On *Controversies over Buddhist Nuns* (2): The Concept and Reality of *Ehibhikkhunī* Nunhood

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1   Introduction

Ehi-bhikkhu-pabbajjā is a type of ordination well-known in Vinaya:

> [It was] the oldest form of admission and ordination as a monk by pronouncing the formula beginning with the words *ehi bhikkhu* (Skt. *ehi bhikṣu,* come monk). This was used only by the Buddha . . .
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> The first to receive *ehi-bhikkhu-pabbjjā* was Aññāta Koṇḍañña. He was followed by the other four of the *pañcavaggiya* group and Yasa and his companions (Vin, I, p. 12 f.). (Nanayakkara 44)

As quoted above, only certain monks got recorded in Vinaya Piṭaka as receiving *ehi-bhikkhu* ordination. But was there any nun who had been ordinated in the same manner? The commentaries maintain there was none (See the section 3 on page 7), but there are reasons that have made modern scholars think otherwise:

1. When (Thī 109) describes the ordination of a nun named Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā in her own words, the text seems to indicate the *ehi-bhikkhunī* type of ordination: *ehi bhaddeti maṃ avaca / sā mama upasampadā* ("[The Buddha] told me, 'Come, Bhaddā'; it was my ordination"). Accordingly, Mrs. Rhys Davids notes: "Great importance came to be attached to a case of ordination—in the case, at least, of a woman—by the Master direct, as was this." (67 note. 4). Horner has the same opinion (213–214), and Cone follows in their footsteps: "(*according to cts no woman was so ordained, but see* Thī 109) . . ." ("ehi-bhikkhunī").

2. Among the several descriptions of a nunn (*bhikkunī*) given in *Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga* (the canonical commentary on Vinaya rules for nuns) there is one which runs: *ehi bhikkhunīti bhikkhunī* (*Vin* 4.214) ("On account of [the Buddha having said,] 'Come, *bhikkhunī*', is one called *bhikkhunī*"). This description seems to evince the

existence of ancient *ehi-bhikkhunī* nuns. Cone takes care to quote this text in her Dictionary ("ehi-bhikkhunī").

Based on these two pieces of evidence, Dr. Juo-Hsüeh goes one step farther and remarks:

> Here the copying of 'Come, nun' formula indicates that to the canonical commentators [the author(s) whosoever of *Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga*] this formula applied to both monks and nuns. The post-canonical commentators, however, intended to restrict this formula to monks alone … In expounding the types of ordination, Dhammapāla argues in great lengths that this formula did not apply to nuns. It was because none of the nuns had done meritorious act … (44 note. 31)

We have chosen here the problem of *ehibhikkhunī* nuns as the topic of the second paper on Dr. Juo-Hsüeh's work. We would argue that:

1. (a) The relevant text in *Therīgāthā*, in its present state, is not convincing enough to confirm the *ehibhikkhunī* nunhood of Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā.

   (b) The statement *ehi bhikkhunīti bhikkhunī* in *Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga* implies only the concept of *ehibhikkhunī* nuns, not their actual existence in history.

   Accordingly, these texts cannot evince the actual existence of *ehibhikkhunī* nuns in general, nor Bhaddā's *ehibhikkhunī* nunhood in particular.

2. Dhammapāla does recognize the *ehibhikkhunī* nunhood in principle; he only denies its actualization in history. He *does not* "restrict this formula to monks alone" (44 note. 31) as Dr. Juo-Hsüeh maintains.

2 The Examination of Canonical Evidences

2.1 Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā's ordination

Actually, she was mentioned in 3 places in Pali Nikāyas:

Aṅguttara Nikāya *Khippābhiññānaṃ yadidaṃ Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā.* (*AN* 1.25)

Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā is the best one among those having swift realization.

Therī-gāthā *addasaṃ virajaṃ buddhaṃ / bhikkhusaṅghapurakkhataṃ. / nihacca jānuṃ vanditvā / sammukhā pañjali ahaṃ / ehi Bhadde ti avaca / sā me ās' ūpasampadā.* (Thī 108–109)

I saw the Buddha, who was without defilements, heading the Order of monks. I kneeled down, paid obeisance, and had my palms folded in (his) presence. He said, 'Bhaddā, come'; this was my ordination.

Therī-Apādāna *Tassa dhammaṃ suṇitvā'haṃ / dhammacakkhuṃ visodhayiṃ / tato viññātasaddhammā / pabbajjaṃ upasampadaṃ / Āyāciṃ. So tadā āha / "ehi bhadde"ti nāyako / tadā' haṃ upasampannā …* (*Ap* 2. 563)

> I listened to His [i. e., the Buddha's] Dhamma and purified the Eye of Dhamma. Having consequently realized the Good Dhamma, I begged for novicehood, for ordination. At that time that Chief said, 'Come, Bhaddā'. At that time I was ordinated.

