of the English translation.

<sup>46</sup> *Saṅghakamma*.

Even the Buddha's requirement for bhikkhuni ordinations to be performed by both communities does not mean that these two communities met together at the same time. When the first stage of the ordination had been completed by the bhikkhunis, a senior bhikkhuni would lead the new ordainee to request the second stage of ordination from the bhikkhu sangha. Some aspects of the first stage were not repeated, for instance the examination of personal attributes, which were accepted as having been carried out and completed by the bhikkhunis.

The Tipiṭaka describes only the primary acts of the sangha during the First Recitation, which was led by Ven. Mahā Kassapa.<sup>47</sup> It is normal according to the Vinaya that bhikkhunis (also male and female lay supporters) would not have participated in these formal acts of the bhikkhu sangha.

Furthermore, the gist of the formal acts during the Recitation are covered in only about two and a half pages. We thus do not have the details of what other procedures were carried out during the seven months of this event. For example, we do not know whether the bhikkhunis were assigned specific tasks to complete within their own assembly, the outcome of which would have then been passed on to the main assembly.

Therefore, we cannot definitively say that the bhikkhunis did not participate in the First Recitation.

As I said earlier, it is very useful if people discover additional source material, even if it is secondary or later information.

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<sup>47</sup> Trans.: in the Pali Canon, the word *saṅgha* has two chief meanings: 1) *ariya-saṅgha*: the community of enlightened beings (divided into four levels of awakening); and 2) *bhikkhu-saṅgha* & *bhikkhuni-saṅgha*: the monastic community. When I use this term on its own, it usually refers to the monastic community.

At the very least, it helps to clarify matters and provides people with a wider perspective. The kind of work that Ven. Subodhā and others have done is thus praiseworthy.

When one examines the Dhammavinaya<sup>48</sup> one should consider the primary source material and apply an effective and clear system of verification and review. In other words, one first considers the Buddha's words in the Tipiṭaka, including those matters concerning the Vinaya, and holds to his principles and prescriptions as a touchstone.

If available, supplementary or later information is helpful and should be used to support our contemplations. But we must be able to discern the status, background, and reliability of this extra information, and whether it accords with or contradicts the original source material.

## **Did Ven. Sāriputta Deliberately Transgress a Vinaya Rule?**

We can now turn our attention to two very interesting points in Ven. Subodhā's book that Khun Martin mentioned:

1. 'Ven. Sāriputta was aware of the Vinaya rule that ordainees must first receive their parents' permission, but he deliberately disobeyed this rule in exchange for having his brother be ordained.'
2. 'Ven. Mahinda Thera invited the arahant Ven. Saṅghamittā Therī from India to travel along with eleven

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<sup>48</sup> Trans.: the teachings of the Buddha in their entirety, comprised of Dhamma (teachings on principles of truth and advice on cultivating the mind) and Vinaya (rules and prescriptions determining good conduct and right livelihood and guiding people's behaviour).

other bhikkhunis in order to establish a bhikkhuni sangha in Sri Lanka. Saṅghamittā Therī bestowed ordination on tens of thousands of bhikkhunis.... We can thus observe that if there are sufficient monastic residences and the female preceptor has the strength to look after the newly ordained nuns, there is no need to allude to this Vinaya rule in order to impede the growth of the bhikkhuni sangha.’

These two points relate to material found in secondary texts: the commentaries and the *Dīpavaṃsa* (a later text containing a recorded history), respectively.

Upon closer inspection, we see that the material cited here is rather vague and ambiguous. In these sorts of cases, we must understand the status and attributes of whatever material is being cited, as well as to compare it with other material that may be at variance or contradictory.

I will only address these points in brief because time is limited and my health is uncooperative. Here my aim is simply to provide a basic level of understanding and to describe the necessary related issues.<sup>49</sup>

In respect to the first point, the claim here is that Ven. Sāriputta surely must have known the Buddha’s prescription that bhikkhu ordinations should not be given to anyone who has not received parental permission. Yet he enjoined the monks to give ordination to his younger brother Revata right away, whenever Revata made the request, without needing to wait for his parents’ approval. This is tantamount to deliberately disobeying the Vinaya rule.

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<sup>49</sup> This method of answering these two points may help with explaining other related matters.



This story of Revata appears in the commentaries to the Dhammapada.<sup>50</sup>

The biographical account of Ven. Revata is also found in two other texts: the commentary to the Theragāthā and the commentary to the Apadāna.<sup>51</sup> These two latter accounts are shorter than that found in the Dhammapada commentary, highlighting only the main features of his life. But it is interesting that they both describe identical accounts differing from that in the Dhammapada commentary in several important ways.

To explain this matter it is necessary to review the accounts presented in these various texts. The presentation in the Dhammapada commentary is almost eight pages. Here is a summary:

After Ven. Sāriputta relinquished his substantial personal wealth<sup>52</sup> and went forth as a bhikkhu, he led his three sisters (Cālā, Upacālā, and Sīsupacālā) and two brothers (Cunda and Upasena) to the monastery to be ordained. This left only Revata at home as the last remaining child. His mother was afraid that Sāriputta would come and lead Revata away to be ordained as well, and she therefore hastily found him a wife while he was still a boy.

Ven. Sāriputta told the forest monks that if Revata were to arrive wishing to be ordained, they should give him ordination right away because their parents hold wrong view. If Revata

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<sup>50</sup> DhA. II. 190. There are many monks in the scriptures named Revata; this individual is usually referred to by the specific name Khadiravaniya-Revata.

<sup>51</sup> Paramatthadīpanī Theragāthāvaṇṇanā (ThagA. I. 115) and Visuddhajanavilāsini (ApA. 302), respectively.

<sup>52</sup> The sum of 870 million 'units' of wealth (*koṭi*).

were to formally take leave from them, what good would come of this? It would be futile. Sāriputta went on to say: 'I myself am both his mother and his father.'

Ven. Sāriputta's mother intended to use marriage as a way to bind Revata—who was only seven years old—to the household life. She sought out a suitable young girl, arranged a wedding date, and led Revata to the girl's relatives. She also performed a blessing ceremony, wishing the bride a lifespan as long as her maternal grandmother, who was 120 years old.

Revata was curious and asked which of the relatives was the 120-year-old grandmother. What he saw was an ancient old lady, with missing teeth, grey hair, wrinkled and discoloured skin, and a bent back. When Revata made further inquiries and found out that his bride would eventually look like this too, he thought: 'Ah, it is for this reason that my elder brother went forth.' On that very day he decided to run away from home and be ordained.

When the wedding ceremony was finished, Revata's relatives lifted him up onto a chariot along with the young girl. When they had travelled a short distance, Revata pretended to have to empty his bowels and asked for the chariot to stop. He went into the bushes and then returned. He did this several more times until his relatives became unsuspecting and let him be. Finally, when he saw his chance, Revata snuck off and went to a monastery containing about thirty monks and asked for ordination. When the monks found out that he was Ven. Sāriputta's younger brother, they said: 'Your older brother has given permission.' They then proceeded to give him ordination, and afterwards they sent a message to Sāriputta informing him of these events.

Having received this news, Ven. Sāriputta went to visit the Buddha and said: ‘News has reached me saying that the monks in the forest have given ordination to Revata. I will go and visit him and then return.’ But the Buddha deterred him and asked him to wait.

A few days later he went to ask permission from the Buddha again, but the Buddha once more stopped him and told him that he would accompany Ven. Sāriputta on this journey.

Sāmaṇera Revata learned a meditation technique and went to live in a thingan tree forest about 30 yojanas from Sāvatti.<sup>53</sup> During that Vassa he realized arahantship along with discriminative knowledge.<sup>54</sup>

After the Vassa, Ven. Sāriputta went to ask the Buddha about the proposed trip. The Buddha then decided to set off on the journey with about five hundred monks.

When they reached a fork in the road, the Buddha, knowing that Ven. Sīvalī was accompanying the group and could provide for the monks’ comfort, decided to take a backcountry path.<sup>55</sup> During this journey many miracles occurred. After arriving at the residence of Ven. Revata, the Buddha stayed for about one month, before returning to Sāvatti.

The story ends at Sāvatti where the monks met with the illustrious female lay-supporter Visākhā, who asked them whether Revata’s residence was a delightful place. Two elderly

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<sup>53</sup> Trans.: *sāmaṇera* = ‘novice’. Thingan tree: *Hopea odorata*; also called ‘ta-khian’. 30 yojanas: more than 300 km. Sāvatti: the city in which the Buddha and Ven. Sāriputta were staying.

<sup>54</sup> *Paṭisambhidā*. [Trans.: the Vassa is the traditional rainy-season retreat.]

<sup>55</sup> This path was only 30 yojanas, whereas the path through inhabited areas was 60 yojanas. [Trans.: Ven. Sīvalī was declared by the Buddha preeminent among recipients of gifts. Wherever he traveled both people and devas supported him.]

monks replied: ‘How can one find delight in this place? It is overgrown with white-thorned thingan trees, similar to the haunt of ghosts.’ Yet when Visākhā asked two younger monks, they replied: ‘Madam lay supporter, the place is beyond words. It is like the celestial hall of Sudhammā.’<sup>56</sup>

When Visākhā asked the Buddha about this matter, he uttered the Dhammapada verse: ‘Whether in village or in forest ... wherever arahants dwell—delightful, indeed, is that spot.’<sup>57</sup> This verse is followed by a commentarial explanation.

The story in the Dhammapada commentary (or more precisely, the story in the text containing the commentary to the Dhammapada)<sup>58</sup> has many interesting points for consideration. Here, however, let us look at the story as described in the other two texts and see how they are different.

The shorter story in the commentaries to the Theragāthā and Apadāna<sup>59</sup> can be summarized as follows:

During the Buddha’s time, Revata was born from a brahmin woman named Rūpasārī in the village of Nālaka in the Magadha country. When he had come of age, his parents wished to bind him to the household life by getting married.

The Pali term translated as ‘come of age’<sup>60</sup> can also be rendered as ‘being grown up’. It is used in conjunction with such expressions as: getting married; finishing one’s

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<sup>56</sup> Trans.: Sudhammā: a hall in Tāvatiṃsa heaven.

<sup>57</sup> Dh. verse 98.

<sup>58</sup> [Trans.: for more on this distinction see the appendix.]

<sup>59</sup> The Paramatthadīpanī and the Visuddhajanavilāsini, respectively.

<sup>60</sup> *Vayappatta*.

education; studying in Takkasilā;<sup>61</sup> completing the three Vedas;<sup>62</sup> becoming a teacher; succeeding to the throne; taking up the position of a wealthy merchant; beginning to earn a living; going forth as a renunciant; and so on. Sixteen is usually mentioned as the age for reaching adulthood. In the case of Ven. Mahā Kassapa, however, the texts state that when Pippalī-Māṇava<sup>63</sup> was twenty, and Bhaddā Kapilānī<sup>64</sup> was sixteen, his parents told him that he had come of age and should establish a family of his own.

When Revata had come of age, his parents told him that he should get married. Revata knew that his older brother Ven. Sāriputta had gone forth as a monk and thought: ‘My older brother Upatissa<sup>65</sup> abandoned his personal wealth and went forth. Am I supposed to swallow the phlegm that he has spat out?’ Thinking in this way he became despondent.

Revata was like a deer who was unwilling to be caught in a snare. He tricked his relatives, went to the monks’ residence, told them that he is the younger brother of the Marshal of the Dhamma,<sup>66</sup> and expressed his desire to be ordained. The bhikkhus gave him novice ordination and when he had reached twenty years of age he was ordained as a bhikkhu. Ven. Revata learned a meditation technique and went to live in a thingan forest. Within a short span of time he had reached arahantship and attained the six kinds

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<sup>61</sup> Trans.: an ancient centre of education situated at modern-day Taxila, Pakistan.

<sup>62</sup> Trans.: the chief scriptures of Brahmanism.

<sup>63</sup> Trans.: Ven. Mahā Kassapa’s original name.

<sup>64</sup> Trans.: Pippalī-Māṇava’s fiancée.

<sup>65</sup> Trans.: Ven. Sāriputta’s original name.

<sup>66</sup> Trans.: an epithet of Ven. Sāriputta.

of supreme knowledge.<sup>67</sup>

After realizing arahantship, Ven. Revata travelled to Sāvatti. He arrived at Jetavana and paid homage to the Buddha and to Ven. Sāriputta, staying there for several days. During this time, amidst an assembly of awakened beings, the Buddha praised Revata as foremost of all the bhikkhus in keeping the practice of living in the forest.<sup>68</sup>

Apart from presenting a shorter account, the story in these two texts differs from that presented in the Dhammapada commentary in several respects, most notably:

- In the Dhammapada commentary, Revata is married and undertakes novice ordination at the age of seven. In these two other texts, his parents simply state that they intend for him to get married and he is ordained as a novice when he has ‘come of age’.
- In the Dhammapada commentary, Revata attains arahantship during his first Vassa, while still seven years old. In the two other texts, after being ordained as a novice and subsequently reaching the age of twenty, he is ordained as a bhikkhu. After this period in time he realizes the fruit of arahantship.
- In the Dhammapada commentary, there is the story of Ven. Sāriputta asking the monks to give ordination to his younger brother; this story is absent in the other two texts.
- In the Dhammapada commentary, Revata is ordained as a novice in the residence of forest monks. In the other two texts,

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<sup>67</sup> Trans.: *chalabhiññā*: psychic powers, divine ear, telepathy, recollection of past lives, divine eye, and knowledge of the destruction of the taints.

<sup>68</sup> *Āraññaka*.

there is no mention of the exact location where he is ordained as a novice. Only later, after he was ordained as a bhikkhu, does it state that he went to live in the forest.

- In the Dhammapada commentary, the Buddha, Ven. Sāriputta, and a large number of other monks travelled to visit novice Revata, who had attained arahantship at the age of seven. In the other two texts, there is no mention of the Buddha making such a trip; instead, Revata himself travels to see the Buddha at Jetavana.

There are several passages in the section of the Dhammapada commentary that are ambiguous, doubtful, and possibly self-contradictory, for instance:

Is it possible that Revata, being a younger brother of Ven. Sāriputta, could have been ordained as a novice at the age of seven? One may ask how old Sāriputta would have been at this time. According to the evidence in the scriptures, Sāriputta was born 'before the birth of the Buddha, the Blessed One'.<sup>69</sup> Based on this evidence we can conclude that both of the chief disciples, Ven. Sāriputta and Ven. Mahā Moggallāna, were older than the Buddha.

When the Buddha set down the prescription for his disciples to only give ordination to those candidates who have received parental permission, he was entering his thirty-seventh year. If Revata was ordained after this prescription was set down, Ven. Sāriputta would have been about forty. Revata would thus have been about thirty-three years younger than Sāriputta. This is quite an age gap and it seems slightly dubious.

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<sup>69</sup> ThagA. III. 92; ApA. 210. *Amhākaṃ pana bhagavato uppattito puretareveva.*

In any case, Ven. Sāriputta, as the Buddha's main disciple, travelled and worked alongside the Buddha continuously. The Buddha frequently let him give Dhamma teachings on his behalf. Wherever he went or whatever he did, Sāriputta would inform the Buddha as a matter of course.

This is evident in this story of the Dhammapada commentary, where, upon receiving news from the forest monks of Revata's ordination, Ven. Sāriputta went to inform the Buddha and asked permission to visit his brother. The Buddha told him to wait, saying that he would travel along on this journey with a large chapter of monks.

It is most likely that the Buddha was kept informed of Ven. Sāriputta's activities in regard to his brother Revata. Having consulted with the Buddha, Sāriputta would have received his consent accordingly. Given the intimate relationship between Sāriputta and the Buddha, how could he have gone ahead and disobeyed the Buddha's injunctions?<sup>70</sup>

In the other two texts, there is no account of Ven. Sāriputta being informed of Revata's ordination until Ven. Revata realizes arahantship and visits Jetavana.<sup>71</sup>

To review, there is a disparity between the account in the Dhammapada commentary and that in the other two texts:

- The Dhammapada commentary states that Revata was

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<sup>70</sup> It is possible that the author of the Dhammapada commentary—by specifically quoting Ven. Sāriputta's statement to the forest monks: 'I myself am both his mother and his father,' and the monks' statement to Revata: 'Your older brother has given permission'—wished for the reader to understand that events had progressed in accord with the Buddha's prescriptions.

<sup>71</sup> Following the narrative of this account, it is likely that Revata beseeched his parents until they gave permission and then quietly snuck off by outwitting his relatives.



ordained at seven years of age, and that both the Buddha and Ven. Sāriputta were informed soon afterwards.

- The other two texts state that Revata was ordained at an older age, and sometime after his ordination he travelled to visit the Buddha and Ven. Sāriputta.

In any case, technically speaking, it is impossible that Ven. Sāriputta would have deliberately transgressed a Vinaya rule, either this rule or any other. At the very least:

- As a chief disciple and in the capacity of living close to the Buddha, if Ven. Sāriputta had had good reason for his brother Revata to be exempt from receiving his parents' permission, he would have had recourse to other means to accomplish this end, without needing to transgress any rules. For instance, he could have consulted with the Buddha, who would have known what to do in this case. As was frequently done, the Buddha may have then set down a supplementary regulation<sup>72</sup> in order to solve the problem.
- As a chief disciple, Ven. Sāriputta would have been an exemplar for the other disciples. He would not have committed any transgressions, which others could have used as an excuse for their own offences or bad behaviour.
- This second point is confirmed by the Buddha's statement, recorded in both the Vinaya Piṭaka and the Sutta Piṭaka: 'So too, when I have prescribed a training rule for my disciples, they will not transgress it even for life's sake.'<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> *Anupaññatti*.

<sup>73</sup> Vin. II. 238-9; A. IV. 201.

One can sympathize with students and practitioners of Buddhism, many of whom will be confused here as to this discrepancy in the texts. Which text is correct? Which can we use as a standard? Which can we trust? These are matters that should be investigated. If we can discern these matters clearly, we will gain confidence and be on the right track.

Let us review the significant differences between these texts: the Dhammapada commentary on the one hand and the Theragāthā & Apadāna commentaries on the other. Besides differences in narrative, there are also differences in their attributes and traditional standing.

It is fair to say that the commentaries to the Theragāthā and the Apadāna comprise the authority when it comes to biographies of the Buddha's disciples. The former text (called the Paramatthadīpanī) elucidates the Theragāthā and the latter text (called the Visuddhajanavilāsini) elucidates the Apadāna.

Both the Theragāthā and the Apadāna are part of the Pali Canon: the Tipiṭaka. The Theragāthā is a collection of verses by male arahant elders (*thera*). It accompanies the Therīgāthā, which is a collection of verses by female arahant elders (*therī*). When the commentaries to these two texts elucidate the verses uttered by a specific *thera* or *therī*, they also present this individual's biography. For this reason these commentaries contain a collection of biographies of male and female elders.

The Apadāna gives direct accounts of male and female elders' biographies, although it often emphasizes their past lives. It is divided into the Thera-Apadāna,<sup>74</sup> describing the biographies of male elders, and the Therī-Apadāna, describ-

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<sup>74</sup> Also spelled: Therāpadāna.

ing the biographies of female elders. It is written entirely in verse form. The commentary to the Apadāna expands on these verses and is thus another source of biographical narrative.

The biographies of important male and female elders are thus contained in these two commentaries. They contain similar material as is seen in the case of Ven. Revata whose biography in both texts is almost identical.

The Dhammapada commentary<sup>75</sup> elucidates the Dhammapada verses from the Tipiṭaka. When explaining a particular verse, this commentary presents associated material, describing the circumstances prompting the Buddha to utter the verse. This material is often varied and numerous, coming from many different sources. In some cases, there is accompanying material related to various awakened disciples.

As mentioned above, in relation to Ven. Revata, the Dhammapada commentary expands on the verse: ‘Whether in village or in forest...’<sup>76</sup> The commentarial story explains how the Buddha uttered this verse while recounting the circumstances connected with his visit to see Revata. This story attempts to give a vivid and comprehensive account of the events, including the story behind Revata’s ordination. (The commentary may also be adding some zest to the story.)

If the Dhammapada commentators had simply expanded on Ven. Revata’s biography as it is presented in the commentaries to the Theragāthā and the Apadāna, it is unlikely that there would be so many discrepancies in regard to important points. It is possible that they derived their information

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<sup>75</sup> Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā.

<sup>76</sup> *Gāme vā yadī vāraññe...*

from another (currently unknown) traditional source, which contained different details. As this alternative story was transmitted, its content thus diverged from the story contained in the commentaries to the Theragāthā and the Apadāna. But here we can only guess or conjecture.

Given these discrepancies, people may raise the doubt as to the trustworthiness of the commentaries. This is an important question, and it is for this reason that I have added the appendix at the end of this book titled ‘Understanding the Commentaries’.

### **The Story of Ven. Saṅghamittā Ordaining Bhikkhunis**

Now to address the second point raised by Khun Martin in relation to Ven. Subodhā’s book: ‘Ven. Mahinda Thera invited Ven. Saṅghamittā Therī to travel along with eleven other bhikkhunis in order to establish the bhikkhuni sangha in Sri Lanka. The Dīpavaṃsa states that Saṅghamittā bestowed ordination on tens of thousands of bhikkhunis. We can thus observe that if there are sufficient monastic residences and the female preceptor has the strength to look after the newly ordained nuns, there is no need to allude to this Vinaya rule (that a female preceptor should not ordain more than one bhikkhuni at a time) in order to impede the growth of the bhikkhuni sangha.’

Before we examine this point in more depth, we should acknowledge that the solution to the dilemma of ordaining bhikkhunis set down in the Dīpavaṃsa is not very reliable. If the time comes when there is a consensus to reestablish a

Theravada bhikkhuni order, we can most likely come up with better solutions to foster growth and development for the nuns.

Besides the Dīpavaṃsa, the subject of how many bhikkhunis were ordained by Ven. Saṅghamittā's delegation is also discussed in the Samantapāsādikā, the commentaries to the Vinaya. This latter text states that Vicereine Anuḷā<sup>77</sup> along with one thousand other women<sup>78</sup> were ordained in the residence of Saṅghamittā and soon after were established in arahantship.<sup>79</sup>

The number of one thousand individuals is mentioned repeatedly, from the beginning of the story, when the matter of ordination is introduced, to the end, when the ordinations were complete. Furthermore, the term 'going forth' (*pabbajjā*) is used throughout. It is not clear whether the ordinations reached the stage of bhikkhuni ordination. There is an ambiguity whether all the stages of ordination were completed at once or whether the women were first ordained as novices (*sāmaneri*) and only later were gradually ordained as bhikkhunis.

The Mahāvaṃsa, which was written later and is considered to be based on the Dīpavaṃsa, states succinctly: 'Anuḷā along with her retinue went forth in the residence of Ven. Saṅghamittā Therī and realized the fruit of arahantship.'<sup>80</sup>

Traditionally, in regard to scriptural validity, the Tipiṭaka is seen as the most important, followed by the commentaries and finally by supplementary texts.

