



Gender and the Vinaya: Role of Bhikkhuni Sangha in Buddhist Monastic Law

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Abstract

The place of women within the monastic institution of Buddhism has always been a matter of debate ever since its inception. This paper attempts to provide an insight into the place of Bhikkhuni Sangha in the context of Vinaya – the code of conduct in monastic Buddhism. By relying solely on the primary sources of Buddhism, especially Vinaya Piṭaka of the Pāli Canon, the present paper discusses how Bhikkhuni Sangha emerged in history and what duties and rights it had along with the problems encountered by it. It was founded by none other than Buddha himself after some hesitation, according to the Cullavagga in Vinaya Piṭaka. However, even under these added restrictions, both men and women had equal opportunities to learn and practice the Dhamma and Vinaya, and the Buddha stated that it was possible for women to attain arahantship. There are many instances in the primary sources, like those in the Therīgāthā of Khuddakanikāya, which demonstrate the contribution of early Bhikkhunis in terms of spiritual attainment. Similar examples include cases like the ordination of Mahapajapati Gotami, marking important instances in Buddhist history in terms of gender and Buddhist law. Thus, this article shows that even under patriarchal structures, the Vinaya provided a way to liberate women in Buddhism. Through the study of primary sources in this regard, it becomes clear how Buddhism responded to gender issues in the Bhikkhuni Sangha.

Keywords : *Bhikkhuni Sangha, Vinaya Piṭaka, Cullavagga, Eight Garudhammas, Therīgāthā*

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Introduction

The problem of gender in Buddhist monastic law is expressed clearly within the Vinaya texts which provide the code of discipline for monks and nuns. As the definitive collection, the Vinaya Piṭaka of the Pāli Canon gives the best information about the roles, responsibilities, and laws of the Sangha. Within its abundant collection, the Cullavagga section contains the best record of the ordination of the Bhikkhunī Sangha. The beginning of this act started when the Buddha's foster mother, Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, made a sincere request to ordain herself and other women into Buddhism. At first, the Buddha refused her but eventually agreed to the women's ordination under some conditions known as the Eight Garudhammas that set up certain hierarchies between Bhikkhus (monks) and Bhikkhunīs (nuns) (Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses* 548-550). It can be noted that the primary sources suggest that, despite the patriarchal appearance of these rules, there are some sociocultural reasons behind them. Most importantly, along with the Garudhammas, there were certain affirmations from the Buddha about the potentialities of women to attain the same level of spirituality as men. These statements can be found in the Aṅguttara Nikāya where the Buddha declares that women can achieve the four levels. Moreover, the *Therīgāthā* stands as a powerful literary testament to the realization of this spiritual potential by early Bhikkhunīs. Poems by eminent Bhikkhunīs like Kisā Gotamī, Patācārā, and Mahāpajāpati Gotamī herself showcase profound insight, courage, and the ultimate goal of liberation (Nibbāna) (Cook 45-52; Collins 129).

A study of the Bhikkhunī Sangha and its Eight Garudhammas needs an insight into the social status of women in ancient Indian civilization before Buddhism. It must be noted here that the Indian society during the sixth and fifth centuries BCE was patriarchal in nature. Even though there were mentions in Vedic literature regarding the scholarly abilities of women like Gārgī and Maitreyī, their educational opportunities and participation in religious affairs began to get curtailed with time as per societal traditions. Women's involvement in religious pursuits had always been deemed secondary to their duties as daughters, wives, and mothers (Altekar 125-32).

The development of the Śramaṇa tradition, which included Buddhism and Jainism, posed a challenge to certain elements of Brahmanical orthodoxy by placing importance on renunciation, ethics, and liberation, as opposed to ritual purity. However, it is important to acknowledge that even the Śramaṇa tradition did not exist in isolation from the context of Indian patriarchy. Thus, the development of a monastic community for female renunciants was an innovative step in itself. As observed by Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, the Buddha's reluctance towards accepting nuns into the sangha should not be considered a case of gender discrimination. Rather, the issues such as the maintenance of monastic discipline, image of the ascetic women who traveled freely among lay communities, and the stability of the recently formed sangha required consideration (Kabilsingh 45-58). Against this backdrop, the formation of the Bhikkhunī Sangha was an impressive phenomenon in the history of religion in India. For the first time in history, women were offered a structured institutional mechanism that enabled them to engage in education, meditation, renunciation, and enlightenment in an unprecedented manner (Chakravarti 72-80).