As seen above, AN says nothing about her ordination while Thī and Ap do describe it but in different manners.

In Thī, Subaddhā's ordination appears to be of *ehi bhikkhunī* type (Notice the sentences *ehi bhadde ti avaca. sā me ās' ūpasampadā*[1]), but important details are missing. If literally interpreted, Thī text would have meant as if the Buddha taught Bhaddā nothing when they met but just called out, "Come, Bhaddā", to make her into a nun even though she had not asked for nunhood; it hardly makes sense. If we are to read the Buddha's usual deliverance of Dhamma, Bhaddā's request for ordination, etc., into the text, there is no reason why we should not also assume the normal ordination procedures for Bhaddā. Then *ehi bhadde* might have been just a welcome speech.

On the other hand, Ap is more detailed and coherent in its description, but we cannot be sure of the ordination type as given therein. The sentences "*So tadā āha 'ehi bhadde'ti nāyako. tadā' haṃ upasampannā*"[2] are ambiguous. They can mean either that her ordination was accomplished by the Buddha's mere address, or simply that she followed normal ordination procedures after hearing the Buddha's welcoming words.

Besides, *ehi bhadde* is not the exact formula (*ehi bhikkhunī*) found in the Vinaya Piṭaka. We may choose to explain it away as *metri causa* (The exact formula, having one more syllable, would have broken the metres of both Ap and Thī verses) but we can also choose to argue that it was just a welcome speech.

To sum up, we need further evidence to corroborate the theory which claims Bhaddā's *ehibhikkhunī* nunhood.

2.2 The description *ehi bhikkhunī it bhikkhunī*

We should consider the sentence in its whole context as found in Vinaya Piṭaka. The following text gives several descriptions of a nun, for whom the precepts in *Bhikkhunīpātimokkha* are prescribed. (They have been numbered for the sake of cross-reference.)

> **Bhikkhunī**ti (1) *bhikkhikā'ti bhikkhunī*; (2) *bhikkhācariyaṃ ajjh'upagatā'ti bhikkhunī*; (3) *bhinnapaṭadharā'ti bhikkhunī*; (4) *samaññāya bhikkhunī*; (5) *paṭiññāya bhikkhunī*; (6) **ehi bhikkhunī'ti bhikkhunī**; (7) *tīhi saraṇagamanehi upasampannā'ti bhikkhunī*; (8) *bhadrā bhikkhunī*; (9) *sārā bhikkhunī*;

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1. Trans. "(The Buddha) said, 'Come, Bhaddā'. That (i. e., that Buddha's short address) was my ordination."
2. Trans. "At that time that Chief said, 'Come, Bhaddā'. At that time I was ordinated."

(10) *sekhā bhikkhunī*; (11) *asekhā bhikkhunī*; (12) *samaggena ubhatosaṅghena ñatticatutthena kammena akuppena ṭhānārahena upasampannā'ti bhikkhunī.*

    Tatra yā'yaṃ bhikkhunī samaggena ubhatosaṅghena ñatticatutthena kammena akuppena ṭhānārahena upasampannā, ayaṃ imasmiṃ atthe adhippetā bhikkhunīti. (*Vin* 4.214)

The term *bhikkhunī* means: (1) one who begs is accordingly called *bhikkhunī*; (2) one who goes on alms-rounds is accordingly called *bhikkhunī*; (3) one who wears patched clothes is accordingly called *bhikkhunī*; (4) on account of common denomination is one called *bhikkhunī*; (5) on account of self-proclamation is one called *bhikkhunī*; (6) **on account of [the Buddha having said,] 'Come, *bhikkhunī*', is one called *bhikkhunī*;** (7) one who has been ordinated by taking refuge in the Triple Gem is accordingly called *bhikkhunī*; (8) an auspicious one is *bhikkhunī*; (9) one having the essence [of morality, etc.] is *bhikkhunī*; (10) a Trainee is *bhikkhunī*; (11) a Non-Trainee is *bhikkhunī*; (12) one who has been ordinated by the united Double Order by means of an irrevocable and fitting-to-stand monastic function, which has the *ñatti* ("introduction") as its fourth part, is accordingly called *bhikkhunī*.

    Of them, one who has been ordinated by the united Double Order by means of an irrevocable and fitting-to-stand monastic function, which has the *ñatti* ("introduction") as its fourth part, is intended in this context as *bhikkhunī*.

Now the question is—does the description *ehi bhikkhunī'ti bhikkhunī* (6) prove that ancient *ehibhikkhunī* nuns existed at the Buddha's time? If we choose to answer in affirmative:

1. (7) must also be viewed as the proof of the existence of *tisaraṇagamana* ("Triple-Refuge-Ordinated") nuns, which goes against the fact that there is no available record of such nuns in Pali records.