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<sup>77</sup> Trans.: daughter of King Muṭasiva and wife to Mahānāga the viceroy of King Devānampiyatissa.

<sup>78</sup> Five hundred maidens and five hundred ladies of the court, comprising only one thousand individuals.

<sup>79</sup> VinA. I. 100.

<sup>80</sup> Mahāvaṃsa: Ekūnavīsatima Pariccheda, verse 65.

Many people believe that the *Dīpavaṃsa* precedes the *Samantapāsādikā*. Some Sri Lankan scholars, including Dr. G. P. Malalasekera, claim that the *Dīpavaṃsa* is the oldest chronicle or historical record of Sri Lanka. Yet, just like with the *Mahāvaṃsa*, it relies primarily on the commentaries that were passed down at Mahāvihāra.<sup>81</sup> Sometimes it quotes passages directly from the commentaries.

All told, the *Dīpavaṃsa* had no single author. It was written by various people, who gathered information from different sources as a patchwork or compilation. It did not take its present shape until circa 900 BE (357 CE). This is what I have learned from scholars.<sup>82</sup>

The *Samantapāsādikā* was completed in around 950 BE (407 CE), not long after the *Dīpavaṃsa*. The *Samantapāsādikā*, however, is widely recognized and respected. It was prepared methodically by an authoritative compiler whose work was accredited and validated. (It needed to be approved by the

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<sup>81</sup> [Trans.: a great monastery at Anurādhapura, for many centuries the chief seat of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.] These were secondary commentaries compiled in the Sinhalese language.

<sup>82</sup> The *Dīpavaṃsa*, *Mahāvaṃsa*, and *Cūḷavaṃsa* can be collectively referred to as the 'Chronicles of Sri Lanka'. They were written in Pali by Sri Lankan elders who recounted events having to do with Buddhism and with various Sri Lankan royal dynasties. These chronicles begin with the *Dīpavaṃsa*, which, as stated above, was compiled by various authors. This was followed by the *Mahāvaṃsa*, which was written by Ven. Mahānāma; it presents a clearer compilation and describes events up to about 300 CE. The most recent text is the *Cūḷavaṃsa*, which was written by numerous authors and recounts events up to the arrival of the British and their subsequent occupation (1815 CE). In Thailand, there is a feeling that these texts are not really relevant. Although they are occasionally mentioned in the commentaries, they are inconspicuous, and as scholars point out, the gist of these chronicles is derived from the commentaries themselves. The most important events of Sri Lankan history are already recorded in the commentaries, which are regarded as more trustworthy.

In the *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names* (1983, vol. 1, p. 1088) Dr. Malalasekera states a similar claim, that the *Dīpavaṃsa* is a compilation from different sources. Readers can look up this citation on their own.

monastic community of Mahāvihāra, both at its inception and completion.) As mentioned earlier, it holds a status as a commentarial text (*aṭṭhakathā*) and is thus considered a prime reference source.

Sometimes when describing ancient Sri Lankan events, the Samantapāsādikā cites the Dīpavaṃsa, by quoting entire verses that are likely to be from the original commentaries. But in the context of Ven. Saṅghamittā Therī bestowing ordination on the women of Sri Lanka, it makes no mention of the Dīpavaṃsa. We do not know whether this is because the author rejects the information contained in the Dīpavaṃsa or if there is another reason.

In any case, although the Samantapāsādikā is a repository of the commentaries, it does not provide a clear guideline on this matter on the grounds of it still being a secondary, later text. The nature of its storytelling corresponds to the description contained in the appendix to this book titled ‘Understanding the Commentaries’ (this appendix sheds light on the subject discussed here.) This is particularly true in respect to the convention of that time period of using exaggerated figures in such contexts.<sup>83</sup>

What we are clear about is that the events pertaining to Ven. Saṅghamittā Therī are directly related to the earlier arrival in Sri Lanka by Ven. Mahinda Thera.

Ven. Mahinda Thera went to Sri Lanka as the leader of one of nine distinct groups of religious missionaries<sup>84</sup> or

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<sup>83</sup> One reason for sticking to this convention is likely to be the fact that the events described occurred far in the past and it was impossible to know the exact number of people, etc. corresponding to the subject at hand.

<sup>84</sup> *Sāsana-dūta*.

Dhamma envoys<sup>85</sup> after the completion of the Third Recitation in 235 BE (308 BC). Of these nine groups, the arrival by Ven. Mahinda Thera in Sri Lanka, and the subsequent transmission of Buddhism, is the most clearly documented story.<sup>86</sup> It is thus a trustworthy historical account.

Some of the other eight groups and the routes they took are shrouded in obscurity. Although the places they were sent to are listed, we cannot with certainty ascertain which countries or regions these places are. In regard to some places that can be verified, we know that Buddhism thrives to this day, but we are unable to know for sure how over the past few millennia Buddhism took root and was preserved there. The historical circumstances and events lack clarity. Sometimes, at best, we can only rely on traditional stories.

Many of these stories lacking in historical clarity contain miracles and fantastical numbers, which was customary to ancient narrative. These stories end up casting doubt on the numbers used in the account pertaining to Sri Lanka, despite this account seeming overall to be genuine and factual. Although we can with confidence state that this account is true, the question arises as to how many of the minor details should be accepted and believed.

The stories of these nine missions are recounted in the Vinaya commentaries: the *Samantapāsādikā*.<sup>87</sup> Many of the stories are comprised primarily of supernatural occurrences and prodigious numbers. We can examine several of these stories in order to capture their gist.

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<sup>85</sup> *Dhamma-dūta*.

<sup>86</sup> The story itself was written in Sri Lanka.

<sup>87</sup> *VinA*. 62-85.



The first mission went to the Kasmīra-Gandhāra country with Ven. Majjhantika Thera as its leader. Today this area corresponds to Kashmir in northwest India<sup>88</sup> and to Kandahar in Pakistan.

It is clear that Buddhism prospered greatly in this region, and it is the place of origin of the famous Gandhāra Buddha images. After vanishing from this region, the Buddhist culture left behind large carvings of Buddha images on the sides of mountains as memorials, for instance the 53- and 37-metre high carvings destroyed by the Taliban in 2001.

Ven. Majjhantika Thera travelled to Pakistan, but the story of his mission was written in Sri Lanka. As the story goes, in the Kasmīra-Gandhāra country a great nāga<sup>89</sup> was causing torrential rains, washing all the rice seedlings into the sea and creating great hardship for the local people. Using his psychic powers, Majjhantika Thera flew from Pāṭaliputta to solve the problem.<sup>90</sup> He battled with the nāga: thunderbolts flew, rivers flooded their banks, fires blazed, and mountain tops were riven. It sounded as if the heavens would break open. In the end Majjhantika Thera defeated the nāga. He gave Dhamma teachings and established the 84,000 nāgas of the Himalayan forest—in addition to many yakkhas, gandhabbas, and kumbhaṇḍas<sup>91</sup>—in the three refuges and the five precepts. He taught the nāgas and yakkhas to abandon their anger, cease destroying crops, practise lovingkindness, and help people to live in happiness.

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<sup>88</sup> Kasmīra, however, may also correspond to Kashmar in northeast Iran.

<sup>89</sup> Trans.: a divine serpent.

<sup>90</sup> Trans.: Pāṭaliputta: the capital of Magadha near modern-day Patna.

<sup>91</sup> Trans.: yakkha: demi-gods often of ferocious demeanour; gandhabba: celestial musicians; kumbhaṇḍa; a class of demons.

The people in that region practised a religion of nāga worship. By chance there was a festival to honour the lord of the nāgas. When the people arrived they saw that the nāga king had become a disciple of Ven. Majjhantika Thera and stood to one side fanning him. Realizing that the venerable elder surpassed the nāga king in supernatural powers, they paid homage to him. Majjhantika Thera preached to them the Āsīvisopama Sutta.<sup>92</sup> Eighty thousand people realized the Dhamma. Members of one hundred thousand families renounced the household life and took ordination, and Buddhism flourished in Kasmīra-Gandhāra from that time onward.

In order for readers to grasp the essence of this story, they must see through these supernatural occurrences and fantastical numbers. In any case, it is certain that Buddhism prospered in this wide and extensive region.

The narratives on missions 2-7 are all very short, consisting almost entirely of supernatural events and fantastical numbers. Here, we can pass these by with the exception of mission no. 4 which contains some aspects worthy of investigation. The story is as follows:

The fourth mission went to the Aparantaka country, led by Ven. Yonaka-Dhammarakkhita Thera. After they arrived, Yonaka-Dhammarakkhita Thera gave teachings from the Aggikhandhopama Sutta,<sup>93</sup> and the citizens of this country subsequently developed faith in Buddhism. Seventy thousand individuals realized the Dhamma. Many thousands of men from noble lineage were ordained, and more than six thousand

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<sup>92</sup> Trans.: this probably refers to the Āsīvisa Sutta ('The Simile of the Vipers'; S. IV. 172-75), although it could also refer to the Āsīvisa Sutta at A. II. 110-11.

<sup>93</sup> Trans.: 'Parable of the Mass of Fire'; A. IV. 128-135.

women were ordained. Buddhism was thus firmly established in this country.

These numbers, when compared with the other missions, are relatively small. We can compare these numbers to those found in the story of the seventh mission, which went to the ‘Himalayan region’. (It is unclear which country this Himalayan region corresponds to today. The *Sāsana Vaṃsa* claims that it is *Cīna Raṭṭha*, that is, China.) The texts state that in this region a multitude of people comprising eighty *koṭi*<sup>94</sup> attained to path and fruit. Five venerable elders took part in this mission, and about one hundred thousand individuals were ordained with each of these five monks, making a total of five hundred thousand ordainees.

The eighth mission, which went to *Suvaṇṇabhūmi*,<sup>95</sup> was led by Ven. *Soṇa Thera* and Ven. *Uttara*. During this period the land was encountering dire misfortune. Every time a child was born to a royal family, an ogress would emerge from the ocean and swallow it up. As it happened, the day when these two elders arrived, a child had just been born to a royal family. The people mistakenly believed that these elders were part of the ogress’s posse and they took up weapons to kill them. Making inquiries and finding out the truth of recent events, the elders explained to them that they are *samaṇa*,<sup>96</sup> who abstain from taking any creature’s life, uphold moral precepts, and are endowed with virtuous qualities.<sup>97</sup>

At that moment the ogress appeared with her retinue to

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<sup>94</sup> Trans.: 1 *koṭi* = 10 million.

<sup>95</sup> Trans.: a region corresponding to modern-day Thailand.

<sup>96</sup> Trans.: *samaṇa*: ‘religious seeker’, ‘renunciant’

<sup>97</sup> *Kalyāṇa-dhamma*.

eat the newborn child. The people saw the ogress and were terrified; they cried out in pandemonium. The two elders used their psychic powers to enlarge their bodies to twice the size of the ogress, and they split her off from her followers. The ogres were afraid that they would be consumed and fled the scene. Having driven off the ogress and ogres, the elders prepared defences around this land.

The elders then transmitted the teaching from the Brahmajāla Sutta.<sup>98</sup> The people developed faith and were established in the refuges and precepts. Sixty thousand people realized the Dhamma, and 3,500 young men and 1,500 young women were ordained. Buddhism thus took root in Suvaṇṇabhūmi. After that time children born to royal families were customarily called Soṇuttara.

The two stories of missions four and eight, besides containing the usual supernatural occurrences and exaggerated figures, also contain some unique and thought provoking aspects in that they mention the ordination of women (*itthī*) and daughters of good families (*kula-dhītā*). They seem to describe an occasion when bhikkhus were able to give ordination to women without the presence of bhikkhunis.

Having said this, there are also several considerations acting to counter this assumption:

Ven. Mahinda Thera travelled to Sri Lanka at the same time as the other missions were sent. When Anuḷā and her entourage requested ordination, why didn't he conduct these ordinations himself? Instead, he invited Ven. Saṅghamittā Therī, which delayed the ordinations by a significant period of time.

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<sup>98</sup> Trans.: 'The Supreme Net'; D. I. 1-46.

The Sāsana Vaṃsa describes all of the missions. When describing the mission to the Aparantaka country the story includes the ordination of a specific number of women.<sup>99</sup>

The story does not end here, however. The author explains that it was not the case that the women were ordained immediately after listening to the Dhamma. Those women who developed faith needed to wait a long time before bhikkhunīs arrived to assist with the ordinations.

This explanation in the Sāsana Vaṃsa suggests that the story is an abbreviated narration. It describes the essential content at one go, recounting how the mission was carried out, along with its longterm consequences. It does not describe the exact order of events in a detailed fashion. We should recognize or acknowledge that such an abbreviated narration was likely a standard method of telling stories in the past.

This distinction is evident when comparing Ven. Mahinda Thera's mission with the other missions. The story of Mahinda Thera is neither curtailed nor filled predominantly with supernatural occurrences. The story, covering thirty-two pages, recounts how he travelled to Sri Lanka up to the time that Vicereine Anuḷā is ordained. The story of the mission to the Aparantaka country, on the other hand, is completed in five lines.

Almost all the other stories are comprised of four or five lines. One exception is the mission by Venerables Soṇa and Uttara to Suvaṇṇabhūmi, which is the next longest story,

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<sup>99</sup> Page 62 (Thai edition). The numbers vary in different texts. This text states that more than sixty thousand women were ordained; the Vinaya commentaries state that more than six thousand women were ordained.

second to the mission to Sri Lanka. The story covers approximately one and a half pages. But it does not contain any considerable detail apart from the defeat of the ogress.

In the story of the eighth mission to Suvannaṇabhūmi, the *Sāsana Varṇsa* mentions that 1,500 women were ordained, but it does not go on to provide any further explanations. We can assume that events unfolded similar to how they are described in the story of the fourth mission.

Although the well-chronicled story of Ven. Mahinda Thera's mission to Sri Lanka does contain a fair amount of supernatural occurrences, the number of ordination candidates is not that unusual.

This is true for both the number of bhikkhus and the number of bhikkhunis. Relative to the other missions, the numbers appear to reflect a gradual, slow-but-sure progression. Unlike the other stories, one does not read that after the monks arrive and teach the Dhamma, hundreds of thousands of people realized the Dhamma and tens of thousands are ordained.

In Sri Lanka, after several months, the first group of fifty-six men were ordained, and during the first Vassa there were thus sixty-two monks and novices (six bhikkhus from India plus the fifty-six Sinhalese ordainees).

By grasping the essence of these stories one sees that these devoted venerable elders who performed this vital missionary work, setting down the roots of Buddhism in these various countries, must have been firmly established in the Dhammavinaya, and determined to act for the genuine benefit of Buddhism.

This corresponds to the common Thai phrase: ‘ordination is for training’.<sup>100</sup> These days, in the Information Age, we have many instruments to assist with educational activities, making the process of learning and training more convenient. But we cannot be careless. Technology may enable us to increase the amount of activities we perform externally, and help us to save time, but it does not necessarily access the core of human life. We must know how to apply technology as an aid to spiritual practice.

Spiritual training is a way of attending to the vital matters pertaining to human beings: to the body (*kāya*), moral conduct (*sīla*), mind (*citta*), and wisdom (*paññā*). However far one may progress in the external world, one’s conduct and actions must incorporate the spiritual life in order to bring about balance.

In terms of ordaining as a renunciant and taking up spiritual training, we can apply the Buddha’s conduct<sup>101</sup> as an example and as a reminder to not be heedless.

When the five Sākya princes, including Prince Ānanda, with the barber Upāli as the sixth member of the group, requested ordination they were first ordained by the Buddha as novices (*sāmaṇera*). The next stage for entering the order was to arrange a mentor for each one of them, someone to oversee their spiritual training for the first five years. Such a person is called a preceptor (*upajjhāya*). For instance, Ven. Ānanda had Ven. Belaṭṭhasāsa and Ven. Upāli had Ven. Kappitaka as their preceptors.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> การบวชเป็นการศึกษา.

<sup>101</sup> *Buddha-cariyā*.

<sup>102</sup> I have not found the names of the preceptors of the other members of this group. Generally speaking, the scriptures do not mention people’s names unless they feature directly in a teaching on the Dhammavinaya.

Spiritual training by preceptors applies to a monk's everyday life and ordinary activities, from waking in the morning to going to sleep. It does not refer simply to imparting technical knowledge or formal discipline. If people do not realize this essential principle of monastic training, ordination eventually becomes a ritual aiming at chalking up a maximum number of ordainees—a problem evident in modern Thai society which is extremely difficult to rectify. We should all help in safeguarding this basic yet vital principle by way of clear understanding.

I have responded to the second question at length. There still remains the third question (on the importance of the bhikkhuni sangha and historical precedents of restoring it), but from what I can tell this matter pertains in large part to personal opinion and I addressed it fairly comprehensively in the previous book so I won't expand on it here.

May I reiterate that the case of Ven. Subodhā, and of other associated individuals, is worthy of empathy and understanding. Although some of her comments may appear disparaging or antagonistic, one need not take offence.

If a subject has a bearing on the wider public and is connected to the Dhammavinaya, we should simply remember to speak according to essential principles and facts. We should focus on and give priority to knowledge. Applying genuine and clear understanding to any set of circumstances is the first and fundamental stage of action, providing us with security and confidence.

We may have to be quite patient before choosing the optimum and least problematic solution, by considering the implications for later generations. Ideally, we will end up with



an answer that the wider community applauds and approves of in unison.

When dealing with such matters of Dhamma, we may need to go against the stream of the world. Very often people try to solve such dilemmas by competing with one another or trying to gain the upper hand. Consequently, the result may be defective or permanently impaired.

If we can collectively review these matters and attend to them in a way whereby we are confident that later generations will inherit an optimum set of opportunities, we will feel at ease in the present and experience lasting happiness in the future. This is how we fulfil our aspirations through acting in harmony with the Dhamma.



## Chapter 3:

# Must Laypeople Who Realize Arahantship Die on that Day if They Do Not Take Ordination?

After acknowledging the answers to the questions listed above, Dr. Martin Seeger sent another question that he had already asked me once in the past:

‘Would it be possible for Tahn Chao Khun to explain an additional question that I once asked you at the mountain residence? When a layman or laywoman practises the Dhamma and realizes arahantship, he or she must hasten to be ordained as a bhikkhu or bhikkhuni on that very day (according to the *Milindapañha*)<sup>103</sup> or within one week (according to the belief in Thailand). Where does this claim or belief come from? There are the stories in the Tipiṭaka of King Suddhadana and the renunciant Bāhiya, who both technically died as ‘laymen’. If this is true and no bhikkhuni order exists, would it thus be impossible for a laywoman to realize arahantship and

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<sup>103</sup> Trans.: a scripture dating from sometime around 500 BE (40 BC) recording the conversation between King Milinda of Bactria (Menander I) and Ven. Nāgasena.

continue living (as a householder)? Would it be possible for a fully awakened layperson to live the life of a renunciant (*anāgārika*), for instance as a *maechi*,<sup>104</sup> without taking ordination as a bhikkhu or bhikkhuni? I see this as a matter related to the subjects we have discussed.<sup>105</sup>

It is difficult to answer this question in brief, but I will try. In any case, it is a good question and it corresponds to this discussion.

As I mentioned several times in *The Buddhist Discipline in Relation to Bhikkhunis*, my intention was not to give a final verdict on the various matters discussed nor was I expressing a personal desire for how these issues should be resolved. My primary aim was to provide essential principles, scriptural evidence, and other facts for the reader to review and consider. For instance, according to such and such principles or teachings, the outcome or procedure would be as follows. As for the decision on how exactly to proceed, or which option of alternatives to choose, this is a matter for the sangha or the wider community. My only wish is that people have access to clear and comprehensive information before they make decisions so that their actions can be guided by genuine understanding.

## Returning to the Source

In order to save time I will not address the contemporary belief

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<sup>104</sup> Trans.: a white-robed nun in Thailand who keeps the eight or ten precepts.

<sup>105</sup> Khun Martin also sent the scriptural source material (*āgaṭṭhāna*) connected to this question: *tasmim̐ yeva divase pabbajati vā parinibbāyati vā*, and: *na so divaso sakkā atikkametun'ti*; see also: *mahārāja khemāya pabbajitum vā parinibbāyitum vā vaṭṭati'ti* (Miln. 264-66); and *gihilingaṃ nāmetaṃ hīnaṃ* (DhA. IV. 59 & MA. III. 196).

in Thailand that a layman or laywoman realizing arahantship must be ordained within seven days. This belief can be seen simply as a traditional narrative whose origin is unclear. In the end we must resolve this question by using the source scriptural material, which is considered the standard criterion of measurement.<sup>106</sup>

The source material or original scriptural evidence for the assertion that laypeople who have realized the fruit of arahantship must be ordained on the day of their awakening or else they will die is found in the Milindapañha.

Although this matter is sometimes referred to in the commentaries,<sup>107</sup> its origin is considered the Milindapañha. This is because the commentaries we now use are the third edition of commentaries (as explained in the appendix), compiled in circa 950 BE (circa 400 CE). The Milindapañha is an ancient text, composed much earlier, in circa 500 BE (circa 40 BC).

In Burmese scriptural tradition, the Milindapañha is considered such a key text that it is included in the Tipiṭaka.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Some traditional narratives are so prevalent that they remain unquestioned. For instance, in regard to King Suddhodana, in the *Dictionary of Buddhist Terminology* I wrote: 'Before dying, King Suddhodana was visited by the Buddha who taught him the Dhamma and assisted him in realizing the fruit of arahantship; he then enjoyed the bliss of liberation for seven days before his final passing away.' This question made me stop and think. I looked up this passage in the dictionary and will edit it for the next edition as the commentaries mention only briefly: 'He realized the fruit of arahantship and passed away under his white-tiered royal umbrella' (e.g. AA. I. 340; ThīgA. 3). [Trans. this passage has now been updated in the most recent edition of this dictionary.]

<sup>107</sup> *Aṭṭhakathā*.

<sup>108</sup> In Thailand, the Milindapañha was copied from palm leaves and first published as a printed text at the same time as the commentaries in circa 1921 (a later date from the publication of the Tipiṭaka). As it turned out, however, many passages were completely missing or arranged differently from the texts preserved in other countries. [Trans.: the first published edition of the Tipiṭaka in Thailand was completed in 1893.]

Here are the direct passages from the Milindapañha on this matter:

King Milinda: ‘Venerable Nāgasena, you say a layperson who realizes the fruit of arahantship has only two destinies, which cannot be otherwise: either he enters the Order on that very day or he attains parinibbāna.<sup>109</sup> Venerable sir, if this layperson who has realized arahantship is unable on that very day to find a teacher or preceptor, or is unable to find a robe and bowl, could he be ordained by himself or wait for an arahant with psychic powers to bestow ordination, or must he attain parinibbāna?’

Ven. Nāgasena: ‘Your Majesty, that lay arahant cannot ordain himself, for by ordaining by oneself one attains this status by way of theft;<sup>110</sup> and no matter whether an arahant with psychic powers arrives or not, he won’t live beyond that day. For surely he will pass away on that very day.’