Origin of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha

The Buddha obtained Nibbāna (enlightenment) in his 35th year. There are very few examples of religious teachers who took such a long period of time to establish, refine, and spread their doctrine. The Buddha was primarily a Dhamma preacher who demonstrated the path for the elimination of suffering. However, his Dhamma was distinct from that of other religious instructors, as it required a Saṅgha (monastic community) to spread it and help others attain liberation. From the very outset, the Buddha's disciples were divided into two groups: Bhikkhus (monks or mendicants) and Gahapatis (householders), also known as Upāsakas (lay followers). The Saṅgha was essentially a brotherhood of the Buddha's most devoted followers. These followers practiced morality (*sīla*) and wisdom (*paññā*) to attain Nibbāna, the complete cessation of suffering. Initially, the Saṅgha consisted entirely of men. Buddha was extremely hesitant to grant *Pabbajjā* (going forth, ordination) to women (Keown 87).

The establishment of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha did not occur as spontaneously as that of the Bhikkhu Saṅgha, as the Buddha was initially opposed to allowing women to undertake the homeless life. He was concerned about the challenges it might create for the discipline of celibacy in the monastic order and its perception in the broader society. Despite his initial hesitation, the Buddha recognized the inherent potential of women to achieve the highest spiritual goal. He confirmed that the path to liberation and the attainment of Arhatship was not limited to men. I.B. Horner rightly notes that under Buddhism, women were no longer bound to marry to save their self-respect or that of their family. “*She could honourably remain unmarried without running the gauntlet of public scorn*” (Horner 133). The concept of women ascetics was not unique to Buddhism. Jain works also mention women ascetics. Mahāvīra, the Jain Tīrthaṅkara, did not regard the ascetic life as a male-only privilege, allowing thousands of women to embrace renunciation. In accordance with Jain tradition, 36,000 women and 14,000 men became part of the Śvetāmbara sect of Jain mendicants. This indicates that the practice of women mendicancy was widespread even prior to the Buddhist era (Cort 59).

What was new with the Buddhist Bhikkhunī Saṅgha was its formal, structured, and organized existence as an institution under a set code of discipline (*Vinaya*). More women than before were willing to forsake worldly ties and dedicate themselves to religious life, marking a significant historic moment in the history of Indian women. Buddhism divided women followers into two categories: Upāsikās, or lay female devotees who remained in household life, and Bhikkhunīs, who renounced worldly ties to live the homeless life of a nun, also known as sisters or almswomen. These Bhikkhunīs followed the same higher training as the Bhikkhus and aimed for the same spiritual goal. The actual formation of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha has been a subject of some scholarly debate. According to the *Apadāna* (a text of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*), Yasodharā, Gotama's former wife, played a key role in making the Saṅgha accessible to women and is said to have led eighteen thousand women to become nuns. I.B. Horner even suggested that Yasodharā may have been the actual leader of the early Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, noting, “*It could be true that Mahāpajāpatī arrived later into the Order following her husband's death, and that the first woman truly to make the organization accessible for women was Yasodharā, perhaps a former spouse of Gotama, who is believed to represent many women and herself in her text in the Apadāna*” (Horner 135).