2. (1–5) and (8–11) would lead to even more absurd conclusions—some became nuns just by begging (1), some others, by going for alms-rounds (2), or by wearing patched clothes (3), or by social denomination as nuns (4), or by proclaiming themselves as nuns (5), etc.

    We may wish to ignore these as legally irrelevant. If we do so:

    (a) We must answer why so many irrelevant descriptions come to be present in a legal context, and which kind of role they are playing here.

    (b) Since the text itself shows that only the type (12) is contextually and legally meant here, we must also accept either of the following equally absurd conclusions:

i. The forms of ordination, *ehibhikkhunī* (6) and *tisaraṇagamana* (7), even if they really occured, are not legally significant. That is, such nuns must go through the formal ordination procedure of (12) again to achieve legally valid nunhood.

ii. Or the Vinaya precepts, in the context of which a nun (*bhikkhunī*) is described, are not applicable to the nuns of (6) and (7) types; they are simply above the law.

We give our solution to this problem on the page (6) but it cannot save us from the problems (1, 2a and 3).

3. We may choose to infer as well that any form of ordination not specified here did not occur in history. If we do so, it would contradict the fact of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī getting ordained merely by accepting the Eight Garudhammas (2.255).[3] If we do not, we must answer why it is omitted here. Does it mean that Mahāpajāpati Gotamī again went through the ordination procedure of (12) to achieve valid nunhood? Or was she above the Vinaya precepts?

Here we may choose to respond by denying the significance of all these descriptions as mere steoreotypical copies of their counterparts for monks (*bhikkhu*) (3.24), yet such a denial would merely have postponed the problem by rallying similar arguments against the identical descriptions for *bhikkhu*. Indeed, the descriptions (1–5, 8–11) are the same for monks, which would have led to the problem (2a) similar to that for nuns. And we must also face the similar problem (2b) of why the monks of (6) and (7) types are not mentioned as part of the sense required for the term *bhikkhu*, even though they clearly existed at the Buddha's time according to Pali sources.

On accounts of the difficulties outlined above, we decide to deviate from the obvious and use a different approach.

We hypothesize that these descriptions of nuns are meant to show *the actual or potential aspects common to all or certain nuns*. Based on this hypothesis, we classify them into two types:

1. Some aspects are common to all nuns. One example would be going on alms-rounds (2). It may be an actual aspect for some nuns but a potential aspect for all others; indeed, a nun might never have gone on alms-rounds but she has the right or potential to do so if she wishes. Also in this category are the aspects (1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9).

2. All others except (6) and (7) are relevant only to certain nuns:

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3. *sace Ānanda Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī aṭṭha garudhamme paṭigaṇhāti sā 'v' assā hotu upasampadā.* ("Ānanda, if Mahāpajāpati Gotamī accepts the Eight Garudhammas, let it [i. e, that acceptance itself] be her ordination.")

In fact, there was also another unusual form of ordination—a prostitute named Aḍḍhakāsī was ordained by proxy (*Vin* 2.277-278). However, it can be explained away by maintaining that it also belongs to the type (12) with the difference of a capable nun acting as proxy at the ordination ceremony.

10) The term *sekha* (or *sekkha*, literally meaning "trainee"), "denotes one who has not yet attained Arahantship" ("Sekha"). PED seemingly covers both noble disciples (*ariyas*) and worldlings (*puthujjanas*) by this term. Traditionally, however, *sekha* means a noble disciple who has not achieved Arahantship: "*Cattāro maggasamaṅgino tayo phalasamaṅgino puggalā* sekkhā" (Pp 14) ("The four individuals endowed with Path and the three endowed with Fruition are *sekha*").

In the former sense, this term refers to an actual aspect of all non-arahant nuns but has no relevance to arahants. In the latter, on the other hand, it refers to an actual aspect of non-arahants who have already achieved noble disciplehood; potential, of worldlings who have both talent and will to achieve noble disciplehood; but it is not relevant to arahants, nor to those who do not have talent or will, or both, to achieve noble disciplehood.

11) The term *asekha* (or *asekkha*, "non-trainee") means "one who is no longer a learner, an expert; very often meaning an Arahant" ("Asekha"). This is an actual aspect of all arahant nuns; potential, of non-arahants who have both talent and will to achieve Arahantship; but irrelevant to those who lack talent or will, or both of them, for achieving Arahantship.

12) The ordination by a formal monastic function is an actual aspect of almost all nuns but it is not relevant to Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī mentioned above.

At this stage, we can confidently answer why the ordination type of Mahāpajāpati Gotamī is omitted here. Her case is simply a unique exception which cannot claim to be an "aspect" of nunhood.

Next we would consider the types (6) and (7). We can interpret them in two alternative ways:

1. They are the actual aspects of certain ancient nuns.
2. Or they are the potential aspects of nunhood that *did not actualize* at the Buddha's time.