King Milinda: ‘Venerable sir, in that case, arahantship, depriving the person who realizes it of life, is bereft of any peace.’

Ven. Nāgasena: ‘[Not so] Your Majesty. The state of a layperson is incompatible.<sup>111</sup> The state is incompatible because it is weak.<sup>112</sup> A layperson who realizes arahantship thus either enters the Order on that very day or attains parinibbāna. The fault, Your Majesty, does not lie with arahantship but with the state of a layperson, because it is weak.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Trans.: final Nibbāna; the death of an arahant.

<sup>110</sup> *Theyya*; it is a counterfeit ordination; one wears the robes as an impersonation.

<sup>111</sup> *Visama* (‘inadequate’, ‘incongruous’, ‘uneven’). In the Thai edition of the Milindapañha the phrase *visamaṃ mahārāja gihiliṅgaṃ* (‘Your Majesty, the state of a layperson is incompatible’) is missing. It can be found in the Burmese edition.

<sup>112</sup> *Liṅga-dubbalatā* (‘ineffective’).

<sup>113</sup> Miln. 300.

Ven. Nāgasena then provided three similes for this discrepancy:

1. It is similar to food that nourishes life and ensures survival. If a person with a weak digestive system eats the food, he may fall sick and even die. This is the fault of his poor digestion; it is not the fault of the food.
2. It is like a small clump of grass. If someone places a heavy stone on the grass, it is unable to support its weight; instead, it is crushed. The state of a layperson is unable to support the exalted state of arahantship.
3. It is like a feeble person, with scant merit and inferior intelligence and skill, who inherits the throne. Before long, he will come to ruin and be unable to sustain his sovereignty. Just so, the weak state of a layperson is unable to sustain arahantship.

By combining the beginning passages of this quote with Dr. Martin's question, two significant matters of consideration on this subject come to the fore:

- A. In what way is the state of a layperson so weak that it is unable to sustain arahantship, to the extent that someone who realizes arahantship must either take ordination on that very day or die?
- B. If a layperson realizes arahantship in this day and age, will he or she be able to be ordained, and if so, how?

## **Liberated Beings Abide Unimpeded by Sensuality**

For brevity's sake we can skip over to Ven. Nāgasena's comment of *visamaṃ mahārāja gihilingaṃ*. The state of a layperson is

*visama*: it is uneven, rough, and bumpy. Lay life is filled with busyness and clutter, and many laypeople get caught up in disputing over trivial and meaningless things. Although this topic deserves a thorough examination, here we will have to suffice with a few key points.

Everyone desires independence, freedom and authority.<sup>114</sup> Often, however, maintaining this authority inclines towards dominating other people and external objects. The freedom of one person thus implies the loss of freedom for others.

In such circumstances, people are largely propelled by the hope of deriving pleasure through sense contact. They rely on contact with external sense objects as a way of catering to the eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body.

Eventually, dominating other people and things is seen as the most effective means for obtaining objects of sense gratification. Such behaviour then becomes habitual for people and shapes the direction of society. For many people it makes up their entire existence.

Yet these delightful sense objects and the pleasure derived from them do not constitute the true essence of human life. If people devote themselves to seeking sense gratification, they may live their whole lives preoccupied with relatively meaningless pursuits and fail to realize the true value of human life.

Unenlightened people often commit themselves to these pursuits and die without any real understanding of the meaning of life. They fail to derive the true blessings of a human birth and their lives pass away in vain. Moreover, they

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<sup>114</sup> *Issariya; issariya-bhāva*; 'sovereignty', 'mastership'.



are consumed by quarreling and competing with one another, protecting their own self-interests, leaving them with even less opportunity to realize what is truly valuable.

Arahants, on the other hand, penetrate the truth, understand the genuine purpose of human life, and abide happily in a state of liberation independent of those relatively hollow sense objects with which many ordinary people are enthralled.

When people have understood the real value of life, the concept of freedom develops new meaning, referring to living and acting in line with the Dhamma, in harmony with righteousness and truth. Genuine freedom implies gaining self-mastery through the eradication of selfishness and mental defilement: of greed, hatred and delusion. Such people are liberated from mental impurity and live a life of virtue, thus realizing true 'authority'.

In the case that a layperson realizes arahantship, he or she will view the renunciant life as spacious and unhampered. They recognize that if they were to enter such a way of life, the freedom and independence it affords would enable them to go against the worldly stream of sensuality. Having completed all tasks pertaining to their own welfare, they use their life force for serving others to the utmost. At the very least, they remind people to use their independence for its true objective: to be liberated from mental defilement and to live a life of integrity.

For arahants to live amidst untidy, disordered, busy, and trivial conditions would be *visama*: it would be conflicting, dissonant, and incompatible vis-à-vis their state of purity and liberation. Lay life would be constrained and restricted. They would be impeded and hindered in performing their desired work. Moreover, the household life is *dubbala*: it is 'weak'; it is

deprived of the power to support the state and responsibilities of a fully awakened being. Therefore, lay arahants are dissatisfied with the householder's life, and this dissatisfaction leads them invariably to the freedom provided by going forth as a renunciant.

The commentaries use a slightly different expression: *gihiliṅgaṃ nāmetaṃ hīnaṃ*, translated as: 'The state of a layman is defective' or 'the state of a layman lacks sufficient quality'.<sup>115</sup> It is unable to sustain or support the highest good.<sup>116</sup> This definition is consistent with the text of the Milindapañha.

A closer look at the commentarial explanation—further elucidated by the sub-commentaries<sup>117</sup>—increases our understanding on how the householder's life is uneven, inadequate, and incongruous.

The commentaries state that celestial beings who have realized arahantship in the six sensual heaven realms do not continue to live, but rather attain final passing away.<sup>118</sup> This is because these heavens are the abode of *laḍita-jana*: misguided beings caught up in beauty and desiring only pleasure and amusement. Such a mode of existence conflicts with these awakened ones' realization. The exception here are the Bhumma devas ('earth devas'), because they have places in which to retreat, for example forested and mountainous areas.

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<sup>115</sup> MA. III. 195; VbhA. 521.

<sup>116</sup> Uttama-guṇa.

<sup>117</sup> E.g.: Majjhima Nikāya Ṭikā, Paribbājakavaggo, Tevijjavacchassuttavaṇṇanā; Aṅguttara Nikāya Ṭikā, Bhayavaggo, Paṭhamanānākarāṇasuttavaṇṇanā.

<sup>118</sup> *Parinibbāna*.

The case of realizing arahantship and then attaining final Nibbāna on that very day therefore does not only apply to human laypeople; the commentaries claim that this principle also applies to celestial beings abiding in these six heavenly realms. Human beings generally have a choice and can take ordination; devas, on the other hand, are left with only one option which is to attain *parinibbāna*.

### Looking at This Subject from Another Perspective

Having outlined the inadequacy of the householder's life, we can say with confidence that arahants will do all that is possible to go forth into the homeless life. In a sense, however, the scriptures skip over this fact and focus on the next stage: that if arahants do not go forth they will attain final Nibbāna.

We should thus examine two aspects of this subject: first, why must arahants go forth or take ordination? Second, if they are not ordained, why must they die? From what has been discussed above, we can say that the answer is the same for both questions.<sup>119</sup> But let us take another tack and approach the subject from a different angle.

To begin with let's reexamine the passage that states: 'A layperson who realizes the fruit of arahantship has only two destinies, which cannot be otherwise: either he is ordained on that very day or he attains *parinibbāna*. He won't live beyond that day.'

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<sup>119</sup> Trans.: namely that the householder's life is inherently incompatible with the state of being an arahant.

We can paraphrase this passage as: ‘A layperson who realizes the fruit of arahantship ... will be ordained on that very day, or if he is not, he attains *parinibbāna* and is thus unable to be ordained. He cannot pass beyond that day.’ Or more simply: ‘A layperson who realizes the fruit of arahantship ... is ordained on that very day unless he first attains final Nibbāna.’

This conveys a slightly different meaning from the original passage above. This latter rendering states that lay arahants will certainly ordain on that very day unless they first attain final Nibbāna and die, in which case they are unable to be ordained. In the original passage it is quite possible to interpret the meaning as: ‘He must be ordained on that very day; otherwise he is forced to die.’ (The literal translation of the commentarial passage is: ‘He will either go forth or attain *parinibbāna* on that very day.’)

We can now look at some related scriptural testimony describing householders who realized arahantship and on that very day attained final Nibbāna (we needn’t examine the case of individuals who realize arahantship and then immediately take ordination). From these examples we can get a clearer idea of whether these individuals failed to take ordination and thus attained *parinibbāna*, or whether they attained *parinibbāna* and were thus unable to take ordination.

The clearest testimony is of Ven. Bāhiya Dārucīriya, who was one of the Buddha’s eminent disciples. This story is contained in the *Tiṭṭaka*<sup>120</sup> and is elaborated on in the commentaries.<sup>121</sup>

Bāhiya Dārucīriya was born in a householder family in the

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<sup>120</sup> Ud. 7-8.

<sup>121</sup> E.g.: AA. I. 278.

Bāhiya country. He set out on a ship in order to trade goods at Suvanṇabhūmi, but the ship broke apart in the middle of the ocean. He survived and washed ashore at the port city of Suppāraka (scholars say that this corresponds with the present-day town of Sopara situated on the west coast of India, north of Bombay), but he was left penniless. He decided to don a woven bark garment and present himself as a holy man, deceiving people in order to make a living.

A while afterwards he travelled to meet the Buddha. When they met he asked the Buddha to teach him the Dhamma, and after the Buddha gave him a brief instruction he attained arahantship. On that occasion, however, the Buddha was on almsround and continued on his way. Later in the day, the Buddha departed from the city along with a large following of monks and he saw that Bāhiya had died.

The commentaries explain that Bāhiya had asked for the going forth from the Buddha, but because he did not have a complete set of robes and a bowl he went off in search of these requisites. While he was searching for them he was gored and killed by a cow with calf. He was praised as foremost amongst those disciples who instantly comprehended the truth.

According to this story, Bāhiya was preparing to take ordination but he was unable to accomplish this deed because he died first. It is not the case that he died because he failed to take ordination.

The second story is of the chief minister Santati. The *Tiṭṭaka* contains only verses by the Buddha in reference to him; it does not mention his name.<sup>122</sup> There are, however, rather

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<sup>122</sup> Trans.: see Dh. verse 142.

detailed stories of him in the Dhammapada commentary, the gist of which is as follows:<sup>123</sup>

The minister Santati succeeded at quelling a rebellion at the frontier of the Kosala kingdom and having restored peace he returned to the capital. King Pasenadi was delighted and as a reward he permitted Santati to sit on the throne and rule the kingdom for seven days. This included being provided with the most famous and skilled young female dancer and singer in the land. Santati consumed copious amounts of alcohol and was intoxicated for the entire week. On the seventh day he dressed up in beautiful attire, climbed on the back of the royal elephant, and went to the bathing pier. Having frolicked in the water all day, he then went to the royal park and sat down in the gardens, drinking and fully enjoying himself.

The young dancer came out on the middle of the stage to dance and sing, but due to fasting during the week in order to remain slender and graceful, something totally unexpected happened: she suddenly fainted and dropped dead on stage.

Santati witnessed this event, sobered up immediately, and felt tremendous grief. He remembered the Buddha as his refuge and thus went to visit him, asking him for help to dispel his sorrows. The Buddha gave him a teaching concluding with a series of verses.

Listening to these verses was the impetus for Santati to attain the fruit of arahantship. Looking within, he realized that his life-faculty<sup>124</sup> was about to expire, and he therefore asked permission from the Buddha to attain final Nibbāna.

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<sup>123</sup> E.g.: DhA. III. 80.

<sup>124</sup> *Āyu-saṅkhāra* ('life principle', 'life-sustaining forces').

He then demonstrated a feat of psychic ability by describing details from his past life, and in full royal regalia attained *parinibbāna* in front of the Buddha.

It is clear from this story that Santati could have asked for ordination on that occasion since he was with the Buddha. But he knew that his vital forces were consumed, and therefore he asked to take leave and attain final Nibbāna. Here again it is a case of someone attaining *parinibbāna* and thus not having the chance to be ordained, rather than attaining *parinibbāna* as a consequence of failing to be ordained.

A final example is that of the Buddha's father King Suddhodana, who realized the fruit of arahantship as a householder and attained final Nibbāna without taking ordination. This story, however, lacks details and is rather unclear. Tradition states that King Suddhodana was gravely ill and that the Buddha went to comfort him and teach him the Dhamma. The king realized arahantship and then attained final Nibbāna.

According to the scriptural evidence that I can find about this story, identical brief passages are presented in numerous commentarial texts: 'On another occasion the Teacher dwelled at the city of Vesāli, residing at the Kūṭāgārasālā. At that time, King Suddhodana realized the fruit of arahantship. He then attained *parinibbāna* under the white-tiered royal umbrella.'<sup>125</sup> Alternatively: 'At the time of his death, [while] resting on the royal bed under the white-tiered royal umbrella, he had already realized the fruit of arahantship.'<sup>126</sup> There are some

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<sup>125</sup> E.g.: AA. I. 340; ThīgA. 3, 140.

<sup>126</sup> VinA. V. 978; JA. I. 90; ApA. 95.

additional passing references to this event, but they are even less clear, so they need not be cited here.

As these scriptural passages lack clear detail, it is possible for people to interpret this event differently. For instance, some people will say that the phrase ‘on the royal bed [at the time of death]’ must mean that he was ill, and most likely gravely ill. Moreover, it seems that King Suddhodana attained final Nibbāna soon after realizing arahantship—likely on that very day.

Other people may concede that he was ill and lying on his bed, having previously realized arahantship, yet interpret that his final passing away occurred at a later time. Perhaps he even lived for another few days before attaining *parinibbāna*.

These ambiguous scriptural passages may be the source giving rise to the traditional Thai belief that if a layperson realizes arahantship and does not take ordination, he or she must pass away within seven days. There is even evidence of an embellished story of King Suddhodana realizing arahantship and then enjoying the bliss of liberation in the palace for seven days before he attained final Nibbāna.<sup>127</sup>

In regard to the story of King Suddhodana, we can follow standard principles backed up by trustworthy source material, such as the Milindapañha, concluding that he attained final Nibbāna on the same day that he realized arahantship.

Yet in whichever way one interprets this particular story,

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<sup>127</sup> As mentioned above, in an earlier edition of the ‘Dictionary of Buddhist Terminology’—พจนานุกรมพุทธศาสน์ ฉบับประมวลศัพท์—I mistakenly or carelessly included this latter account. But because there is a lack of clear scriptural substantiation for this story it was necessary to remove it.



it is similar to the previous two, namely that having earlier realized arahantship and then shortly after attaining final Nibbāna suggests that he attained *parinibbāna* and thus did not take ordination; it is not the case that he attained *parinibbāna* because he failed to take ordination.

The available evidence relating to these stories supports the conclusion that householders who realize arahantship need not rush to be ordained. The wish to no longer live the household life comes from within these individuals themselves. Whatever the circumstances, they will strive to take ordination on that very day; this aspiration and effort will only be thwarted if they happen to first attain *parinibbāna*.

Whatever the case may be, the ensuing comment by King Milinda: 'In that case, arahantship, depriving the person who realizes it of life, is bereft of any peace,' indicates to the reader that he understands Ven. Nāgasena's reply as meaning that if one does not enter the Order one is obliged to die.

To come to some agreement on this matter, the story of the minister Santati is a good example for the interpretation that if the fully awakened individuals are still alive, they will take ordination. If their life force is spent, however, they will attain final Nibbāna and thus be unable to take ordination. To sum up, they are either ordained or they attain *parinibbāna* (and thus die without taking ordination).

This analysis is not intended to be a final verdict on this subject. It is simply meant to offer some possibilities as food for reflection. But whichever conclusion one makes about this matter, it is important not to assert that arahants in such cases are committing suicide, which is poles apart from the concept of attaining *parinibbāna*.

## Leaving the Household Life and Entering the Monastic Life

Having examined the question of whether attaining *parinibbāna* is an inescapable outcome if one has not ordained, we arrive at another important question, namely whether a householder who has realized arahantship must be ordained as a bhikkhu or bhikkhuni on that very day. If we conclude that such an ordination is compulsory, it means that in this day and age where a bhikkhuni sangha is absent, a realized laywoman would not be able to take ordination. In such a case, would it be possible for the realized woman (or man) to live as a ‘homeless renunciant’ (*anāgārika*), for example as a *maechī*?

To begin with, we should make it clear that it is not necessary for a fully realized layperson to be ordained as a bhikkhu or bhikkhuni. For instance, if one realizes arahantship before the permissible age to take higher ordination (*upasampadā*), one is not qualified to be ordained as a bhikkhu or bhikkhuni. During the Buddha’s time there were many fully enlightened male and female novices (*sāmaṇera/sāmaṇerī*) who spent years in robes before they could take higher ordination.

Some of these novices realized arahantship at an early age and were widely renowned, for example: Paṇḍita Sāmaṇera, Sukha Sāmaṇera, Sumana Sāmaṇera, and Saṅkicca Sāmaṇera.

In a strict sense, ordination in Buddhism (or in Dhamma-vinaya) comprises two stages. First is *pabbajjā*—ordaining as a *sāmaṇera* or *sāmaṇerī*—and second is *upasampadā*—ordaining as a bhikkhu or bhikkhuni. *Pabbajjā* is already considered a ‘going forth’ from the household life; *upasampadā* is simply a formal consummation of one’s aspiration and intent.

It is important to understand that priority is given to *pabbajjā*, the act of ‘going forth’ from the household life.<sup>128</sup>

The Tipiṭaka contains a standard expression when referring to the Bodhisattva’s going forth (or generally to any person’s going forth), namely: *Sambādho gharāvāso rajāpatho abbhokāso pabbajjā*: ‘[He reflected:] “The household life is crowded and dusty; a life gone forth is wide open”.’<sup>129</sup> This passage conveys the reasoned consideration applied when resolving to leave the household life and it reveals the true meaning of the term *pabbajjā*.

The above passage points out that lay life or the householder’s life is full of worries, attachments, entanglements, and complications, which tend to impede and restrict people. It is congested and often a source of irritation and agitation. The renunciant life, on the other hand, is open and spacious, free

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<sup>128</sup> *Pabbajjā* literally means ‘going forth’ or ‘leaving entirely’, that is, departing the state of a layperson or a householder. The term is comprised of the roots *pa* (‘forth’, ‘out’, ‘entirely’) and *vaj* (‘to go’). In respect to the phrase *anagāriyaṃ pabbajanti/pabbajitā*, however, the commentaries define this term as *upagacchanti*, *upasaṅkamanti*, or *paṭipajjanti*, that is, ‘entering’, ‘stepping into’, or ‘proceeding along the path of’ the life of a homeless one.

This phrase is part of an expression found frequently in the Tipiṭaka: *agārasmā anagāriyaṃ pabbajanti/pabbajitā*. Following the commentarial interpretation this expression can be translated as: ‘Departing the household life and entering into the state of a homeless one.’ *Pabbajjā* can thus be translated as both ‘departing’ and ‘entering’. The preferred translation for this expression, as is found in the Thai translated Tipiṭaka, is: ‘Departing the household life and taking ordination as a renunciant (*pabbajita*).’ Here, *anagāriya* (‘the state of being a homeless one’) is equated with ‘the state of being a renunciant’, another definition for *pabbajjā*. This translation corresponds to the commentarial explanation: *Pabbajjanti anagāriyabhāvo* (‘*pabbajjā* is the state of a homeless one’); ApA. 140.

To sum up, a basic definition of the term *pabbajjā* is the ‘state of being a homeless one’ (*anagāriya*), and the term *pabbajita* (‘renunciant’; ‘one who has gone forth’) is identical to the term *anāgārika* (‘homeless one’).

<sup>129</sup> E.g.: M. II. 211, 226. [Trans.: Bodhisattva (Pali: Bodhisatta): a being destined to attain Buddhahood; a person who has made a vow to become a perfectly enlightened Buddha (*sammāsambuddha*). This is the term used to refer to the Buddha before his enlightenment.]

of worries and concerns, and it provides a perfect opportunity for spiritual growth. The scriptures compare the monk's life to that of a bird: just as a bird has two wings, a monk possesses simply a bowl and robe, and he is free to wander wherever he pleases.

The passage is then followed by a similar contemplation of one who sees the restricted nature of the household life and the opportunities provided by the renunciant life: 'That a householder can practise the holy life completely and fully, to absolute purity, like a well-polished conch shell, is not a task easily accomplished. Enough! I should shave off my hair and beard, don the ochre robe, go forth from the household life, and enter into the life of a renunciant (*anāgārika/pabbajita*).'

This latter passage elaborates on the decision to renounce the household life and adopt the renunciant life. It also describes the attributes of going forth, namely, that this act of going forth is done according to formal Buddhist principles and procedures. One's commitment to practise the holy life begins by shaving off one's hair and beard and donning the ochre robe.<sup>130</sup>

The practical application of this commitment is as follows: 'Subsequently, he abandons his wealth great or small, leaves his various relations and family members, shaves off his hair and beard, dons the ochre robe, departs the household life, and goes forth into the life of a homeless renunciant.'<sup>131</sup> In this passage, a person 'goes forth' (*pabbajjā*) as a 'homeless one' or 'renunciant' (*anāgārika/pabbajita*). In this context, the

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<sup>130</sup> *Kāsāva-vattha*.

<sup>131</sup> *Agārasmā anāgāriyaṃ pabbajati*.

process of going forth accords with the formal principles and procedures of Buddhism—of ‘this Dhammavinaya’.

For the sake of clarity one can divide this subject into two aspects:

- A. Basic principles or objectives of ‘going forth’ (*pabbajjā*).<sup>132</sup>
- B. Ordinations according to the standards and procedures of a specific religious tradition.

The basic meaning and objective of going forth or being ordained is to relinquish the household life—which is full of worries, bonds, and attachments—both in regard to material possessions and to social obligations, and to enter an unconstrained and unfettered life requiring no property or wealth.

Moreover, a person who seeks out such freedom and spaciousness does so in order to practise the ‘holy life’<sup>133</sup> to the utmost.

The act of going forth into the homeless or monastic life has existed from time immemorial. Having entered such a free and spacious life, most individuals wish to experience or discover something exceptional or lofty in relation to spiritual qualities, psychic powers, or supreme knowledge. Some renunciants seek freedom and liberation,<sup>134</sup> some seek true happiness, some seek the answer to life, while others seek insight into the universe.

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<sup>132</sup> Trans.: the author focuses here on the ancient Indian tradition, but many of these principles apply to Western monasticism as well.

<sup>133</sup> *Brahmacariya*; ‘exalted life’; in Buddhism this refers to the noble path (*ariya-magga*). [Trans.: the term *brahmacariya* has numerous definitions, depending on the context.]

<sup>134</sup> What is known as *mokkha-dhamma* (Sk.: *moksha*): ‘salvation’.

In reference to his own Great Renunciation<sup>135</sup> as Prince Siddhattha, the Buddha said: ‘When I was still a Bodhisatta ... I went forth as a seeker of the good’ (as a seeker of the true value and purpose of life).<sup>136</sup>

Spiritual seekers, both those with specific goals in mind and those with relatively vague aspirations, often look to veteran renunciants who have already passed through a process of training. Some of these renunciants have become famous, revered by a great number of disciples, and have established their own distinct schools, doctrines, traditions, and so on. Some seekers will simply take it on faith that a particular doctrine will lead them to their desired objective and will thus request to go forth in that community. Others may require more time for inquiry and examination before they develop confidence and agree to join a religious tradition.

Each religious institution or tradition has its own unique standards, teachings, goals, and so on. For example: One tradition espouses that our present existence is primarily a result of actions we performed in previous lives. In order to attain liberation and realize spiritual perfection, one must refrain from performing any more karma,<sup>137</sup> as well as eradicating old karma by undertaking extreme ascetic practices. Someone who has realized such perfection is altogether free of any attachments.

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<sup>135</sup> *Mahā-abhinikkhamana*.

<sup>136</sup> *Kiṅkusalāgavesī; kiṅkusalānu-esī*; D. II. 151; M. I. 163.

<sup>137</sup> Trans.: Sanskrit: *karma*; Pali: *kamma*: ‘volitional action’, ‘intentional action’. [Trans.: this doctrine is held by the Nigaṇṭhas—the Jains.]

Another tradition maintains the doctrine that Lord Brahma created the world—created human beings and set down a divinely ordained social order—and is assisted by a host of devas. Human beings are obliged to make sacrifices and to tend a sacred fire, which act as a link between the human realm and heaven. If the gods are pleased they will protect the world, ensuring that nature and human society function well.<sup>138</sup>

The doctrine, teachings, principles of conduct, goals, and so on, of a particular religious tradition can be subsumed under the term ‘*dhamma*’. The corresponding disciplinary codes and systems of practice established and prescribed to uphold the doctrine, support the principles, achieve the goals, and so forth, can be represented by the term ‘*vinaya*’.<sup>139</sup> Each religious tradition, creed, institution, etcetera, thus has its own unique ‘*dhammavinaya*’.

Adherents of the first tradition mentioned above believe in a doctrine of non-performance of karma. They undertake extreme ascetic practices tormenting the body in order to eliminate old karma and practise complete non-attachment. Like other religious groups, they establish a specific *vinaya*—a distinct code of conduct. For instance, in order to practise non-attachment they may determine to give up wearing clothing entirely and travel about seeking alms as naked ascetics. In addition, they carry out extreme religious austerities, for example refusing to sit down or standing always on one leg.

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<sup>138</sup> Trans.: i.e. Brahmanism (and by extension other theistic religions).

<sup>139</sup> Trans.: the terms *dhamma* and *vinaya* are not exclusively Buddhist terms. They were already part of the vernacular in the Indian subcontinent before the Buddha began to teach, although like with many words he added new nuances of meaning to them. When spelled with a capital, the term ‘*Vinaya*’ refers to the Buddhist monastic code of discipline.

Adherents of the second tradition maintain a doctrine of fire worship and propitiating the gods. Some of them live as hermits and recluses, surviving off of roots and berries and shunning all human contact. They devote themselves to keeping the sacred fire alight without pause.

From these examples we can see that ‘going forth’ (*pabbajjā*) is more complex than simply meeting the basic objectives of leaving a confining household life and entering a relative life of spaciousness and freedom. Going forth is also connected to formal social structures, corresponding to the statement in the commentaries: ‘[Having left the household life] one enters the renunciant life according to the standards and procedures of a specific religious tradition.’

Returning to the going forth of the Bodhisattva—Prince Siddhattha—he went forth from the palace, took on the practice and identity of a renunciant, and lived as a *kiṅkusalagavesī*—a seeker of the ‘supreme province of peace’:<sup>140</sup> Nibbāna. He visited the ascetic Āḷāra Kālāma and said to him: ‘Venerable Kālāma, I wish to practise the holy life in this *dhammavinaya*.’<sup>141</sup>

Later, having attained the same state of realization as that of Āḷāra Kālāma, and recognizing that it does not lead to awakening, the Bodhisattva departed and travelled to see Uddaka Rāmaputta. He said: ‘Venerable Rāma, I wish to practise the holy life in this *dhammavinaya*.’ Having similarly matched the same state of realization as that of Rāma, and seeing its shortcomings, he departed once more.

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<sup>140</sup> *Santivara-pada*.

<sup>141</sup> M. II. 212.



After realizing full awakening the Buddha proclaimed the ‘Buddhist teachings’,<sup>142</sup> and a short time thereafter he established the monastic sangha. At this point there existed a ‘dhamma’—a set of teachings revealing the essential Buddhist message and goal—and a ‘vinaya’—a code of discipline regulating people’s behaviour and a structure for social activities. Hence, there came into being the ‘Dhammavinaya’ of the Buddha.

In Buddhism, those individuals who grasp the essence of the teachings and arrive at the supreme goal—who ‘realize the Dhamma’—are called arahants. They leave the household life and take up the monastic discipline known as the ‘Vinaya’, a code of living established in order to support the Dhamma. In short, they go forth into the Buddha’s Dhammavinaya.

Householders who realize arahantship are endowed with a correct understanding of how to relate to worldly conventions. As a result, they invariably go forth into the homeless life and are ordained in this Dhammavinaya, that is, they enter into the Buddhist monastic life.<sup>143</sup>

It is not possible that they would take ordination in another religious tradition with such practices as: living as a fire-worshipper who never cuts his hair or beard—leaving them as a tangled knot in which birds can build their nests—and who allows his teeth to be tartar-stained; undertaking extreme ascetic practices like smearing his body with ashes and mud—allowing it to be caked with dust—eating grass, not cleaning his backside after defecation, eating faeces, lying directly on

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<sup>142</sup> *Buddha-sāsana*.

<sup>143</sup> Including both preliminary ordination (*pabbajjā*) and higher ordination (*upasampadā*).

the ground or on nails, standing on one leg, or hopping on one foot; or living as a naked ascetic who lets his hair grow long and crawls on the ground.<sup>144</sup>

As a related matter the Milindapañha states: ‘That this arahant householder ordains by himself is not so; for were he to be ordained by himself, this would constitute a state of “identity theft”.’<sup>145</sup>

Granted, the basic definition of ‘going forth’ (*pabbajjā*) is to leave the householder’s life and to enter into the state of a homeless one (*anāgārika*). Arahant laypeople have finished their spiritual business; nothing remains for them to accomplish. Is it not sufficient for them to simply go forth into any form of homeless life? Why must they adopt the system of ordination prescribed by the formal Buddhist discipline, the Vinaya?

A simple answer is that awakened individuals possess a clear discernment of worldly conventions<sup>146</sup> and they conduct themselves properly in relation to them. Arahant laypersons recognize that the convention of formal ordination has been established to help people awaken to and benefit from ultimate truth.<sup>147</sup> This convention protects and supports the Dhamma revealed by the Buddha, enabling it to provide blessings to the wider public far into the future. Realized beings thus act as leaders in upholding and maintaining such conventions.

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<sup>144</sup> Trans.: here the author is presenting a standard list of religious practices undertaken by ascetics during the Buddha’s era.

<sup>145</sup> *Theyya*.

<sup>146</sup> *Sammati-paññatti*.

<sup>147</sup> *Paramattha*.

It is natural that, despite all efforts by Buddhists at being careful, eventually such social systems and institutions will be infiltrated by evil-minded or depraved individuals who will cause them to deteriorate in either minor or severe ways. It is impossible to maintain these systems in an unblemished state forever. Their existence and stability relies on people with pure-hearted determination, and it is precisely those individuals having progressed far on the noble path, who, by becoming part of such systems and institutions, act as a positive force for safeguarding and rejuvenating them.

Fully awakened laypeople are a good example of those who decide to become a part of such institutions, even though they have no more spiritual work to accomplish and they know that by doing so they will necessarily face personal hardship. Considering the benefit to the wider public, however, they participate in these systems and institutions to defend the wellbeing of all people.

Were such arahant laypeople to bestow ordination on themselves by following some simple renunciant life in line with the basic definition of 'going forth' (*pabbajjā*), they would still live their lives in a way corresponding to the Buddhist path. Their behaviour would not deviate from this path because they possess a clear understanding of right and wrong, of the correct and incorrect way to conduct themselves.

Despite living in accordance with the Buddhist path, were they to live as renunciants outside of the Buddhist monastic sangha, this would be a form of impersonation or as defined in the scriptures as a form of 'identity theft'. It would cause problems within Buddhist circles by giving rise to competitiveness, mistrust, contention, and disharmony. The integrity

of the conventional structures set down by the Buddha for the good of the wider society would be compromised and impaired, and the longterm benefits for later generations would be jeopardised. So it is natural that arahant laypeople would not behave in this way.

To conclude, arahant laypeople do not bestow ordination on themselves. In light of this fact, and in the case where a bhikkhuni sangha no longer exists, it is not possible for female arahant laywomen to take higher ordination. In that case, how would they be able to live a formal renunciant life? Are there solutions to this dilemma? This is the subject to be considered in the next section.

### **Passing Over the Preliminary Going Forth — Higher Ordination at One Go**

In the context of such historical or technical matters, instead of making decisions based on personal opinions or preferences, we should gain more clarity, confidence, and comprehensive understanding by seeking out and examining factual evidence.

The scriptures recount how, during times when the teachings by a Perfectly Enlightened Buddha<sup>148</sup> are absent, there are occasionally individuals fully cultivated in the perfections,<sup>149</sup> ripening as the fruit of arahantship. These self-awakened arahants, who do not rely on the guidance by a Perfectly Enlightened Buddha, are known as ‘Silent Buddhas’ or ‘Individually Enlightened Ones’ (*paccekabuddha*).

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<sup>148</sup> *Sammāsambuddha*.

<sup>149</sup> *Pāramī*.

These Silent Buddhas all go forth into the renunciant life. According to the scriptures, some of them undertake a formal act of 'going forth' prior to their awakening, say by determining to live as a rishi or hermit. But many of them are still householders at the moment of their full awakening. For example, while ruling as a monarch, an individual realizes the Dhamma and is fully awakened as an arahant. In this situation, what should be done?

The commentaries reply to this question by describing miraculous events, stating that as soon as a Silent Buddha raises his hand to his head, he immediately takes on the appearance of a renunciant: his hair and beard vanish, he is cloaked in an ochre robe, and he is supplied with an almsbowl. He then levitates and goes to live in a forested mountain area such as the Himalayas. In a nutshell, he goes forth instantly on that very day.

Silent Buddhas have realized ultimate truth. At the same time, they understand conventional truth, and therefore it is only natural that they live a renunciant life based on a Buddhist template. If they were previously rishis, hermits, or ascetics, they change their lifestyle and observances to correspond with a Buddhist way of life.

Perfectly Enlightened Buddhas are capable of teaching others, guiding them on the path to full realization. This guidance results in a monastic community (*saṅgha*), for which Buddhas prescribe a disciplinary code known as the Vinaya, including systematic ordination procedures. Silent Buddhas, however, lack the capability to transmit ultimate truth to the conventional world to the extent of developing a set of wide-ranging and comprehensive formal

regulations.<sup>150</sup> It is for this reason that they are called ‘Silent Buddhas’. (They do teach others but only to a limited extent.)

This discussion of Silent Buddhas helps to highlight the essence of ‘going forth’. Formal acts of renunciation embrace a way of life with conventional structures and traditions established consciously for the wellbeing and happiness of all people, both in the present and in the future.

When one understands the true meaning of going forth, one uses established conventions in line with their original purpose. One thus avoids causing harm or disruption for oneself or society. In a time period when the teachings of a Perfectly Enlightened Buddha still exist, one practises correctly in accord with the Buddha’s prescriptions.

Endowed with a genuine understanding of going forth and a skill in applying established conventions, one is then prepared to make a broader inspection. One explores methods to facilitate the renunciant life that hold true to the heart of going forth while at the same time one avoids transgressing the Buddha’s guidelines.

We can now take a glance back to the Buddha’s time and examine the leading source material: the Tipiṭaka. The Tipiṭaka contains twenty-seven passages recording instances where individuals ask for ordination directly from the Buddha. And in only one of these instances, the person asks for higher ordination (*upasampadā*) without needing to pass the preliminary going forth (*pabbajjā*). This means that, in this case, the Buddha accepted the candidate’s previous ordination, thus considering him to already be a Buddhist renunciant in spirit and to be eligible for higher ordination directly.

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<sup>150</sup> *Paññatti*.

This story is found in the Dhātuvibhaṅga Sutta.<sup>151</sup> At one time, the Buddha had arrived on his travels at the city of Rājagaha, and was staying overnight in a potter's shed belonging to a man named Bhaggava. He shared this accommodation with a clansman named Pukkusāti who had previously gone forth as a renunciant.

During the night, the Buddha observed that this fellow renunciant's bearing and deportment was dignified, and he asked him how he came to be ordained. At that moment, Pukkusāti was unaware that he was in the presence of the Buddha. He was under the impression that the Buddha was currently residing at Sāvatti. He said that he had ordained by himself as an act of devotion; he described his faith and delight in the Buddha based on the teachings he had heard.

Without revealing himself, the Buddha gave him a Dhamma teaching (addressing him as 'bhikkhu'). While listening to this teaching, Pukkusāti awakened to the stage of non-returner and he realized that he was in the presence of the Buddha. When the sermon was finished, he bowed and asked forgiveness,<sup>152</sup> and he asked to take higher ordination. But because he did not have the complete set of robes and bowl, he first had to seek and prepare these items.

The commentaries say that Pukkusāti was the king of the Gandhāra country, having ruled at the city of Takkaṣilā.<sup>153</sup> He was a friend of King Bimbisāra of Magadha, although, because

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<sup>151</sup> M. III. 237-47.

<sup>152</sup> Trans.: he had previously addressed the Buddha with the familiar appellation 'āvuso' ('friend').

<sup>153</sup> MA. V. 33.

of the great distance between their respective kingdoms, they had never met in person. They communicated by way of letter, using merchant caravans as a means of delivery service.

On one occasion, in reply to a valuable and costly gift sent by King Pukkusāti, King Bimbisāra decided to send him back the most valuable gift of all: a royal missive describing the blessings of the Triple Gem along with other Dhamma teachings.

King Pukkusāti read this letter and was filled with rapture and devotion. He practised meditation, achieved *jhāna*, and decided to go forth into the renunciant life. The commentaries state that, similar to the Bodhisattva, from the moment of his going forth his hair and beard remained at a length of two inches. He instructed his royal page to seek out two ochre robes (an under-robe and an upper robe) and a clay bowl. He then, by himself, adopted the life of a renunciant, in devotion to the Buddha.

As a renunciant, he departed from the palace with the wish of going to pay respects to the Buddha. At that time, the Buddha was staying at Sāvatti, but because Pukkusāti had recently received a letter from King Bimbisāra, he decided to first visit Rājagaha, even though this meant travelling beyond Sāvatti. Pukkusāti, along with a caravan of merchants, travelled a great distance.<sup>154</sup> Comparing it with modern landmarks, it was equivalent to travelling from Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, across the entire expanse of India, almost to the border of Bangladesh.

As it happened, the Buddha had walked from Sāvatti to Rājagaha and met Pukkusāti in the potter's shed.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> He covered a distance of 237 *yojanas* (3,792 km, or 1,550 km as the crow flies).

<sup>155</sup> Potters' sheds were popular places for rest and shelter by itinerant renunciants at that time.



To continue the story, having listened to the Buddha's teaching, Pukkusāti requested higher ordination but he lacked the complete set of bowl and robes (the earlier account states that he had only two robes—he thus lacked the necessary outer robe). At dawn, he went out in search of this robe, but before he could return to see the Buddha he was gored by a cow with calf and was killed.<sup>156</sup>

On the surface, this story seems to be almost identical to that of Bāhiya Dārucīriya, who also met the Buddha only once, outside of a monastery. Having listened to a Dhamma teaching and realized awakening, Bāhiya asked to take ordination but lacked the necessary requisites of a bowl and triple robe. He went off in search for them, and was killed by a cow on that very day and was thus unable to take ordination.

Yet there are important distinctions between these two stories. In particular, Bāhiya attained the fruit of arahantship. He wished to be ordained, but died and entered final Nibbāna before this was possible and so never received ordination. He is thus frequently referred to as an example, apparently demonstrating that: 'A layperson attaining arahantship must take ordination on that very day or else enter final Nibbāna.'

Pukkusāti, on the other hand, was a non-returner; he had not yet attained arahantship. His death is thus not referred to as 'entering final Nibbāna' (*parinibbāna*). There are many cases of non-returners spending their entire lives as laypeople, without taking ordination. The story of Pukkusāti thus does not fit with the criterion: 'A layperson attaining arahantship must take ordination on that very day or else enter final Nibbāna.'

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<sup>156</sup> Even today there are apparently areas in India where cows rule the streets.

In fact, his story is sometimes cited to prove a contrasting theory, that the prevention of someone taking ordination due to premature death may be a coincidence, that is, the result of other causes.

As mentioned earlier, Pukkusāti is the only person mentioned in the Tipiṭaka who asks directly for higher ordination from the Buddha without needing to pass through the preliminary stage of going forth (*pabbajjā*). In other words, the Buddha accepted and endorsed the ordination procedure that Pukkusāti had performed before their meeting. This is a matter worthy of consideration.

To begin with, let us look at the wording used by all other individuals who asked for ordination directly from the Buddha (both preliminary and higher ordination).<sup>156</sup> Here is the wording used by the Buddha's first disciple, Ven. Aññā-Koṇḍañña:

‘On that occasion, Aññā-Koṇḍañña saw the Dhamma, realized the Dhamma, awakened to the Dhamma.... In respect to understanding the Buddha's teachings, he was independent of the words of others. He addressed the Blessed One thus:’

*Venerable Sir, may I receive the preliminary going forth, may I receive higher ordination, in the presence of the Blessed One?*<sup>157</sup>

In contrast, the wording used by Pukkusāti is as follows:

‘On that occasion, Pukkusāti realized: “Of course! The Teacher ... The Well-Farer ... the Perfectly Enlightened One has come to me.” He got up from his seat, arranged his robe over his left shoulder, bowed down with his head by the Blessed

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<sup>157</sup> I have found twenty-six cases in the Tipiṭaka.

<sup>158</sup> *Labheyyāhaṃ bhante bhagavato santike pabbajjaṃ labheyyaṃ upasampadaṃ*. Vin. I. 12.

One's feet and said: "Venerable Sir, a transgression overcame me, in that foolish, misguided and heedless, I presumed to address the Blessed One as 'friend'.<sup>159</sup> May the Blessed One forgive me for this offence, so that I may be more restrained in the future...." He went on to say:

*Venerable Sir, may I receive higher ordination in the presence of the Blessed One?*<sup>160</sup>

### **Special Circumstances for Bypassing the Preliminary Going Forth**

Let's examine what makes the case of Ven. Pukkusāti unique, in the sense that he is the only individual who was ordained by himself and whose ordination was verified by the Buddha as being valid and complete, and who was thus recognized as already being a Buddhist renunciant.

The normal procedure for ordination candidates is to ask for the preliminary going forth and the higher ordination.<sup>161</sup> Here, we will compare the case of Pukkusāti with some other special cases, for example that of the Group of Five.<sup>162</sup>

The Buddha addressed Pukkusāti as 'bhikkhu', demonstrating that, on one level, he already recognized him as a renunciant—as someone ordained.

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<sup>159</sup> *Āvuso*. [Trans.: *āvuso* ('friend', 'brother', 'Sir'): a form of polite address used usually in conversation between bhikkhus. More polite forms of address are '*bhante*' ('Sir', 'Venerable Sir') and '*āyasmā*' ('Venerable').]

<sup>160</sup> *Labhēyyāhaṃ bhante bhagavato santike upasampadaṃ*. M. III. 247.

<sup>161</sup> *Pabbajjā & upasampadā*.

<sup>162</sup> *Pañca-vaggiya*.

Before asking for ordination from the Buddha, the Group of Five were similarly renunciants and the Buddha also addressed each one of them as 'bhikkhu'. He thus recognized that they too were already renunciants in a formal sense.

So what is the difference? Why did the Group of Five need to request both the preliminary going forth and higher ordination, while Pukkusāti only needed to request the latter?

The answer is easy. The Group of Five were renunciants outside of the Buddhist dispensation. They attended on the Buddha before his awakening, before Buddhism had been established.

The Group of Five monks had previously anticipated that, were the Bodhisattva to become enlightened, they too would share in his good fortune and be enlightened as well. When the Bodhisattva abandoned his extreme ascetic practices, they were convinced that he had lost his way. Eventually, the Buddha was awakened and returned to teach them. But before receiving these teachings, they had no comprehension of the Buddha's teachings; they had no understanding of the Dhamma. They were still renunciants outside and apart from Buddhism.

The Group of Five originally went forth into the renunciant life believing in the prophesy made by the soothsayers about the Bodhisattva. As yet, however, they had no inkling about the Buddha's teachings, about the Dhamma. For the most part, the commentaries simply state that they 'went forth' following the example of the 'Great Being'<sup>163</sup>—the Bodhisattva. But there are some alternative descriptions, for example:

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<sup>163</sup> *Mahāpurisa.*

they went forth as recluses<sup>164</sup> or they went forth as religious seekers<sup>165</sup> in devotion to the Bodhisattva (rather than in devotion to the Buddha). Some passages claim that they belonged to those individuals who practise extreme asceticism.<sup>166</sup> In sum, they were non-Buddhist renunciants.

After listening to the Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta, the Group of Five gained a profound understanding of the Buddha's teachings and realized the Dhamma.<sup>167</sup> They requested the preliminary going forth and higher ordination, entering into the Buddha's Dhammavinaya.<sup>168</sup>

Thereafter, many non-Buddhist renunciants met the Buddha and were enlightened. They too asked for the preliminary going forth and higher ordination. At the beginning of the Buddha's time, those individuals who listened to teachings directly from the Buddha and were subsequently enlightened were ordained by using the words, '*Ehi bhikkhu*' ('Come, bhikkhu'), which combined and completed the preliminary and higher ordination all at once. Yet even in such cases, they requested both the preliminary going forth and higher ordination.

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<sup>164</sup> *Tāpasa-pabbajjā*; ThagA. I. 150.

<sup>165</sup> *Samaṇa-pabbajjā*; VinṬ.: Mahākhandhakaṃ, Pañcavaggiyakathāvaṇṇanā.

<sup>166</sup> *Attakilamathānuyoga*; Majjhima Nikāya Ṭikā, Opammavaggo, Pāsārāsīsuttavaṇṇanā, section 276.

<sup>167</sup> Trans.: only Koṇḍañña realized stream-entry on the occasion of the Buddha preaching the Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta, yet all five members of the Group of Five realized arahantship over the next few days.

<sup>168</sup> Trans.: although technically the 'Vinaya'—the monastic discipline—had not yet been established, the very act of admitting the Group of Five into the monastic order (*saṅgha*) constituted an ordination in line with distinct Buddhist standards and procedures (see the earlier discussion on *vinaya*).