Now which of them should we choose? The former is hardly acceptable since there is no Pali record, except the dubious case of Bhaddā, of the type (6) nuns while no record at all of the type (7). If we choose the latter, on the other hand, we get to understand the absence of *ehibhikkhunī* and *tisaraṇagamanana* nuns only as a historical incident, not as the lack of such potential on the part of womanhood, nor as anti-feminine prejuidice of the Buddha and monks. Indeed, the very fact of the terms *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī* having identical descriptions shows that monks and nuns are, as members of Saṅgha, equal in potential and prospects.

Now only one problem remains. Why is only the type (12), the aspect of getting ordination by a formal monastic function, shown to be the legal requirement for both monks and nuns (See *Vin* 3.24, 4.214)? At least we know that:

1. Pali sources never mention that the monks already ordained in *ehibhikkhu* (6) and *tisaragama* (7) forms need the ordination form (12) again. And the Buddha explicitly mentioned that Mahāpajāpati Gotamī did not need it (See the footnote 3 on page 5), even though her ordination type is not even mentioned here.

2. And it does not mean that those of ordination types other than (12) are above the law, for there is not a single instance of such a privilege granted to such monks and nuns in Vinaya.

Therefore the only probable conclusion in our opinion is: it indicates that there were no longer any living monks or nuns of other ordination types when the canonical commentaries (*Bhikkhuvibhaṅga* and *Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga*) were finally formed. In short, it is a clue of their date.

To sum up, the hypothesis above has led us to view the sentence *ehi bhikkhunī'ti bhikkhunī* as indicating only the concept of *ehibhikkhunī* nunhood, not their historical existence. Accordingly, we agree with Dr. Juo-Hsüeh when she says, "... to the canonical commentators this formula applied to both monks and nuns", but we believe it is not qualified as positive evidence for Bhaddā's *ehibhikkhunī* nunhood, nor for the actual existence of *ehibhikkhunī* nuns. A declaration of potential does not always mean its actualization.

3 The Examination of Dhammapāla's View

Dhammapāla explains at length why there was no *ehibhikkhunī* nun at the Buddha's time (*Thī-a* 269–271), but the essence of his view is as follows:

> *evam idhāpi alabbhamānagahaṇavasena veditabbaṃ. parikappavacanaṃ h'etaṃ. sace bhagavā bhikkhunibhāvayogyaṃ kañci mātugāmaṃ ehi bhikkhunī ti vadeyya, evam pi bhikkhunibhāvo siyāti. kasmā pana bhagavā evaṃ na kathesī ti? **tathā** katādhikārānaṃ abhāvato.* (270 emphasis added)

> In the same way it should be understood here (i. e., in the case of the statement *ehi bhikkhunī ti ehibhikkhunī*) in terms of saying what is not actual. Indeed, this statement is a hypothetical one: if the Budda had said "*ehi bhikkhunī*" to a certain woman who was worthy of nunhood, such (a type of) nunhood might have been possible too. Then why did the Buddha not say so? Because there were no women who had done deeds of merit *in that (particular) manner*.[4]

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4. Cf. Pruitt's version: "Thus, in this case also, this is to be understood in the sense of mentioning what does not exist. This is a hypothesis: 'If "Come, bhikkhunī," should be said by the Blessed One to any woman who is suitable for admission as a bhikkhunī, then there would be admission as a bhikkhunī.'

In the text above, we should note the particle *tathā* shown in emphasis. It is syntactically connected to *kata,* the first member of the Relative compound *katādhikārānaṃ.* Therefore the whole phrase *tathā katādhikārānaṃ* should be translated as "of those who have done deeds of merit in that (particular) manner." What does it mean? We simply understand it as those who have done acts of merit *with a specific purpose to achieve **ehibhikkhunī** nunhood.*

In Dhammapāla's opinion as interpreted above, *ehibhikkhunī* nunhood is simply a kind of potential not actualized at the Buddha's time. There were no *ehibhikkhunī* nuns because none of the nuns living at that particular time had aspired to *ehibhikkhunī* nunhood by dedicating their merits to it in their previous lives; not because this formula is not applicable to women, nor because womanhood in general does not deserve such an honour. His position is essentially the same as ours, and Dr. Juo-Hsüeh simply misinterprets him when she said, "Dhammapāla argues in great lengths that this formula did not apply to nuns. It was because none of the nuns had done meritorious act" (44 notes. 31).

But why did the Blessed One not say that? Because none of them had done [the appropriate] meritorious acts" (381).

We can only wonder why he has failed to translate the crucial word *tathā*. Anyhow it may be part of the reasons that have led Dr. Juo-Hsüeh to mistakenly sum up the Dhammapāla's view.

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