If the ordination candidates were recluses (*tāpasa*), hermits (*isi*), or matted-hair ascetics (*jaṭila*) who were considered to believe in a basic principle of the law of karma, and whose views and practices were considered not to be seriously erroneous or inconsistent with Buddhist teachings, they would be ordained following the normal procedure. But if they were naked ascetics (*acelaka*) or wandering ascetics (*paribbājaka*) classified as ‘adherents of other sects’,<sup>169</sup> before their higher ordination they would be required to undergo a four-month probation.<sup>170</sup>

Pukkusāti went forth at a time when Buddhism was already established and he was aware of the arising of a Buddha. He had personally read the royal letters proclaiming the Dhamma, and had consequently gained faith in and insight into the Buddha’s teachings. Acquainted with the basic format of the Dhammavinaya, he renounced his throne and went forth into the homeless life. But living in such a distant and remote region, there was nowhere for him to undergo a formal ordination procedure.

Endowed with this faith, sincerity, and understanding, he adopted the state of being a renunciant by ‘going forth out of devotion to the Buddha’. Then, wishing to meet with the Buddha, he set forth on the long journey along the roads used by merchant caravans.

When Pukkusāti met the Buddha, the Buddha asked him about his ordination. Pukkusāti told him that he had gone forth out of devotion to the Buddha. The Buddha accepted

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<sup>169</sup> *Aññatitthiya*.

<sup>170</sup> *Titthiya-parivāsa*. If the Buddha saw that their realization of Dhamma was assured and that they were incapable of going astray, he would sometimes exempt them from such probation.

his formal status as a Buddhist renunciant. (At this point, the Buddha had not yet revealed his true identity. He simply listened without commenting on or responding to his ordination. He accepted his status by remaining silent.)<sup>171</sup> When Pukkusāti realized that he was in the presence of the Buddha, he asked for the next stage of ordination, that is, he asked for the single procedure of higher ordination at one go.

As mentioned earlier, this story is almost identical to the story of Bāhiya Dārucīriya. Besides the similarities listed above, Pukkusāti arrived as a renunciant wearing an ochre robe.<sup>172</sup> Bāhiya donned a woven bark garment, in a manner resembling a renunciant.

The similarity, however, is only superficial, as the gist of these two stories differs significantly. Bāhiya was travelling by ship to Suvanṇabhūmi to engage in trade, but he was shipwrecked. He survived and was washed ashore at the port city of Suppāraka, naked and penniless. Acquainted neither with this locality nor with anyone residing there, he made a living by dressing up as a renunciant and presenting himself as a holy man.

Bāhiya was a non-Buddhist renunciant and a spurious renunciant to boot. He had no awareness or knowledge of Buddhism. The reason he went to the Buddha was because a deva, a former relative of his, came and warned him against deceiving other people. He encouraged Bāhiya to seek out the Buddha in order to witness firsthand what a true holy man—a person free from defilement—is. He therefore travelled to and met with the Buddha.

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<sup>171</sup> *Tuṅhī*.

<sup>172</sup> *Kāsāva-vattha*.

Pukkusāti's circumstances were different. He was familiar with Buddhism and had a considerable understanding of the Dhamma. He was endowed with ardent faith and decided to go forth as a monk in devotion to the Buddha.

After listening to a Dhamma talk and realizing arahantship, Bāhiya went out in search of the necessary requisites for ordination but he was gored and killed by a cow before he could accomplish this task. This event conforms to the principle that, if a layperson realizes arahantship, he or she must either take ordination on that very day or else attain *parinibbāna*. Pukkusāti, on the other hand, realized the fruit of non-returning. He wished to take higher ordination on that very day, but was killed by a cow. This event can be seen as an everyday accident; it does not conform to the aforementioned principle.

Some people may think it is highly unlikely that someone who has realized the Dhamma would be gored and killed by a cow. Note that there are several other stories in the Tipiṭaka of realized individuals (or ordinary people performing meritorious acts) being killed by cows. It seems that it was not unusual for people in ancient India (and perhaps even today) to be killed by cows. As cows have traditionally been the lords of the streets in India, one can say that such accidents have been regular occurrences in that country.

There is a story in the Tipiṭaka of a poor and starving man named Suppabuddhakuṭṭhi.<sup>173</sup> One day while searching for food he saw a large company of people sitting together. Thinking that there was a good chance of getting something to eat, he went over to join them.

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<sup>173</sup> Ud. 48-50.



When he reached them, he saw that they were listening to a Dhamma talk by the Buddha. Although he knew it was not a convenient time to receive food, he decided to listen to the talk anyways. The Buddha saw him and recognizing his spiritual potential determined to teach him. As a result, Suppabuddhakutṭhi obtained the eye of Dhamma and realized stream-entry. He paid respects to the Buddha, expressed his appreciation for the Dhamma talk, and declared himself a lay disciple. But soon after departing, he was gored by a cow with calf and killed.

A similar event occurred at Rājagaha.<sup>174</sup> An elderly outcaste woman was hobbling out of the city districts with her walking stick. The Buddha knew that she was about to die so he led his group of monks to stand at a spot where she could meet them for a brief moment; he then walked on. The old woman was delighted and paid her respects. But as she was holding her palms together in respectful salutation, a cow came and gored her to death. As she died with a bright and gladdened mind, she was born in Tāvātimsa heaven.

Another story is of a female lay-disciple.<sup>175</sup> One morning after waking up, she decided to go and pay respects to a stupa. She collected four flowers—whatever she could find—and headed for the stupa. But a cow with calf knocked her over and gored her to death. But because her mind was still wholesome and bright, she was reborn in Tāvātimsa heaven as in the previous story.

Over the centuries, countless people in the Indian sub-continent have probably been gored to death by cows. It has

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<sup>174</sup> Vv. verses 194-204.

<sup>175</sup> Vv. verses 790-802.

most likely been a commonplace occurrence, similar to today's traffic accidents.

Another factor that makes Pukkusāti's ordination unique is that his hometown was situated in the 'border lands'<sup>176</sup> or the 'frontier land',<sup>177</sup> that is, it lay beyond the boundary of the 'Middle Country'<sup>178</sup> which at that time was considered to be cultured, prosperous, and civilized.

Rājagaha in the Magadha state and Sāvātthi in the Kosala state were the two main centres of civilization and prosperity in the Middle Country.<sup>179</sup> They were also the centres of Buddhism at that time, containing numerous monasteries and a large number of monastics.

Normally, the Buddha's training rules for the sangha were prescribed for the monks and nuns living in this central region along with its adjacent territory.

Later, when Buddhism spread to various districts and towns in the 'frontier lands', there were fewer monks and monasteries in those regions. The people's traditions, way of life, and even the climate, was different from the Middle Country. This caused difficulties in complying with some of the Vinaya rules, including the prescriptions pertaining to ordination. Disciples informed the Buddha of these difficulties and they requested special regional concessions. He therefore set down certain allowances and made special exceptions for these remote frontier lands.

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<sup>176</sup> *Paccanta-janapada.*

<sup>177</sup> *Paccanta-desa.*

<sup>178</sup> *Majjhima-janapada; majjhimadesa.*

<sup>179</sup> These two cities were 720 km (45 yojanas) apart by caravan route (or 456 km as the crow flies).

In relation to ordinations, there is a story of Ven. Mahā Kaccāna<sup>180</sup> who lived in the Avanti country—part of the ‘frontier lands’—where he was revered and honoured by many. One day, one of his disciples named Soṇa-Kuṭikaṇṇa<sup>181</sup> asked for ordination. Because there were not enough bhikkhus to make up a quorum, Mahā Kaccāna was only able to give him novice ordination as a first step. It took another three arduous years before enough bhikkhus could be found to complete the quorum of ten monks (the required number set by the Buddha in the original prescription). Soṇa was thus finally able to take higher ordination.

A year after his ordination, Ven. Soṇa-Kuṭikaṇṇa asked permission from his preceptor to go and pay respects to the Buddha. Ven. Mahā Kaccāna consented and instructed him to ask the Buddha for an allowance to relax or omit certain disciplinary rules that were problematic in the frontier lands. The first request was to reduce the number of bhikkhus required for giving higher ordination.

When Ven. Soṇa-Kuṭikaṇṇa had submitted his request, the Buddha acknowledged the difficult circumstances in the southern region of Avanti and informed the congregation of bhikkhus that he was making special allowances for remote frontier lands,<sup>182</sup> beginning with an allowance for monks in such regions to perform higher ordination ceremonies with a minimum quorum of five bhikkhus.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Also known as Ven. Mahā Kaccāyana.

<sup>181</sup> Or ‘Soṇa’ for short.

<sup>182</sup> *Paccanta-desa*; this includes present-day Thailand.

<sup>183</sup> Including ‘one versed in the discipline’ (*vinaya-dhara*); Vin. I. 197. In respect to a *vinaya-dhara*, the commentaries highlight an ‘*anusāvanācariya*’, a senior monk capable of chanting the formal announcement and resolution in the sangha assembly; VinA. V. 1088.

Pukkusāti had also lived in the frontier regions but the Gandhāra country was much farther away than the Avanti country. Measuring in a straight line, Ujjenī, the capital of the Avanti state, lay approximately 800 km (50 yojanas) from Sāvatti, the capital of the Kosala state (where Ven. Soṇa visited the Buddha). As mentioned earlier, Takkasilā, the capital of Gandhāra, was almost twice as far away.

Buddhism had already spread to the Avanti country and there were monks available to conduct ordinations. The problem was simply that there were only very few monks living there, which prompted the Buddha to reduce the required number of bhikkhus necessary for conducting higher ordinations.

In the Gandhāra country, people were not yet familiar with Buddhism, and no bhikkhus lived there. There was absolutely no way to undergo a standard ordination ceremony. King Pukkusāti therefore had to take ordination by himself in dedication to the Buddha. It was most likely for this reason that the Buddha accepted his going forth by remaining silent (similar to offering a reprieve in respect to the preliminary going forth: *pabbajjā*).

## **Going Forth in Dedication to the Buddha**

According to the story that has been passed down to us, Pukkusāti had an understanding of Buddhism, was endowed with ardent faith, and sincerely resolved to go forth into the homeless life. Yet receiving a standard ordination in his remote and distant homeland was impossible as there were no bhikkhus living there to facilitate this. He therefore took

ordination by himself taking the Buddha as his teacher and set off on the journey to meet with the Buddha in person.

When he informed the Buddha of his going forth, the Buddha remained silent as a sign of acknowledgment and acceptance. Pukkusāti therefore requested higher ordination; there was no need for him to request a repeated preliminary ordination.

Let's look at the phrasing recorded in the Tipiṭaka whereby Pukkusāti informs the Buddha of his procedure of going forth. Note that this phrasing is unique; it is not repeated by anyone else.<sup>184</sup>

*Now there was a clansman named Pukkusāti who had gone forth from the home life into homelessness out of faith in the Blessed One, and on that occasion he was already staying in the potter's workshop.... Then the Blessed One entered the potter's workshop, prepared a sitting mat of grass, and sat down ... late into the night.... Then the Blessed One thought: 'This clansman conducts himself in a way that inspires confidence. Suppose I were to question him.' So he asked Pukkusāti:*

*'In devotion to whom have you gone forth, bhikkhu? Who is your teacher? Whose Dhamma do you profess?'*

*'Friend, there is the recluse Gotama, the son of the Sakyans who went forth from the Sakyan clan. Now a good report of that Blessed Gotama has been spread to this effect: "The Blessed One is accomplished ... enlightened, blessed." I have gone forth in devotion to that Blessed One; that Blessed One is my teacher;*

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<sup>184</sup> The one exception is Ven. Assaji who uses almost the identical phrasing on an occasion after his ordination. announcement and resolution in the sangha assembly; VinA. V. 1088.

*I profess the Dhamma of that Blessed One.*<sup>185</sup>

As mentioned in a previous footnote, these words by Pukkusāti are similar to those by Ven. Assaji, one of the members of the Group of Five.<sup>186</sup> When he was an arahant and had received full ordination, he responded to a question by the renunciant Upatissa (later to be Ven. Sāriputta). His passage, however, is shorter; it does not mention the Buddha's virtues, and instead of 'samaṇo gotamo', it uses the word 'mahāsamaṇo'.<sup>187</sup>

As described earlier, recounting these stories and providing scriptural material is simply a means to share knowledge and factual information in the most comprehensive way possible. The intention here is not to make a final judgement on this matter of ordination or to give a verdict on what people should do about it.

If, however, this method of ordination applied by Ven. Pukkusāti is deemed legitimate, that is, it is a realistic and valid method to be used in such circumstances when the necessary number of monastics cannot be found to perform an ordination as dictated by the Vinaya, and it does not contradict any of the Vinaya rules, then the monastic community (*saṅgha*)<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> M. III. 237-8. The answer by Pukkusāti in Pali: *Atthāvuso samaṇo gotamo sakyaputto sakyakulā pabbajito, taṃ kho pana bhāgavantaṃ gotamaṃ evaṅkalyāṇo kittisaddo abbhuggato: itipi so bhāgavā arahaṃ sammāsambuddho vijjācaraṇasampanno sugato lokavidū anuttaro purisadammaśārathi saththā devamanussānaṃ buddho bhāgavāti. Tāhaṃ bhāgavantaṃ uddhissa pabbajito, so ca me bhāgavā saththā, tassāhaṃ bhāgavato dhammaṃ rocemi.*

<sup>186</sup> *Pañcavaggiya.*

<sup>187</sup> *Atthāvuso mahāsamaṇo sakyaputto sakyakulā pabbajito. Tāhaṃ bhāgavantaṃ uddhissa pabbajito, so ca me bhāgavā saththā, tassa cāhaṃ bhāgavā dhammaṃ rocemi.*

<sup>188</sup> Trans.: the term 'saṅgha' here refers to the bhikkhu sangha. Because in such a case no new Vinaya rule would be formally established nor would an existing rule be revoked, the consensus would not require participation by every bhikkhu on the planet. A smaller community of bhikkhus could validly perform such a procedure.

is at liberty to support and approve it as a consensus.

If the sangha were to make such a decision in unison, they would not be replacing the authority of the Buddha. The sangha would not be conferring ordination on such an individual. In this case, he or she would go forth independently out of devotion to the Buddha.

The only responsibility here for the sangha would be to meet and to act as a witness, or to verify and guarantee that the person is going forth correctly and in a way that fulfils the criteria set down by the Buddha's original allowance (that is, by remaining silent). The sangha would inspect and confirm that the person has a comprehensive understanding of and deep faith in the Buddha's teachings and is going forth out of devotion to the Buddha with sincerity.

In order for this bearing witness or verification to be authoritative and precise, the sangha may wish to establish a formal agreement pertaining to this process.<sup>189</sup>

In the scriptures, the common and accepted name for such a person going forth by dedicating him- or herself to the Buddha is *pabbajita*, but if the sangha would prefer to designate another unique name for such an individual, this would be a valid alternative.

The Buddha addressed Pukkusāti as 'bhikkhu' in the same way that he addressed the Group of Five renunciants before they were ordained as Buddhist monks. From this perspective, it would appear legitimate to call such an individual going forth in devotion to the Buddha a *bhikkhu* or *bhikkhunī*.

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<sup>189</sup> Trans.: again, this does not imply establishing a new Vinaya rule or procedure.

But from another, more stringent perspective, we must engage in further analysis:

- At the beginning period of the Buddha's dispensation, he referred to certain individuals according to the current language at that time. The terms *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī* were already in use to refer to renunciants before Buddhism was established.

- Later on, however, when he had prescribed the formal sangha ordination procedure, making a clear distinction between the two stages of ordination, i.e. *pabbajjā* and *upasampadā*, the terms *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī* were reserved for those people who have completed the higher ordination of *upasampadā*. A person who has completed only the preliminary stage of *pabbajjā*—a 'budding' renunciant<sup>190</sup>—is referred to as a *sāmaṇera* or *sāmaṇerī*.

It would be incongruous to refer to someone going forth in devotion to the Buddha as a *sāmaṇera* or *sāmaṇerī*, because, technically, these terms refer to those people undertaking a training in preparation for higher ordination as a *bhikkhu* or *bhikkhuni*. As this distinct ordination procedure (of devoting oneself to the Buddha) is self-contained and independent, it would be appropriate to refer to these monks and nuns by a distinct and special term.

In any case, whether we wish to adopt this procedure or not, the aim of this exposition has been to share the accounts of this matter as they are presented in the scriptures.

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<sup>190</sup> *Samāṇa*.



## Resolving the Dilemma of Arahant Laypeople Taking Ordination

This lengthy exposition may appear to be an attempt to find a solution for present-day arahant laywomen to take ordination in the case that they are not able to be ordained as bhikkhunis, thus overcoming the apparent obstacle set down by the claim that if a fully awakened layperson fails to ordain on that very day, he or she must die.

However, this exposition might more accurately be described as a means to find a way for women in general to take ordination in the present time.

According to the commentaries, in this present age it is no longer possible for anyone—including monks, novices, or laypeople—to realize arahantship. Following this interpretation, no-one in the current era can enter final Nibbāna.<sup>191</sup> This statement accords with the teaching on the five kinds of ‘disappearance’.<sup>192</sup>

This teaching is found in the commentarial exegesis on the ordination of bhikkhunis. The commentators refer to the Buddha’s statement when he granted women higher ordination and laid down the eight garudhammas for the bhikkhunis to uphold:<sup>193</sup>

<sup>191</sup> *Parinibbāna*.

<sup>192</sup> *Antaradhāna*; ‘vanishing’. The five kinds of disappearance: 1) *adhigama-antaradhāna* (or *paṭivedha-antaradhāna*): realization of Dhamma disappears; 2) *paṭipatti-antaradhāna*: practice of Dhamma disappears; 3) *pariyatti-antaradhāna*: study of Dhamma disappears; 4) *liṅga-antaradhāna*: maintaining the state of a bhikkhu or wearing the ochre robe (*kāsāva-vattha*) disappears; 5) *dhātu-antaradhāna*: the Buddha’s relics all disappear.

<sup>193</sup> Vin. II. 256. [Trans.: *garudhamma*: ‘principle requiring weighty consideration’, ‘principle requiring sincere respect’, ‘important principle’.]

*The Blessed One said: ‘Ānanda, if women do not go forth from the household life into the homeless life in the Dhamma and Discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata, the sublime teachings<sup>194</sup> will last long, the true Dhamma<sup>195</sup> will remain for one thousand years. But if women go forth from the household life into the homeless life in the Dhamma and Discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata, the sublime teachings will not last long, and the true Dhamma will remain for only five hundred years.’*

*Ānanda, just as people build a dam by a large reservoir, preventing the water from spilling out, so too, I have prescribed for the bhikkhunis the eight important principles, which they should not transgress throughout their lifetime.*

The commentaries explain this passage by saying that, if the Buddha had not laid down the garudhammas, with the going forth of women into the homeless life, the true Dhamma, which would otherwise have endured for 1,000 years, would only remain for 500 years.<sup>196</sup> But having established the garudhammas, the true Dhamma will endure for the full 1,000 years.

The definition of the true Dhamma enduring for 1,000 years is that, during this time, there will still be arahants who have realized discriminative knowledge,<sup>197</sup> that is, there will still be individuals whose realization is utterly thorough and complete.

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<sup>194</sup> Trans.: *brahmacariya*: the holy life; the Buddhist teachings.

<sup>195</sup> *Saddhamma*.

<sup>196</sup> VinA. VI. 1290; AA. IV. 137.

<sup>197</sup> *Paṭisambhidā*.

In the second millennium after the Buddha's passing away, there will only be arahants who are 'dry-insight practitioners',<sup>198</sup> that is, they will not be endowed with extraordinary qualities or special abilities.

In the third millennium, there will be realized beings whose highest level of realization is non-returner (*anāgāmi*).

In the fourth millennium, there will be realized beings whose highest level of realization is once-returner (*sakadāgāmi*).

Finally, in the fifth millennium, there will be realized beings whose highest level of realization is stream-entry (*sotāpanna*).

The commentators conclude that realization<sup>199</sup> of the true Dhamma will occur during this period of five thousand years but not afterwards.

According to the principle of the disappearance of realization,<sup>200</sup> after 2,000 BE (1457 CE), the highest realization possible as an awakened being is as a non-returner. Both monastics and laypeople will only be able to reach this particular level of realization (irrespective of whether one is ordained or not).

If one adopts this principle that at the present time no arahants exist, one need not worry about the teaching stating that a layperson who realizes arahantship must be ordained on that very day or else enter final Nibbāna.

Note that some commentarial passages elsewhere contradict the interpretation mentioned above. One passage,

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<sup>198</sup> *Sukkhā-vipassaka*.

<sup>199</sup> *Paṭivedha*.

<sup>200</sup> *Paṭivedha-antaradhāna*.

while explaining another subject, moves into a discussion of the subject of ‘disappearance’ and states that during the first millennium there will be arahants who have realized discriminative knowledge, during the second millennium there will be arahants endowed with the six kinds of supreme knowledge,<sup>201</sup> during the third millennium there will be arahants endowed with the threefold knowledge,<sup>202</sup> during the fourth millennium there will be arahants who are dry-insight practitioners, and during the fifth millennium there will be individuals who abide by the Pāṭimokkha.<sup>203</sup>

According to this latter interpretation, there could still be arahants alive today. But the primary and most widely accepted interpretation is the former one, stating that no-one in the current era realizes the fruit of arahantship.

Whichever interpretation is correct, the aim here has been to present a comprehensive account of the teaching that arahant laypeople must be ordained on that very day or else attain final Nibbāna.

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<sup>201</sup> *Abhiññā.*

<sup>202</sup> *Vijjā.*

<sup>203</sup> DA. III. 899.

Chapter 4:

## The Priority of Developing into an Awakened Being Irrespective of Gender

Having replied to Dr. Martin's additional inquiry about the claim that laypeople realizing arahantship must ordain on that very day or else enter final Nibbāna, it occurred to me that there are other related subjects that would be useful to address in this context. Dr. Martin's questions all revolve around the topic of bhikkhunis. In the discussion of bhikkhunis, it is common for people to link this topic with the challenges facing women in general.

As described in the book *The Buddhist Discipline in Relation to Bhikkhunis*, the questions here pertaining to women have nothing to do with women's rights. The impediment to present-day bhikkhuni ordinations is not a problem of rights; women have had the undisputed right to be ordained as Buddhist nuns for thousands of years. If there is a problem of rights, it has to do with the rights of those individuals who could potentially confer ordination on women. If one adheres or holds true to the prescriptions preserved in the Vinaya, the

bhikkhus are entitled to confer ordination on those women who have already been accepted by the bhikkhuni sangha. For this reason, if no bhikkhuni sangha exists, there is the question whether it would be a transgression or infringement of their authority if the bhikkhus were to go ahead and confer ordination regardless. As this topic has been discussed in the previous book, we can leave it aside for the time being.

The topics to be addressed below have to do with broader issues, including the matter of taking birth as a woman or a man. For instance, what are the causes for people to be born with distinctive genders? These topics also cover the general relationship between men and women.

## **Regardless of Gender, Live a Good Life**

Setting aside the question of being born with a distinctive gender (which is discussed below), the more important matter is how people, both women and men, can live a wholesome life.

The world of human beings can be divided into the two genders—or biological sexes—of women and men.<sup>204</sup> (Even if one includes other gender identities, they all begin with or circle around the two main genders or biological sexes.) And in terms of the relationship between these two genders, there are two main kinds of interaction, namely: competitive-domineering and egalitarian-cooperative.

Most often, when there is a sense of separation or dissimilarity, people tend to get competitive and domineering.

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<sup>204</sup> Trans.: as mentioned at the beginning of the book, unless otherwise specified I use the term 'gender' to refer to biological sex.

Sometimes they even compete in order to get equal: they vie for equality. This creates an egalitarian-competitive interaction, and it often then spills over into some form of mutual intimidation. As a result, such people never achieve a truly egalitarian-cooperative relationship.

Having said this, human beings are also endowed with intelligence and an ability to discern the dangers of competition and intimidation. Likewise, they are often able to recognize the advantages of mutual assistance and cooperation. Moreover, human beings are capable of learning and self-improvement, thus enabling them to pass beyond competition/intimidation to a state of equality/cooperation.

When this transformation takes place, it can be compared to the development from being an ordinary, unawakened person<sup>205</sup> to being an enlightened one.<sup>206</sup> Bringing such development to completion, however, is rare and difficult. As mentioned above, people more frequently deviate into an egalitarian-competitive interaction.

The type of relationship between women and men becomes clearly evident when people get married. When they live together as a couple, if they have not cultivated a strong basis of mindfulness and wisdom, they will maintain a traditional status quo which often leads to a competitive-domineering relationship.

This status quo is partly determined by the nature of women's and men's physical bodies. As a generalization, the female sex is characterized by the physical traits of delicate-

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<sup>205</sup> *Puthujjana*.

<sup>206</sup> *Ariyapuggala*.

ness, slightness, softness, and beauty, in turn promoting such mental qualities as gentleness, leniency, refinement, and tenderness, which are suitable for childbearing, childbirth, and child rearing.

The male sex, on the other hand, is characterized by the physical traits of strength, sturdiness, brawn, and grit, promoting the mental qualities of daring, tenacity, courage, and vim, suitable for fighting, domination, and protection.

When women and men live together in marriage (or as life partners), their contrasting attributes often complement one another, combining into a unified whole.

A good example of this is when a woman goes through pregnancy and rears a child who is the offspring of both parents. This child-rearing requires many years of careful attention. It can be very difficult for the woman to perform this task and make all ends meet entirely by herself. Traditionally, the husband is there as protector and provider, obtaining food and other necessities and overcoming any dangers and hardships that the family face. Working together, the parents can lead the family to wellbeing and prosperity.

Due to the nature of being unenlightened, however, instead of cooperating, men and women may allow their innate gender attributes to cause conflict and discord, leading to a competitive-domineering relationship. Men, who are usually physically stronger, often bully, coerce, and intimidate women to keep them in check. And women, although usually physically weaker, may use the power of their physical beauty and sexual appeal to captivate, control, and manipulate men.

When a society evolves and is thus referred to as ‘cultured’



or ‘civilized’, people have a clearer understanding of what constitutes harmonious social life. They recognize that there should be equality in society. At the very least they see the dangers of mutual oppression and mistreatment. As a result, they set down a code or constitution of social living.<sup>207</sup> Members of society are encouraged to uphold this code of behaviour founded on wise observation and reflection, instead of simply following personal preferences and aversions.

Although a society may have established a beneficial code of social living, in most cases, many people in that society will not have accessed the wisdom and understanding on which the code is based. They are still caught up in personal likes and dislikes, and thus there is repeated transgression of the code. Instead of feeling truly satisfied or content with it, they feel resistance and annoyance. They are not happy with it because they are still bound by their mental defilements. One could say that their spiritual cultivation is inadequate.

In Buddhism, therefore, people are encouraged to engage in spiritual development in order to be free from an unenlightened mode of catering to preference and aversion. In addition, one shouldn’t simply follow an ethical code blindly, by harbouring a sense of resistance and compulsion. One should develop within oneself the wisdom that is the true basis for such a code. One’s willingness to follow the code is then not driven by reluctance or begrudging compliance. Rather, one harmonizes with such a ‘legal code’: a set of laws (*nīti*) grounded in truth (*dhamma*). One follows this code wholeheartedly, without any sense of coercion. One realizes that

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<sup>207</sup> *Nīti-dhamma*.

these rules and prescriptions are indeed shared conventions and representations of peaceful coexistence.

At this stage, one elevates from simply maintaining a set of social legal prescriptions<sup>208</sup> to embodying noble qualities<sup>209</sup> of an awakened being.<sup>210</sup> Here, a person has surpassed the state of an ordinary, unawakened being<sup>211</sup> and developed to the state of an awakened being for which there is true equality and integrity.

When people embody noble qualities and live in a society endowed with a wholesome ethical code—whereby truth and discipline are well-integrated—one can say that personal and social development have been realized. People have successfully established an advantageous ‘Dhamma-vinaya’.<sup>212</sup>

When addressing the two sexes, especially in regard to living together intimately, the scriptures encourage both an external cultivation based on an ethical code and an internal cultivation leading to a realization of noble qualities. One then passes beyond a way of life seeking pleasure in material things to a consummation of wisdom. One surpasses temporary material gratification and arrives at a lasting inner happiness.

As this discussion has carried over from the subject of bhikkhunis, I will now focus on the spiritual development of women, in particular those women leading a household life.

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<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>209</sup> *Ariya-dhamma*; attributes of a noble being.

<sup>210</sup> *Ariyapuggala*; awakened being.

<sup>211</sup> *Puthujjana*.

<sup>212</sup> Trans.: in line with the previous discussion, the words ‘Dhamma’ and ‘vinaya’ here are used in a general sense without limiting their meaning to a Buddhist context.

## Developing Both as Life Partners and as Noble Beings

Following is a teaching by the Buddha describing how a woman develops into a noble, awakened being:

*There are five powers of a woman. What are the five? The power of beauty, the power of wealth, the power of relatives, the power of children, the power of virtuous conduct.<sup>213</sup> When a woman possesses these five powers, she looks after the household with confidence....*

*When a woman possesses these five powers, she [can] look after the household winning over her husband....*

*When a woman possesses these five powers, she [can] look after the household dominating her husband, keeping him under control....*

*When a man possesses one power, he wields power over a woman. What is that one power? The power of authority.<sup>214</sup> When a woman is ruled by the power of authority, neither the power of beauty, nor the power of wealth, nor the power of relatives, nor the power of children, nor the power of virtue can rescue her.<sup>215</sup>*

A woman can be considered complete when she possesses these five powers. But of these five, the power of virtue is chief and decisive. If a woman possesses the power of beauty, wealth, relatives, or children, but she lacks the power of virtue—she is ill-mannered, of immoral conduct, and causes

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<sup>213</sup> Rūpa-bala, bhoga-bala, nāti-bala, putta-bala, & sila-bala, respectively.

<sup>214</sup> Issariya-bala.

<sup>215</sup> S. IV. 246-48.

harm—her husband’s relatives will generally not accept her into the family. Conversely, although she may lack the other four powers, if she possesses the power of virtue—she is kind, dignified, well-mannered, and morally upright—the relatives will generally embrace her.

At the time of death, the first four powers are unable to lead her to heaven, because a good destination, a heavenly world, is reached through the power of virtue. Moreover, when a woman observes the five precepts, she looks after the household with confidence.

In any case, all of the aforementioned points pertain to ordinary, unawakened women—to womenfolk<sup>216</sup> in general. The Buddha encouraged women to develop themselves higher, to the level of an awakened being. In this context, a noble female disciple<sup>217</sup> develops herself by way of ‘noble growth’;<sup>218</sup> she develops the five factors of cultivation,<sup>219</sup> namely:

**1. Cultivation of faith** (*saddhā*): she is endowed with faith accompanied by wisdom; her faith is grounded in reason; she has a steadfast understanding of the virtues of the Triple Gem; she cherishes the Dhamma and holds it in highest esteem; she is fully confident in the efficacy of good deeds; she aims for results through determined effort; her power and radiance of mind stem from an unswerving determination to reach the supreme goal.

This first factor is of vital importance. It is the basis that

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<sup>216</sup> *Mātugāma*.

<sup>217</sup> *Ariya-sāvikā*.

<sup>218</sup> *Ariyā vaḍḍhi*; cultivation by the noble ones.

<sup>219</sup> *Vaḍḍhi*; fulfilment, increase, profit, gain.

gives meaning and direction to one's life. By energetically following in this direction, one can improve oneself and reach one's desired goals.

**2. Cultivation of virtuous conduct (*sīla*):** she lives a righteous life, free of enmity, exploitation, and hostility; she abstains from aggression; she is disciplined; she is established in the five precepts and in right livelihood; she is skilled at communication; she speaks honestly, in moderation, and courteously; she speaks words of reconciliation; she speaks polite and pleasing words.<sup>220</sup>

**3. Cultivation of learning (*suta*):** she is intent on learning and acquiring knowledge; she listens and is receptive to new information, reflecting in order to gain insight; she knows those things that should be practised to bring about improvement in her life; she shares her knowledge with her relatives and with others worthy of counsel.

**4. Cultivation of relinquishment (*cāga*):** she is generous; she takes interest in the joys and sorrows of others; she is considerate and openminded; she is ready to assist and benefit others. Her relinquishment is both outer and inner: outwardly, she relinquishes material things; inwardly, she relinquishes avarice and greed. She lives the household life free from the stain of miserliness.

**5. Cultivation of wisdom (*paññā*):** she sees things according to the truth; she has insight into the world and into human life; she knows how to conduct her life in a correct and wholesome way, preventing problems from arising and not sowing

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<sup>220</sup> *Kiriyā-vāda*. [Trans.: traditionally, the Pali term *kiriyā-vāda* means 'doctrine of action'. In Thai the term has developed an additional meaning of 'polite speech'.]

seeds of suffering; she is skilled at analysis and investigation, applying proper means to dispel affliction, manage her duties, make plans, and succeed at her work.

A noble, awakened woman who has cultivated these five factors is designated as someone who captures the essence or acquires the best of human life.

Within a Buddhist context there are different aspects to women's development:

- The Buddha referred to womenfolk generally as *mātuḡāma*; he referred to awakened female disciples as *ariya-sāvika*.
- Skilled, unawakened women possess the five powers (*bala*); awakened women possess the five factors of growth and cultivation (*vaḍḍhi*).
- Unawakened women often consider how to compete with and dominate men by using the five powers. Awakened women have gone beyond this competitive-domineering dynamic. Their minds are focused on growing in the five factors of cultivation. If they find a man who is also dedicated to this spiritual cultivation, together they can achieve a state of unity and equality.

Awakened women need not forsake the five powers. But instead of using them to drive the competitive-domineering dynamic, they are able to change course, using them as a catalyst and support for spiritual cultivation.

- Although an unawakened woman may be fully endowed with the five powers, succeed at running a household, or even gain the upper hand and dominate her husband, these are all relatively superficial, mundane accomplishments.

They do not pertain to the essence of human life. Awakened women who have developed the five factors of spiritual growth are said by the Buddha to have realized the essential meaning of human life; their life is not lived in vain.

In the context of unawakened beings, men's worldly development differs from that of women. But on the level of awakened beings, the spiritual development of both genders is the same; and the attributes of awakened beings, regardless of gender, are equal.

When a man and a woman live together in marriage, if they are both awakened to the level of stream-entry, they may be endowed with the 'spiritual attributes of life partners' (*samajīvi-dhamma*).<sup>221</sup> Here, they have developed specific spiritual virtues to the same degree.

At the time of the Buddha, there was a notable married couple, both of whom were stream-enterers. They loved each other very much and they made the wish that wherever they might be reborn in the future, they would like to meet each other again. They even expressed this wish to the Buddha. During this encounter, the Buddha presented the teaching on the virtues of compatibility:

*On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at the Deer Park of Bhesakaḷāvana near the city of Sumsumāragira in the Bhagga country. Then, in the morning, the Blessed One ... went to the residence of the householder Nakulapitā.*

*Then the householder Nakulapitā and his wife Nakulamātā approached the Blessed One.... The householder Nakulapitā said to the Blessed One:*

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<sup>221</sup> Trans.: also known as the 'virtues of compatibility' or 'qualities for a good match'.

*‘Lord, ever since the young maiden Nakulamātā was brought home to me when I was still young, I have never been aware of acting unfaithfully towards her even in my thoughts, let alone in my deeds. Lord, our wish is to be together so long as this life lasts and in the future life as well.’*

*[The wife Nakulamātā said the same thing.]*

*The Blessed One replied: ‘Householders, if both husband and wife wish to see each other not only in this present life but also in future lives, they should have the same faith, the same virtuous behaviour, the same generosity, and the same wisdom.’<sup>222</sup>*

*Both husband and wife are endowed with faith and responsive to the needs of others. They maintain virtuous conduct and live righteously. They exchange words expressing their mutual love. Many benefits and blessings accrue to them and they dwell at ease. Their enemies become discouraged. They are endowed with equal virtue. Having practised the Dhamma in this world—equal in conduct and behaviour—they rejoice in divine union, delighting in things beautiful—gladdened and uplifted.<sup>223</sup>*

At that time, Nakulapitā and Nakulamātā—both stream-enterers—were advanced in age, yet their love for one another was constant. Both of them were praised by the Buddha as foremost disciples: Nakulapitā was foremost amongst the laymen disciples as being in a close relationship to the Buddha, and Nakulamātā was foremost amongst the laywomen disciples in the same respect.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> *Sama-saddhā, sama-sīla, sama-cāga, and sama-paññā, respectively.*

<sup>223</sup> A. II. 61-62.

<sup>224</sup> A. I. 25-26



## Noble Disciples Help Foster Societies Grounded in Equality

The prefix *sama* in the term *samajīvi-dhamma* can be translated as ‘equal’. *Samajīvi-dhamma* can thus be translated as ‘virtues of those on an equal standing’. *Sama* can also be translated as ‘well-matched’ or ‘complementary’, rendering the translation of the term as ‘virtues of compatibility’ or ‘qualities for a good match’.

In the same vein, instead of saying that these life partners have the same faith, virtuous behaviour, generosity, and wisdom, one can say that they have compatible or matching faith, virtuous behaviour, generosity and wisdom.

The important point here is that the Pali word *sama* can be translated in different ways, as ‘equal’, ‘united’, ‘in concord’, ‘matching’, ‘corresponding’, ‘compatible’, and so on. All of these definitions have a similar nuance of meaning. For instance, people who are equal are compatible. People who experience the same joys and sorrows are natural companions: they share similar experiences.

Nowadays, these corresponding nuances of meaning may be difficult for people to tie together. This may be because today’s society is overly swayed by a business-minded attitude. People give too much emphasis and importance to personal profit. When they hear the word ‘equality’, they tend to associate this with personal demands, rivalry, disputes, and competitiveness. Here, rather than expand on egalitarian-competitive relationships, we will focus more on an egalitarian-cooperative dynamic.

Note that the process of ‘noble growth’,<sup>225</sup> whereby a woman evolves from being an ordinary woman to a noble female disciple, contains five factors: faith, virtuous conduct, learning, generosity, and wisdom. Yet in the ‘spiritual attributes of life partners’<sup>226</sup> only four of these factors are found.

The missing factor is learning.<sup>227</sup> Why is it missing? The answer is that, although it is essential for everyone to acquire knowledge and information through formal learning, it is not necessary for everyone to learn exactly the same things or the same subject matters.

For instance, one person may study and gain mastery in astronomy, acquiring a knowledge of the moon, planets, black holes, and so forth. Another person may be highly skilled at cooking, without any knowledge of the stars. But this poses no problem. It is only with the other four factors that a compatibility is required for the two people to live as life partners. In respect to shared wisdom, for example, they need, at the very least, to be able to discuss matters and understand each other clearly.

Moreover, when two people have learned different subjects, these varying bodies of knowledge can become complementary. Knowing different things becomes an advantage.

In addition, some people have scant formal learning but they possess clear and astute wisdom. All they require is to listen to a brief teaching and they understand the gist

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<sup>225</sup> *Ariyā vaḍḍhi*.

<sup>226</sup> *Samajīvi-dhamma*; ‘virtues of compatibility’.

<sup>227</sup> *Suta*; literally: ‘[that which has been] heard’; data, information, knowledge, etc. acquired through learning.

immediately. Other people have extensive formal education and are decorated with numerous degrees, but are unable to apply any of this acquired knowledge to truly succeed in life.

There are many examples of this apparent paradox in the suttas. Some disciples have an exceptional memory, having studied numerous scriptural texts, but their knowledge remains at the level of rote learning. They do not penetrate the true essence of the teachings. No matter how many years they study, they do not get anywhere. Other disciples are sharp-witted. They listen to a single stanza by the Buddha and attain the eye of Dhamma, awakened on the spot.

In sum, the four virtues of compatibility must be well-matched and balanced. Otherwise, a marriage is unlikely to be stable and enduring.

On the level of awakened beings, spiritual maturity is equal for women and men. Such equality is an inherent part of nature. The path is the same, up to the final goal, as described by the Buddha in the Accharā Sutta:

*‘The straight way’ that path is called,  
And ‘fearless’ is its destination....  
I say this Dhamma vehicle,  
Has right view guiding as charioteer.  
One who has such a vehicle,  
Whether a woman or a man,  
Has, by means of this vehicle,  
Arrived at the abode of Nibbāna.<sup>228</sup>*

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<sup>228</sup> S. I. 33.

When such compatibility exists, the spiritual practice of women and men occurs in unison. Stream-enterers, for instance, most of whom lead the household life, and are often married, live with their life partners in harmony. Their equality is grounded in their shared joy, cooperation, and contentment. And they can expect to meet again in future lives, wherever they may be born, as in the case of Nakulapitā and Nakulamātā.

As Buddhists we should give this degree of spiritual development special attention. By doing so, we can help strengthen the foundation of society. For instance, we should praise those exemplary married couples, like Nakulapitā and Nakulamātā, who walk in the footsteps of the noble ones, as described and lauded by the Buddha.

Some outstanding laypeople cultivate more refined aspects of calm and insight,<sup>229</sup> as demonstrated by such stories of the Buddha praising a specific laywoman disciple as foremost in practising the jhānas or praising a specific layman disciple who had attained the state of non-returning as foremost in those who give Dhamma teachings. Many lay disciples at the time of the Buddha were great teachers, imparting their wisdom to the fourfold assembly,<sup>230</sup> including giving teachings to the monastic sangha. These are indeed important individuals, but they are exceptional.

In any case, we should not forget the wider Buddhist assembly, especially the laypeople who make up the majority of the Buddhist faithful. We should build a firm social foundation, beginning with families and the life of married couples, who

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<sup>229</sup> *Samatha-vipassanā*.

<sup>230</sup> Trans.: *buddha-parisā*: bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, laymen, and laywomen.

are at the centre, the wellspring, of the community of people commencing on the Buddhist path.

Let us honour the life of those married stream-enterers living as householders who live together in virtue and solidarity, delight in harmony, and maintain their enduring love for one another until their dying days. Lift these awakened lifetime partners up as role models, cherishing them as symbols of peace and dignity that can be recalled at any time.

The Buddha himself gave this matter great importance. This is reflected in the monastic discipline, which contains a rule stating that if a family is rich in devotion, but poor in material wealth, the sangha can formally declare the members of this family as 'trainees',<sup>231</sup> thus prohibiting bhikkhus from troubling them for food.<sup>232</sup> This story indicates how as Buddhists we should pay close attention to the basic dynamics of society.

The spiritual development of women and men merges at the point where they pass beyond the stage of an unawakened person and reach that of an awakened being. Women and men then share a state of equality and harmony, not only in family life but in the context of society as a whole.

In any case, as Buddhists we aim for this state of equality. In the case that we have not yet collectively achieved it, as is the case now since most people have not developed themselves to an adequate degree, we should acknowledge conditions as they presently exist as well as consider how we may desire them to be in the future.

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<sup>231</sup> *Sekha*. [Trans.: generally, this term is used to refer to awakened individuals from stream-enterers up to non-returns.]

<sup>232</sup> This formal declaration is known as *sekha-sammati*.

We can divide human social development into three stages, corresponding to the level of development by specific individuals in society:

**1. Stage of untrained ordinary people:** at this stage, people act by following personal likes and dislikes. They use physical strength<sup>233</sup> to compete with, bully, dominate, abuse, and violate one another. At this stage, people lack equality; instead, they abide in a state of mutual intimidation and coercion.

**2. Stage of the rule of law (*nīti-dhamma*):** here, people apply wisdom based on inherent virtues stemming from a degree of spiritual development. They lay down rules and prescriptions as an ethical code, coming to a mutual agreement to follow this code. They cease seeking control through bodily force based on personal desires. They live under the rule of law and respect the law as the governing authority. The country they live in is subject to the laws and legal policies agreed upon and determined by its citizens. At this stage, people are granted equality as dictated by their constitution, but the state of equality tends to still be instilled with competition and a vying for parity.

**3. Stage of embodying noble qualities (*ariya-dhamma*):** having set down an authoritative legal code for society, wise individuals develop themselves to the extent whereby they live in harmony with it. Their actions are guided by legal principles as if they are an inherent part of their being. The rules and prescriptions are seen simply as conventions set down for harmonious coexistence in line with their true objective. They are not considered constrictions meant to

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<sup>233</sup> *Kāya-bala; bāhu-bala*; 'bodily force.'

hold people in check and to demand obedience. At this stage, people are equal according to truth, corresponding to their individual spiritual accomplishments. This is genuine equality grounded in social harmony.

This third stage is naturally the most desirable as it fosters virtue and stability in society. At this point, people are truly equal and harmonious, united in cooperation and concord.

The best that present-day civilization can hope for, it seems, is the second stage. Indeed, we see that this mode of having society be governed by laws, however shaky, is strongly emphasized and endorsed.<sup>234</sup> Under these circumstances, society is subject primarily to legal principles and countries take the form of rule-of-law states.<sup>235</sup>

Having said this, the rule-of-law second stage assists in promoting harmonious social coexistence. Moreover, it acts as a map, guiding people to discern the essentials pertaining to the path and goal of spiritual development. The legal principles become integrated into people's everyday way of life, and truth is elevated and given prominence over selfish desire. Here, the second stage dovetails with the third. Externally, the truth inherent in laws is given priority; internally, the truth of awakened beings governs people's hearts.

If people fail to recognize this link, and therefore do not internalize these legal principles, they will not see the importance of developing noble qualities and they will feel constrained by the rule of law. Moreover, it will be

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<sup>234</sup> Trans.: although the author is primarily focusing on Thai society, an emphasis on the rule of law is an important part of modern-day globalization.

<sup>235</sup> *Niti-ratṭha*; Rechtsstaat.

increasingly common that people will attempt to transgress the social laws due to ignorance and a lack of appreciation for self-improvement.

In today's society the rule of law is swayed by two opposing forces. From one side there are people endeavouring to refine noble qualities. On the other side are people who act by following selfish desire, whereby social laws are not seen as essential guiding principles but rather as constraints to be observed against one's will.

In this environment, the power of people striving for noble qualities is generally losing out to the power of selfishness. Few people have the awareness and appreciation of their spiritual potential, let alone the commitment to actualize it. The majority of people are dragged down to the level of coarse desire and ignorance. Society as a whole thus struggles to become truly civilized. Even remaining established in a basic rule of law is extremely difficult. And when people lack self-development, social equality is unstable, maintained through control and coercion and prone to become undone at any moment.

When society moves in such a direction, law and order is increasingly maintained through physical force, using personal desires based on ignorance as the benchmark. This dynamic leads to a distinct inequality in society and competition and domination become rampant.

Such a set of circumstances has an impact on the status and promotion of women, because their social equality is supported by the rule of law. Even if their equality is initially based on a competitive relationship and still evolving into a genuine



parity on the level of ‘noble truth’,<sup>236</sup> without a legal code women can easily be stripped of any equality they have gained.

We should instil in people a sense of urgency for personal development and an awareness of the importance of fostering noble qualities. In this respect, women themselves should be particularly vigilant in regard to improving themselves and supporting the growth of others.

We establish legal codes to protect liberty and equal rights. But the rule of law is not a reliable or stable guarantee. Despite our efforts to establish a secure and reliable constitution or legal system, the rule of law is not an end in itself. Only noble qualities cultivated in the hearts of people can act as a genuine and reliable guarantee and protection for the rule of law.

If people in society fail to cultivate noble qualities, the rule of law will be precarious and insecure. This instability begins when people lack a basic love for truth and have no grounding in righteous principles. If they heedlessly neglect the cultivation of noble qualities, they themselves are responsible for the rule of law becoming unstable and eventually collapsing.

Genuine rule of law is not simply a set of decrees imposing a state of equality. Rather, it is a formal system designed to provide an opportunity to develop noble qualities, which in turn guarantee the reliability and sustainability of the rule of law itself.

Development in line with noble qualities must begin during the first stage of life, during childhood, when young people live at home with their parents. During these formative years,

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<sup>236</sup> *Ariya-dhamma.*

such qualities can be imbued into the core of young people's characters, thus shaping their lives.<sup>237</sup>

Without a doubt, the individuals at the centre of this training and education are women, namely, mothers. They share this task with men—the fathers—in regard to children's development, initiating and introducing the members of the new generation into true 'nobility'.

Here we are highlighting the role of women in their capacity as mothers within a household. Mothers are society's insurance and safeguard for instilling noble qualities in people. In cooperation with fathers, a successful development of these qualities begins with mothers' care, nurturing, and supervision within the family.

At the end of the day, women hold the fate of society in their hands. In this context, we should underscore the principles of noble growth<sup>238</sup> within women's spiritual development on the way to awakening. If a mother is a noble disciple, she will raise her children in line with the path of the awakened ones. Doing so, she will help build a truly civilized society.

To conclude, the importance of being a man or a woman does not lie at obtaining or guarding one's sense of equality. We should go beyond the status quo of competitive-domineering relationships, and expand our perspective, gaining insight into the truth of nature and thus deriving the maximum benefit that life has to offer.

The division into two biological sexes is part of nature. Although it is impossible to be both a man and a woman at the

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> *Ariyā vaḍḍhi*.

same time, people can integrate their individual attributes with members of the opposite sex, thus combining the dual attributes into a whole. Having said this, when people arrive at the 'state of awakening',<sup>239</sup> they all share a genuine equality grounded in truth.

Although unawakened beings must still deal with such issues as competition, domination, and protecting a sense of equality, they should reflect on how to integrate varying gender attributes in a way that generates optimum benefits for all, a process that depends in part on temporal and regional circumstances and on social conventions.

Awakened beings, who have obtained the supreme benefit from life, live and act harmoniously and appropriately in respect to all things. In terms of social conventions, they understand both their necessity and their true purpose. Unawakened beings should strive to reach this state of awakening, whereby all conflict and inequality is dispelled, culminating in wholeness and true equality.

## **Laying the Groundwork Biological Sex Is Open to Choice**

Why are some people born as women while others are born as men? What can be done as preparation if one wishes to be reborn as either a woman or a man? The answers to these questions conform to key principles outlined by the Buddha himself. For more clarity on this issue, let us look at the Buddha's teachings contained in the Saṃyoga Sutta:

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<sup>239</sup> *Ariya-bhāva*.

*Monks, I will teach you a Dhamma exposition on binding<sup>240</sup> and disengagement.<sup>241</sup> Listen and pay close attention....*

*A woman, monks, takes interest internally in her feminine faculty, her feminine comportment, her feminine bearing, her feminine appearance, her feminine demeanour, her feminine objects of desire, her feminine voice, her feminine ornamentation. She is attached to and delighted by these feminine attributes.*

*Thereupon, she takes interest externally in a man's masculine faculty, his masculine comportment, his masculine bearing, his masculine appearance, his masculine demeanour, his masculine objects of desire, his masculine voice, his masculine ornamentation. She is attached to and delighted by these masculine attributes.*

*Henceforth, she wishes externally for union and interaction with a man, and she wishes for the pleasure and joy that arises on account of such union and interaction.*

*Beings who are delighted with their femininity bring about ties of affection with men. It is in this way that a woman does not transcend her state of being a woman.*

*A man, monks, takes interest internally in his masculine faculty, his masculine comportment, his masculine bearing, his masculine appearance, his masculine demeanour, his masculine objects of desire, his masculine voice, his masculine ornamentation. He is attached to and delighted by these masculine attributes.*

*Thereupon, he takes interest externally in a woman's feminine faculty, her feminine comportment, her feminine bearing, her*

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<sup>240</sup> *Sañiyoga* ('attachment', 'connection').

<sup>241</sup> *Visañiyoga* ('release', 'disconnection').

*feminine appearance, her feminine demeanour, her feminine objects of desire, her feminine voice, her feminine ornamentation. He is attached to and delighted by these feminine attributes.*

*Henceforth, he wishes externally for union and interaction with a woman, and he wishes for the pleasure and joy that arises on account of such union and interaction.*

*Beings who are delighted with their masculinity bring about ties of affection with women. It is in this way that a man does not transcend his state of being a man.*

*Monks, this is how binding comes about.*

*And how does disengagement come about?*

*A woman, monks, does not take interest internally in her feminine faculty ... comportment ... bearing ... appearance ... demeanour ... objects of desire ... voice ... ornamentation. She is neither attached to nor delighted by these feminine attributes.*

*Thereupon, she does not take interest externally in a man's masculine faculty ... comportment ... bearing ... appearance ... demeanour ... objects of desire ... voice ... ornamentation. She is neither attached to nor delighted by these masculine attributes.*

*Henceforth, she does not wish externally for union and interaction with a man, and she does not wish for the pleasure and joy that arises on account of such union and interaction.*

*Beings who are not delighted with their femininity do not bring about ties of affection with men. It is in this way that a woman transcends her state of being a woman.*

*A man, monks, does not take interest internally in his masculine faculty ... comportment ... bearing ... appearance ... demeanour ... objects of desire ... voice ... ornamentation. He is neither attached*

*to nor delighted by these masculine attributes.*

*Thereupon, he does not take interest externally in a woman's feminine faculty ... comportment ... bearing ... appearance ... demeanour ... objects of desire ... voice ... ornamentation. He is neither attached to nor delighted by these feminine attributes.*

*Henceforth, he does not wish externally for union and interaction with a woman, and he does not wish for the pleasure and joy that arises on account of such union and interaction.*

*Beings who are not delighted with their masculinity do not bring about ties of affection with women. It is in this way that a man transcends his state of being a man.*

*This is how disengagement comes about.*

*This, monks, is the Dhamma exposition on binding and disengagement.<sup>242</sup>*

## **A Woman Born As a Male Deity**

There is an interesting story in the Tipiṭaka of a woman named Gopikā. Gopikā was very devoted to Buddhism and she conducted herself virtuously. She disengaged her mind from femininity and developed in her mind the state of being a man. After death, she was reborn as a male deity<sup>243</sup> in Tāvātimsa heaven.

While abiding in this heaven realm, this male deity met three devas of a lower rank who had formerly been bhikkhus whom he had known well during his previous human life as

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<sup>242</sup> A. IV. 57-9.

<sup>243</sup> Devaputta.

the woman Gopikā. These inferior devas were gandhabbas.<sup>244</sup> They had to serve on him since he was of a higher status. When he met them he felt sorrowful. He therefore spoke to them, urging them to reflect on their lot and to revive those spiritual qualities they had cultivated as bhikkhus while living in close proximity to the Buddha.

Here is an abridged version of this story as presented in the scriptures:

*Sakka, king of the gods, said to the Blessed One: ‘There was, Lord, right here in Kapilavatthu a Sakyan girl called Gopikā who had faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, and who observed the precepts scrupulously. She disengaged from the status of a woman and developed the thought of becoming a man. Then, after her death, she went to heaven, being reborn among the Thirty-Three Gods, as one of our sons. In that realm he is known as Gopaka the son of the devas.’<sup>245</sup>*

*‘Also, there were three bhikkhus who, having practised the holy life under the Blessed Lord, had been reborn in the inferior state of gandhabbas. They were fully endowed with the five desirable and alluring sense objects,<sup>246</sup> and acted as our attendants and servants.*

*‘When they had entered into our service, Gopaka rebuked them, saying: “What do you have to show for yourselves, sirs? Is this what you get from listening to the Blessed One’s teaching?*

*“I was a woman who had faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, and who observed the precepts scrupulously....*

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<sup>244</sup> Trans.: heavenly musicians.

<sup>245</sup> Gopaka-devaputta.

<sup>246</sup> Pañca-kāmaguṇa: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile objects.

*I went to heaven, being reborn among the Thirty-Three Gods.... The host of devas know me as Gopaka the son of the devas. But you, having practised the holy life under the Blessed One, have been reborn in the inferior state of gandhabbas.*

*“It is a sorry sight for us to see our Dhamma companions reborn in the inferior state of gandhabbas.”*

*‘And being thus admonished, two of those gandhabbas immediately came to their senses, and so attained to the Realm of the Retinue of Brahma. But one of them remained dwelling in the sensual sphere.’<sup>247</sup>*

*Gopaka spoke: ‘Disciple once of Him-Who-Sees, the name I bore then was Gopikā. In Buddha, Dhamma firmly trusting, I served the Sangha joyfully.*

*‘On account of the Lord Buddha’s supreme teaching, I am mighty, son of Lord Sakka, resplendent, in the Threefold Heaven.’<sup>248</sup> Here, the devas know me as Gopaka-devaputta.*

*‘Then familiar monks I saw, disciples of Lord Gotama, who had joined the host of gandhabbas. In the past, when I had human birth, we had supplied them with food and drink, and had looked after them, washing and anointing their feet when they visited our home.*

*‘Had these venerable sirs no ears, so that they failed to grasp the Buddha’s teachings? The Dhamma, well-proclaimed by He-Who-Knows-and-Sees, is to be experienced individually by the wise.*

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<sup>247</sup> *kāma-bhava*. [Trans.: the sphere of existence for beings who are still caught up in sensuality. There are eleven such spheres: the four lower worlds (*apāya-bhūmi*); the human world; and the six heavenly realms, from the realm of the Four Great Kings to the realm of gods who lord over the creation of others.]

<sup>248</sup> Trans.: *tidiva*: another name for Tāvātimsa heaven.



*‘I, who served these venerable sirs, listened to the wise words of the noble ones, and so am born, a son of Lord Sakka, mighty and resplendent, in the Threefold Heaven.*

*‘Whereas you, sirs, though you attended the Noble Lord Buddha closely and led the supreme life he taught, have reappeared in humble state, and reached an unseemly, unbecoming birth.*

*‘A sorry sight it is to see one’s Dhamma-fellows sunk so low that, gandhabba-spirits, you but come to wait upon the gods.*

*‘While as for me—notice the contrast! From household life, and female, I am now reborn a male, a god, fully endowed with celestial bliss!’*

*When thus rebuked by Gopaka, disciple of the Buddha, with a sense of urgency they all replied: ‘Alas, let’s go and strive with diligence, and be no longer others’ servants!’*

*And of the three, two marshalled energy, and called to mind Lord Gotama’s word. They released their minds bound to the pleasure of that realm, discerning the danger inherent in all sensuality. Like a bull elephant rending all restraining bonds, they severed the fetters of lust<sup>249</sup> and shackles of sense desire<sup>250</sup>—the noose of Māra so difficult to escape—and passed beyond the gods of the Thirty-Three....*

*Gopaka said to Lord Sakka: ‘In the world of men a Buddha, King of Men, called the Sakyan Sage, has gained mastery over lust, and these his pupils, who had fallen away from mindfulness, have now regained it with my help.*

*‘Though one of them is left behind and still among gandhabbas*

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<sup>249</sup> *Kāma-saññojana.*

<sup>250</sup> *Kāma-bandhana.*

*dwells, these two, setting their sights on the path to awakening and relentless in their meditation, [ascend to the host of Brahmas, as if] spurning the gods!*

*The Dhamma proclaimed in this dispensation bears such fruit; hence, no disciple harbours any doubt. To him who has crossed the flood and made an end of doubt, our homage due, the Buddha, Victor, Lord, we give.'*

*[Lord Sakka said to the Buddha:] 'Of the three gandhabba-spirits, two of them realized the teachings of the Lord and attained a superior state, gaining a celestial body in the Realm of the Retinue of Brahma and reaching eminence. We have come, O Sorrowless Lord, that we may gain that truth, and, if you will give us leave, to put our questions to the Blessed Lord.'*

(From here, the sutta continues with a series of answers by the Buddha to Sakka's questions.)<sup>251</sup>

Gopikā-sakyadhītā, who became Gopaka-devaputta, was a witness to the Buddha's teachings on being born as the opposite sex, according to the principles of binding and disengagement outlined in the Saṃyoga Sutta mentioned above. This matter pertains to a natural process according to causes and conditions; it is impartial and unbiased.

If one wishes to escape from the gender conditions one is subject to, it is necessary to stop attaching to these conditions and to disengage from them. As in the story of Gopikā/Gopaka above, this act of disengagement is generally described as follows: 'She disengages from the state of being a woman and

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<sup>251</sup> D. II. 271-72. [Trans.: as a template for this translation I have relied on the text in 'Thus Have I Heard: The Long Discourses of the Buddha' translated by Maurice Walshe (Wisdom Publications © 1987). Note that Sakka is another name for Indra.]

develops the thought of being a man.<sup>252</sup>

There are simpler translations for this phrase. For instance, following the Thai Pali text: ‘Disengaging from the female mind, one cultivates the male mind’; or following the Burmese Pali text: ‘Disengaging from femininity, one cultivates masculinity.’ Reverse the genders in the case that someone wishes to be reborn as a woman.

This principle applies to other things besides changing biological sex. If one wishes to escape from any state of existence or set of conditions, one must disengage one’s mind: to extricate one’s attachment and vested interest in that state. Deliverance is then possible.

Disengaging from femininity or masculinity without wishing for the opposite gender, for instance by disengaging from femininity without actively cultivating masculinity, may have the benefit of promoting a disengagement from sensuality in general or even from all forms of desire.

In such a case, one may not be reborn in a bodily form of the opposite biological sex, but instead surpass the realms of sensuality and be reborn as a Brahma god (who are allegedly genderless), or one may pass beyond gender altogether and attain the transcendent.<sup>253</sup> This depends on one’s degree of liberation.

There are examples in the scriptures of women disengaging from femininity while simultaneously refraining from cultivating masculinity, because they had the insight that they had

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<sup>252</sup> *Itthiccitaṃ virājetvā purisacittaṃ bhāvetvā*. Note the slight discrepancy in the Burmese Tipiṭaka: *Itthittaṃ virājetvā purisattaṃ bhāvetvā*.

<sup>253</sup> *Lokuttara*.

been born countless times in the past as both men and women. They therefore developed detachment, let go of both gender states, cultivated lovingkindness, and were reborn as Brahmas. This is evident, for instance, in the passage: ‘Disengaging from female mentality, I have attained to the Brahma world.’<sup>254</sup>

If one reaches a stage where one no longer welcomes taking birth as either sex, one has gone beyond disengaging from femininity or masculinity. One simply remains: ‘having disengaged from sensual lust’<sup>255</sup> or ‘having disengaged from sensual desire’.<sup>256</sup> One then enters the realm of the Brahma gods or one transcends the three planes of existence<sup>257</sup> and attains to the Ultimate,<sup>258</sup> depending on those conditions from which one is delivered. Take the example of one of the female elders who, ‘having disengaged from delight in becoming,’<sup>259</sup> was thus fully liberated as an arahant.

The commentaries and sub-commentaries sometimes describe the state of mind of a person taking birth as a specific sex by using the same terminology for someone completing an activity or fulfilling an aspect of Dhamma practice, namely, he or she is ‘intent on’<sup>260</sup> this particular state. The mind inclines towards this state; it aspires to, strives for, and focuses on it. This interpretation conforms to the outline presented in the Saṃyoga Sutta.

To sum up, if one desires to be reborn as a woman or man, one must sustain a one-pointed predilection and aspiration towards either femininity or masculinity.

<sup>254</sup> Pv. verse 385; *Itthiccitaṃ virājetvā brahmalokupagā ahu.*

<sup>255</sup> *Kāmarāgaṃ virājetvā.*

<sup>258</sup> *Lokuttara.*

<sup>256</sup> *Kāmacchandaṃ virājetvā.*

<sup>259</sup> *Bhave chandaṃ virājetvā*; Thīg. verse 14.

<sup>257</sup> *Tebhūmaka.*

<sup>260</sup> Trans.: *adhimutta-citta.*

## You Are What You Think

A related topic to choosing one's biological sex is the claim that men who commit adultery with other mens' wives<sup>261</sup> will be reborn as women. This claim has been repeated so often that some people have the misguided belief that being reborn as a woman is a result of sexual misconduct.

This matter is explained in the scriptures. In a nutshell, while fantasizing about women and the pleasures of sexual intimacy, adulterers harbour a deep-seated yearning and passion. They are preoccupied by these thoughts, immersed in anticipation of and desire for femininity and female attributes,<sup>262</sup> to the extent of losing sleep obsessing over women. Their minds proliferate over this subject to an extreme, which may end up generating a feminine mode of consciousness and leading to rebirth as a woman.

The married woman participating in this act of adultery has a contrasting state of mind. She reinforces an already-existing preoccupation with femininity and its accompanying characteristics. For instance, she considers ways to increase the man's infatuation, passion, and fixation. Her feminine mentality is strengthened.

When discussing this matter, it is important to be specific. It is an over-generalization to state that being born as a woman is the result of adultery. Rather, a man committing frequent adultery gravitates towards being reborn as a woman.

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<sup>261</sup> *Paradāra-kamma; paradārika-kamma*. Adultery falls under the category of sexual misconduct (*kāmesu-micchācāra*).

<sup>262</sup> 'Attribute': *indriya*.

In sum, this is a matter conforming to causes and conditions inherent in nature. In this circumstance, the primary agent is a person's state of mind. The prominent attributes of mind here are inclination, disposition, and longing, which influence and align all other mental factors into a single process fulfilling a person's desire and determination.

In brief, we are now discussing the way in which one conditions and shapes the mind. Having said this, reconditioning the mind is not easy. It is not simply a matter of wayward and muddled abandon.

An essential factor for generating firm intent and one-pointedness of mind is wisdom (*paññā*), which, similar to a charioteer, helps to guide one's way. Wisdom functions smoothly when there is an underlying basis of virtuous qualities in the mind.

A good example of conditioning the mind in relation to the physical body is the act of organ donation. Before donating their organs, people will have various views and considerations. Some may do it with only a vague idea of what they are doing. Some may do it simply because they see others doing it. If such an act is a true expression of generosity and relinquishment, however, it will be in harmony with a genuine natural process.

Under these circumstances, the donor has heard about people who have lost a particular organ and as a consequence must face great hardship and difficulty. They are in dire need of a replacement. If one were to donate this organ, the recipient would be freed from distress; he or she would be strong, happy and healthy again.

For instance, when donating an eye, one thinks of the blind, who live in darkness, are faced with numerous obstacles, and often appear disfigured to others. If they were to receive an eye or a pair of eyes, their world would be illuminated; they would be able to get around and engage in activities with comfort and ease, and their faces would appear healthy and attractive.<sup>263</sup>

Reflecting in this way, after having donated an organ, one witnesses how one has brought relief and joy to someone else who has overcome a serious misfortune and physical handicap and regained good health. The donor likewise experiences joy and satisfaction.

Within this natural process, wisdom acknowledges the increased good fortune of the organ recipient. Complementing wisdom is compassion, whereby one wishes for others to be freed from affliction and be healthy. Endowed with these two qualities, the mind is steady and agile. When one's wishes are fulfilled and one witnesses the other person cured of their handicap, one experiences delight, a vivid and potent outcome of generosity.

This is a way of developing positive habits and establishing wholesome avenues of thought. These mental habits then become pronounced. When one is reborn, this mental conditioning helps to shape the attributes of one's new life, bestowing on it such qualities as strength, health, and beauty. In the case of donating an eye, for instance, one may have keen

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<sup>263</sup> Trans.: there is no such thing as a whole-eye transplant. The optic nerve, which goes directly to the brain, cannot be replaced; and this nerve is damaged for many people who are blind. The eye transplant would not work without also transplanting the optic nerve. Currently, the only eye transplant procedure that is available is the cornea transplant, which replaces a diseased cornea with a donated cornea. For the most part, corneal donation comes from people who are dead. In very rare circumstances, a donor may be living.

vision and attractive, radiant eyes.

The Bodhisattva, for example, donated organs in many of his previous lives, thus developing the perfections.<sup>264</sup> Over numerous lifetimes, he gradually became more and more accomplished until he became the Perfectly Enlightened Buddha.

Some people may get confused, however, if they hear the claim that if one donates an organ one will be reborn in a body missing this particular organ. They feel disoriented and dumbfounded and consequently fail to cultivate virtuous qualities. When they are reborn, their deluded thinking may even lead them to be born without this organ!<sup>265</sup>

The subject of biological sex follows the same principles. Choosing a sex is not dependent simply on desire based on confused thinking. Sometimes the outcome is not how people want it to be. For example, one may be born with androgynous features, without a clear indication of being a distinct gender. Or instead of being born as an attractive man or woman, one's sexual features are coarse and ugly (especially if one's mind resembles that of a troll).

As mentioned above, one should cultivate wisdom accompanied by virtuous qualities. For instance, one should use reason to consider how being born with a specific gender gives one the opportunity to perform particular wholesome deeds and to benefit others in special ways. The choices one makes may be more conducive to fulfilling one's desired aspirations.

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<sup>264</sup> *Pāramī*.

<sup>265</sup> In this context, dreams may act as an unconscious reflection of people's conditioned train of thought.



In respect to every longterm goal, achieving success is no simple matter; it is not achieved by vague and unclear thinking and desire. To assist people in fulfilling shared ambitions, it is customary for societies to establish principles of behaviour and conduct.<sup>266</sup> Every society contains traditions based on observations of how certain kinds of behaviour give rise to skilful ways of acting and to wholesome states of mind. Following such behaviour leads to desired effects, even if people performing it are not fully aware of what they are doing.

To realize these effects one must act in a way that generates necessary causes and conditions, and such action in turn relies on a comprehensive understanding of truth.<sup>267</sup> Having said this, everyone has a personal responsibility. We need not wait for an external moral code to tell us what to do. Everyone has the inherent ability to shape his or her own life.

On a basic level, no matter what circumstances we face, what ups and downs we experience, we have the potential to maintain a sense of joy, clarity, and equilibrium. Even if one is ill, one can maintain a sense of inner ease independent of others. One need not get caught up in depression, boredom, loneliness, agitation, and so on. This is Dhamma practice. If one is capable of doing this, one possesses the skills to develop one's life and to prosper.

Shaping the mind in wholesome ways as described above can be seen as a test of one's resolve. If one can succeed at doing this, one's aspirations will come to fruition.

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<sup>266</sup> *Cariya-dhamma*. [Trans.: note that the Pali term *cariya-dhamma* ('code of conduct', 'ethical code') was coined later and is only common in Thailand (จริยธรรม; 'jariya-tam'). In Pali, the term used for conventional laws, regulations, codes, etc. is 'paññatti'.]

<sup>267</sup> *Sabhāva*.



## Appendix: Understanding the Commentaries

This appendix pertains to the earlier section titled ‘Did Ven. Sāriputta Deliberately Transgress a Vinaya Rule?’ dealing with the ordination of Ven. Revata. For this reason, it is helpful to read that section before this appendix.

Note that in this context the term ‘Dhammapada Commentary’ is more accurately described as ‘Scriptures Containing the Dhammapada Commentaries’. Why is this so?

Strictly speaking, the story of Ven. Revata, along with similar stories, are not commentarial (*aṭṭhakathā*). Instead, the story of Revata is found in the scriptures containing the commentaries. One can say that such stories accompany the commentaries.

In this case, what are the commentaries? Indeed, the term *aṭṭhakathā* reveals the answer to this question, but at first we may not recognize or understand it.

The term *aṭṭhakathā* literally means ‘exposition’ or ‘explanation’. For instance, beginning students of English may not understand the word ‘clock’. To explain the meaning, we may say that a clock is an ‘instrument for telling time’. The phrase ‘instrument for telling time’ is the ‘*aṭṭhakathā*’: the definition.

In any case, the Pali word *aṭṭhakathā* is specifically reserved to refer to explanations of the Buddha's words, or somewhat more broadly, to explanations of words and passages contained in the Tipiṭaka. The commentaries (*aṭṭhakathā*) are thus expositions and explanations of the text contained in the Tipiṭaka.

The Buddha's teachings, and other material from the Tipiṭaka, have been preserved in the Pali language. Therefore, the commentaries give explanations of Pali terms and phrases.

Take, for example, this short teaching by the Buddha:

*Tato pakkhīpi jānātha pattayāne vihaṅgame.*<sup>268</sup>

When explaining this passage, the venerable elders from the past have looked for difficult words or for words requiring a clearer understanding. The commentators define, elucidate, and expand on a single term, a pair of terms, or even an entire phrase or section. For instance, in terms of the teaching above, they explain as follows:

*Pakkhīti sakuṇe. Te hi pattehi yantīti pattayānā, vehāsaṃ gacchantīti vihaṅgamā.*<sup>269</sup>

'The word *pakkhī* means "bird." Birds fly with their wings. Therefore, they are *pattayāna*: they have wings as their means of transportation. They go skyward; they are thus *vihaṅgama*.'

Other commentarial explanations of this teaching are similar. For example:

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<sup>268</sup> From volume 13 of the Thai Tipiṭaka; section: 707; page 643. The reference in Thai is thus M. 13/707/643. [Trans.: English PTS reference: M. II. 196. Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation: 'Know the birds that wing their way as they range in open skies'; 'The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha'; © 1995.]

<sup>269</sup> MA. III. 434.

*Pakkhīti sakuṇe. Te hi pakkhānaṃ atthitāya pakkhīti vuccanti. Pattehi yantīti pattayānā, vehāse gacchantīti vihaṅgamā. Tepi anekappakārā kākādibhedena.*<sup>270</sup>

‘The word *pakkhī* means “bird.” Birds are called *pakkhī* because they have wings. Because they fly with their wings, they are *pattayāna*. Because they travel in the sky, they are *vihaṅgama*. Birds are of assorted varieties; one type of bird, for example, is the “crow.”’

These are easy examples, using common, everyday Pali terms. Now let us look at some explanations of Dhamma teachings. This is the commentary to some of the Buddha’s words in the Maṅgala Sutta:

*Saṅgahoti sammānanādīhi upakāraṅgaṃ.*<sup>271</sup>

‘The word *saṅgaha* means “providing assistance”, for instance as a means of showing respect.’

Let us examine several more commentarial and sub-commentarial passages:

*Samathoti cittakaggatā.*

*Vipassanāti saṅkhārapariggāhakañāṇaṃ.*<sup>272</sup>

‘*Samatha* means one-pointedness of mind; *vipassanā* means comprehensive insight into formations.’

*Bhāvanāti uppādanā vaḍḍhanā ca.*<sup>273</sup>

‘*Bhāvanā* means “giving rise to” and “cultivating”.’

<sup>270</sup> SnA. II. 465.

<sup>271</sup> Maṅgala Sutta: Kh. 3; commentary: KhA. 138.

<sup>272</sup> AA. II. 119.

<sup>273</sup> VismṬ.: Pathavikaṣiṇaniddeśavaṇṇanā, Dasavidha-appanākosallavaṇṇanā, section 64.

*Sugatinti sundaram gatiṃ, sukhasa vā gatinti sugatiṃ.  
Sagganti rūpādisampattihi suṭṭhu agganti saggam.... Ettha ca  
sugatiggahaṇena manussagatipi saṅgayhati, saggaggahaṇena  
devagati eva.*<sup>274</sup>

‘The word *sugati* is defined as an “excellent state of existence” or a “happy destination.” For this reason it is *sugati*.<sup>275</sup> The word *sagga* is defined as “highest” or “exalted”, distinguished for instance with the attainment of beauty. For this reason it is *sagga*....<sup>276</sup> In this case, the word *sugati* includes the human realm, [but] the word *sagga* refers exclusively to the heavenly realm.’

These are examples of how the commentaries elucidate passages from the Tipiṭaka. The venerable elders<sup>277</sup> or teachers<sup>278</sup> who provide these explanations are referred to as the ‘commentators’ (*aṭṭhakathācariya*).

The commentaries are thus similar to a dictionary. The difference is that the term *aṭṭhakathā* is reserved specifically for explanations of the Buddha’s words or of words contained in the Tipiṭaka. It is not used for other definitions. To avoid confusion, similar explanations found in later texts (composed after the Commentaries), which do not directly explain or interpret the Tipiṭaka, are not referred to as *Aṭṭhakathā*, but rather as ‘*Ṭīkā*’ (‘sub-commentaries’), for example.

Furthermore, the commentaries are broader in content than dictionaries. Whereas a dictionary normally only defines

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<sup>274</sup> ItA. I. 73.

<sup>275</sup> Trans.: literally: ‘going well’.

<sup>276</sup> ‘Heaven’.

<sup>277</sup> *Thera*.

<sup>278</sup> *Ācariya*.

single words, the commentaries define both words and entire passages.

Another difference is that dictionaries are organized in alphabetical order. The commentaries, on the other hand, are organized according to the sequence that words or passages appear in the Tipiṭaka.

The commentaries are thousands of years old, beginning with the Buddha himself. Occasionally, in the morning, the Buddha would teach laypeople, converse with them, or answer their questions, and later, in the evening, while speaking with his monastic disciples, a monk would ask a question or request an elucidation pertaining to some doubts he had about the matter earlier discussed. The Buddha's subsequent explanations are also referred to as *aṭṭhakathā*.

Numerous commentaries were made by the Buddha's great disciples, including Ven. Sāriputta and Ven. Anuruddha, who had many of their own disciples. They would explain the Buddha's teachings and training rules to their disciples.

These explanations by the Buddha and his great disciples became guidelines and templates memorized and applied by later generations of monks. High priority was given to preserving these commentaries, along with the principal teachings by the Buddha, in order that they be taught and studied. The commentaries have thus been traditionally paired with the Tipiṭaka, although they have always been viewed as holding a secondary or subordinate importance.

Note that the commentaries are roughly divided into three time periods or epochs. Why is this division made?

As mentioned above, the commentaries have existed and

been preserved since the beginning of the Buddha's time. Later, Buddhism grew and flourished, until the time of Emperor Asoka in the third century BE. When Ven. Mahinda Thera established Buddhism in Sri Lanka, he took with him the Pali Tipiṭaka along with the Pali Commentaries. (This was probably also the case for the other eight missions, but there remains no factual evidence to confirm this.)

In Sri Lanka, however, the people spoke Sinhalese. When studying the Tipiṭaka, they needed to learn from the original source material recorded in Pali. In this way, they preserved the original Tipiṭaka. Yet, as an educational tool, they also needed to rely on the commentaries.

As it happened, to assist students of Buddhism, all of the Pali commentaries brought over from India were translated into Sinhalese. Eventually, in Sri Lanka, only these translated editions survived. Moreover, some new texts were composed in Sri Lanka. The original Pali commentaries in Sri Lanka were gradually lost and vanished.

The original Pali commentaries are considered the first generation of commentaries. The Sinhalese commentaries are considered the second generation, translated directly from the original Pali.

The story does not end here. Back in India, the monks continued to use the original Pali commentaries, unaware of the second generation of translated Sinhalese commentaries.

Later, however, Buddhism in India fell into decline and only the Pali Tipiṭaka was preserved. The Pali commentary was gradually forgotten and eventually disappeared altogether. This can be called the true end of the first generation of commentaries.



Finally, in around 950 BE (407 CE), the Indian monk Ven. Buddhaghosa was sent by his teacher to Sri Lanka, to ask permission to translate the Sinhalese commentaries back into Pali. They could thus be used once more in India for studying the Pali Tipiṭaka.

After Ven. Buddhaghosa arrived in Sri Lanka, he was first cross-examined before being granted permission to commence his work. He translated almost all of the commentaries (the remaining commentaries were translated by other monks, for example Ven. Dhammapāla, until all of them were finished). Buddhaghosa, however, did not translate the texts word by word; instead, he used a revisionary, abridged scheme. After he had completed his work, he took the Pali commentaries back to India.

The upshot of this undertaking was that Sri Lanka also obtained a new set of Pali commentaries, which was used as the standard from that time on. The result was that the Sinhalese commentaries gradually vanished.

Here, we enter the third generation of commentaries, namely this new set of Pali commentaries, which has survived and is used up to the present day.

Therefore, when we now use the term ‘commentary’ (*aṭṭhakathā*), we are referring to this third generation. Most people have no knowledge of the historical development of the commentaries and the fate of the previous, original versions.

In sum, there are three generations of commentaries, from three time periods:

- Pali *aṭṭhakathā*, which descended from the Buddha’ time; it has now been completely lost.

- Sinhalese *aṭṭhakathā* translated from the original Pali *aṭṭhakathā*; this too has vanished.
- Pali *aṭṭhakathā* translated from the Sinhalese *aṭṭhakathā*; this is the commentary existing at this time.

As mentioned above, strictly speaking, the *aṭṭhakathā* refers to definitions and explications of the Buddha's words and passages contained in the Tipiṭaka. This is considered the genuine 'commentary' (*aṭṭhakathā*), which is given great importance. Over the centuries, much effort has been made to preserve it and pass it down to later generations. It is used as the chief device for studying and understanding the Buddha's words and all other material contained in the Tipiṭaka. We can thus state that the *aṭṭhakathā* is the kernel and essence of what we call the commentarial texts—the commentaries.

However, besides this essential *aṭṭhakathā*, there exists supplementary or accompanying text material in those scriptures containing the *aṭṭhakathā*. This can be seen as surplus or bonus material.

The important supplementary text can be described as follows:

- The opinions of the 'commentators',<sup>279</sup> who compiled the commentaries—the scriptural texts containing the *aṭṭhakathā*. Occasionally, the commentators use these texts as a forum for debate. For instance, they may say: 'Some teachers<sup>280</sup> claim this; another<sup>281</sup> group of teachers

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<sup>279</sup> *Aṭṭhakathācariya*.

<sup>280</sup> *Keci ācariya*. [Trans.: note that this is the source for the Thai word 'keci Ajahn' (เกจิอาจารย์), which, in modern times, refers to something markedly different, namely, to famous monks renowned for psychic powers.]

<sup>281</sup> *Apare*.

claim otherwise; while yet other<sup>281</sup> teachers claim thus.’ Often they repudiate these claims, while sometimes they agree with them.

- Stories, accounts, information, etc., both minor and extensive, added in order to increase understanding. For instance, a sutta being elucidated may begin with a passage stating that the Buddha was residing at Rājagaha. The commentators then explain how this city got its name and recount its history. Or a sutta may contain a conversation between the Buddha and a particular brahmin. The commentators introduce this individual and describe his parentage, clan, biography, social position, and so forth.

Such supplementary information is particularly lengthy when it describes a distinct teaching or verse presented by the Buddha or when it expands on a brief passage in the Tipiṭaka (as is found for instance in the commentaries to the Dhammapada and Jātakas). On such occasions, the commentators occasionally add their own comments in order to clarify the explanation of some essential meaning of the text. This can be seen as sundry material.

The commentaries contain numerous chronicles, including local historical accounts from Sri Lanka, which clearly were not part of the original set of Pali *aṭṭhakathā* brought to that country. For didactic purposes, these events were assimilated into the commentaries in Sri Lanka.

The third generation of commentaries—the Pali

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<sup>282</sup> *Aññe*.

commentaries used at the present time—contain a large number of these accounts from Sri Lanka, pertaining to politics, military conflicts, monastic affairs, village affairs, etc., including stories from the Sri Lankan chronicle the *Dīpavaṃsa*. This indicates that Ven. Buddhaghosa, and other commentators, inherited these stories from the second generation of commentaries, recorded in Sinhalese.

As mentioned above, it is the original and genuine *aṭṭhakathā* that is considered of vital importance and deemed truly worthy of being preserved and handed down, despite the fact that there are aspects to it that are controversial. If we were deprived of this genuine *aṭṭhakathā*, however, it would be extremely difficult to make sense of the *Tiṭṭhaka*, which is recorded in Pali. Even simple Pali words could potentially be baffling.

This would be similar to someone learning a foreign language without assistance from a dictionary. In our case, we cannot rely on other people, because Pali is a dead language; other people are only able to transmit the knowledge passed down by others.

In terms of historical accounts, from what I have discovered, the commentators are especially cautious when it comes to stories pertaining to the Buddha's life. They make a point of referring to and quoting what previous texts have said, rather than taking a dismissive attitude towards them.

For instance, in the text containing the commentaries to the *Apadāna*, the commentators describe biographical details of the Buddha, stating that the Bodhisattva went forth into the renunciant life on the same day that his son Rāhula was born. They then add:

‘The phrase mentioned in the Jātaka Commentaries: “At that time, the infant Rāhula had already been born for seven days,” is not found in any other commentaries. One should therefore simply assume what has been stated here.’<sup>283</sup>

In terms of other historical accounts, for example the story of Ven. Revata,<sup>284</sup> the commentators give importance to the gist of the story, the main events, or the essential points. They then add to the story in a rather informal, easygoing way, since, at the time of composing these texts, no-one would have been able to verify the precise details of the accounts.

When the commentators elucidate Dhamma teachings, they often expand on them. They occasionally insert dialogue into the text in order to further explicate these teachings, making the text more interesting, poignant, or vivid. Sometimes the added material is sensational, as if they did not recognize the risk that the added material may contradict the original text or lead to a distortion of the teachings. As stated earlier, the various opinions, stories, accounts, etc. added later should be seen as simply supplementary.

Another prominent feature of these later scriptures containing the commentaries is that they are full of marvellous, miraculous, and fantastic stories. This most likely conforms to the customs of the era in which they were written; many literary works from that time and place possess the same feature.

In subsequent eras, however, literary customs and values

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<sup>283</sup> ApA. 67: *Yaṃ pana jātakatṭhakathāyaṃ tadā sattāhajāto rāhulakumāro hotīti vuttaṃ taṃ sesatṭhakathāsu natthi tasmā idameva gahetabbaṃ*. Note that this passage cited from the Jātaka commentaries seems to have disappeared from this text; it appears to have been replaced by the very passage contained in the Apadāna commentaries.

<sup>284</sup> Trans.: Ven. Sāriputta’s younger brother.

changed. Whereas in the previous era, people were thrilled and inspired by these stories, people of later generations and places might have an opposite response. They may feel negative, cynical, or disinterested, or even outright reject these stories.

One aspect to these miraculous stories is the enormous numbers they describe, for instance: ‘eighty thousand’, ‘a trillion’ (100,000 *koti*), ‘multiple immense periods’ (*asankheyya*), etc.

It is important to understand these miraculous stories and enormous numbers in the context of the time and place in which these expanded commentaries were composed.

This is connected to contemporary Hindu religious beliefs and folk traditions. In India at that time, Hindu composers described how celestial beings from all over the universe gathered their troops with magnificent weapons to wage battle throughout the heavens. Due to god Siva’s wrath, the skies would thunder and roar, manifesting as spectacular and electrifying occurrences. (Many modern Bollywood movies still depict these dramatic events.)

During this era when, in Hindu scriptures, the gods were depicted as exhibiting supernatural powers, swayed by their own emotions of greed, hatred, and delusion, the concurrent Buddhist texts presented teachings aimed at enlightening tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands—even trillions—of celestial beings, transforming them into virtuous and benevolent beings.

When addressing everyday householders—Buddhist and Hindu alike—it was important to accord with and be relevant to the customs and trends of the time, in order to interest people and establish them in faith.

There are many examples of such marvels and prodigious numbers. For instance, in the Dhammapada commentary, the commentators describe events from the Buddha's life:

*Accompanied by his companion Channa, and surrounded by celestial beings from the ten-thousand world systems, he mounted the horse Kaṇṭhaka and went forth into the Great Renunciation....*

*Lord Brahma Sahampati, with an entourage of ten-thousand great Brahmas, asked the Buddha to give a Dhamma teaching....*

*Inviting 180 million Brahmas, led by Ven. Aññā-Koṇḍañña, to drink the nectar of ambrosia....*<sup>285</sup>

We can compare how a story from the Tipiṭaka is described in the scriptures containing the commentaries (*aṭṭhakathā*):

Take the Samacitta Sutta as an example. In this sutta,<sup>286</sup> Ven. Sāriputta gives a teaching; the Buddha then arrives and offers additional teachings, which marks the end of the sutta. The commentary containing the Vinaya *aṭṭhakathā* tells the story of Ven. Mahinda travelling to Sri Lanka. On various occasions, Mahinda presents teachings by the Buddha. The commentary recounts how on one occasion Mahinda recited the Samacitta Sutta; they conclude by saying that countless devas had become enlightened at the time when the Buddha

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<sup>285</sup> DhA. I. 85-86; note that this description is separate from the actual *aṭṭhakathā*. [Trans.: 180 million = 18 koṭi; 'ambrosia' = *amata* (drink of the gods; elixir of immortality). 'Drinking the nectar of ambrosia' refers to listening to and realizing the Dhamma. Drawing upon traditional Brahmanistic beliefs, the Buddha uses a metaphor whereby he reverts to the literal meaning of '*amata*', i.e. 'deathless'. The Dhamma is the deathless (the undying truth), as confirmed by the passage: *Amatandado ca so hoti yo dhammamanusāsātī* ('The one who teaches the Dhamma is the giver of the Deathless'); S. I. 32.]

<sup>286</sup> A. 63-65.

gave this teaching.<sup>287</sup>

In such instances, we should focus on the essential events and details outlined in the commentaries. In this case, the gist of the matter is that Ven. Mahinda travelled to Sri Lanka and due to his devoted efforts Buddhism successfully took root in that country.

As for the marvels and enormous numbers, they should be seen in the context of literary works from that era, as mentioned above. In this way, one can distinguish between the genuine *aṭṭhakathā* and those stories composed by later commentators who preserved the original commentaries.

There are simpler examples. The commentaries to the Suttanipāta, for instance, claim that the population of Sāvātthi was 18 *koṭi* (= 180 million).<sup>288</sup> Similarly, the Dhammapada commentary states that, on the day that the Buddha pacified the elephant Nāḷāgīrī who was released to trample him, he gave a Dhamma talk to 18 *koṭi* of inhabitants of the city of Rājagaha.<sup>289</sup> Of these people, 8,400 became enlightened.

Unlike the Suttanipāta commentary, the Dhammapada commentary claims the population of Sāvātthi was 7 *koṭi* (= 70 million). Of these inhabitants, about 5 *koṭi* (50 million) became enlightened after listening to the Dhamma; approximately 2 *koṭi* (20 million) remained unenlightened.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> VinA. I. 79.

<sup>288</sup> SnA. I. 372.

<sup>289</sup> DhA. I. 140.

<sup>290</sup> These figures of 5 *koṭi* of awakened beings and 2 *koṭi* of unawakened beings are consistent throughout the Dhammapada commentary (e.g.: DhA. I. 256; III. 345; IV. 190); perhaps it is the same commentator throughout.



Surely, no-one believes that the cities of Sāvatti and Rājagaha were so huge, containing 180 million inhabitants (more than the population of many countries today). These are fantastical figures. They correspond with the term *aneka-saṅkhyā* ('countless'): they are intended simply to convey a sense of great abundance.

This is similar to the manner in which a large amount in the scriptures is simply denoted as 'five hundred', for example: 500 bandits, 500 young men, 500 princes, 500 bhikkhus, 500 bhikkhunis, 500 hermits, 500 children, 500 maidens, 500 merchants, 500 arahants, and so forth. This can be compared to the English expression 'a thousand and one'.<sup>291</sup>

In any case, the spirit and objective of these exaggerated accounts is twofold, namely to describe: a) that a key event has taken place; and b) that a great number of people were involved.

This appendix is based on my own observations, gleaned from available evidence. Please take these remarks as suppositions or conjectures that can be used as a foundation for further study and contemplation. The main intention for presenting this material is to foster understanding and to promote a balanced attitude and conduct in relation to the commentaries.

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<sup>291</sup> Equivalent to the Thai expression ร้อยแปดพันเก้า ('a hundred and eight, a thousand and nine').



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