Nonetheless, the most believable story related to the origin of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha can be found in the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, specifically in the *Cullavagga* (Chapter X). According to the source, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, who was the foster mother of Buddha, became the first person to make an application for ordination, together with a group of Sakyan ladies. Although the application was rejected thrice by the Buddha, she and 500 other Sakyan women had to shave their heads, don robes, and follow the Buddha all the way to Vesālī. As described in the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, at the time of their arrival at Vesālī, they were tired, dusty, their feet were swollen, and they looked sad. However, without any hope, they had no other choice but to wait outside the hall. He approached the Buddha multiple times on their behalf. Ānanda respectfully asked the Buddha whether women were capable of attaining the four fruits of spiritual attainment; Sotāpanna, Sakadāgāmi, Anāgāmi, and Arahantship; through the Dhamma-Vinaya taught by the Buddha. The Buddha affirmed that they could indeed achieve liberation. Eventually, the Buddha permitted their ordination on the condition that they accept the Eight Garudhammas, eight special rules establishing the hierarchical relationship between Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunīs. One of these rules required that even the most senior Bhikkhunī should show respect to even the youngest Bhikkhu by ordination. It is also recorded in the *Cullavagga* (X.1.6) that the Buddha stated: “Had women not been admitted to the Saṅgha, the pure Dhamma would have lasted for a thousand years. With women admitted, it will last for only 500 years” (Bodhi, *Cullavagga* 72).

Many scholars and modern researchers believe that such passages may have been later interpolations by conservative members of the Saṅgha. Linguistic analysis and historical contextualization by modern Buddhist scholars suggest that the Buddha’s recognition of spiritual equality between men and women was genuine and consistent with his other teachings. The difficulties posed by the Buddha must have been related to the intricacies of ensuring discipline among the monks and nuns while preventing any possible disturbances from occurring that might affect their chastity. This can be seen through the numerous *Vinaya* precepts on how the Bhikkhus should behave when dealing with the Bhikkhunīs. Nevertheless, there is no indication that the Buddha or Ānanda had ever said that the spiritual level of women was not as high as that of men. These were merely practical questions influenced by the realities of ancient Indian society (Anālayo 101). However, the women did succeed in becoming the first Bhikkhunīs, led by Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and the 500 Sakyan women.

The Fourfold Assembly in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta

The role of women in Buddhism as perceived by the Buddha is also evident from the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta in the Dīgha Nikāya. Here Māra begs the Buddha to attain Nirvana. Buddha says that he cannot do this until his disciples i.e. bhikkhus, bhikkhunīs, upāsakas, and upāsikās; are all mature, wise, trained, and qualified to safeguard and propagate the doctrine of the Dhamma (Walshe 245-46). This is very important, considering the fact that it proves that for the Buddha the Fourfold Assembly (catuparisā) was very crucial for the perpetuation of the Buddhist dispensation. It is important to note here that in mentioning bhikkhunīs Buddha does so explicitly which means that women were seen as necessary components in this process. Consequently, the institution of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha can only be understood in this context and should not be taken simply as a reluctant step.

The Establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha in the Vinaya Piṭaka

The *Cullavagga* of the *Vinaya Piṭaka* provides the earliest and most authoritative account of the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. The episode begins with *Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī*'s approach to the Buddha in Kapilavatthu. Her request for ordination is met with a firm refusal, repeated three times. The Buddha's concern was not rooted in any spiritual inadequacy of women but in the potential challenges to the integrity of the Sangha's discipline and the broader societal response to women living the homeless renunciate life (*Vinaya Piṭaka* X.1–2). This turning point is most profound in Vesali, when Venerable Ananda observes the resolve and suffering of Mahapajapati and her Sakyan sisters and pleads their case out of compassion. The conversation between Ananda and the Buddha provides the doctrinal foundation for the admission of women into the Sangha. When Ānanda asks: "Lord, are women capable of realizing the fruits of Stream-entry, Once-returning, Non-returning, and Arahantship?" or in Pāli "Sakyadhītā, bhante, bhikkhuniyo labhanti arahattaphalaṃ vā anāgāmiphalaṃ vā sakadāgāmiphalaṃ vā sotāpattiphalaṃ vā?" (*Cullavagga* X.2.4, *Vinaya Piṭaka*, V. 354-355). Buddha responds in an affirmative manner. After this affirmation, Ānanda begs for their entry into the Buddhist Order. Buddha consents to his request, but on one condition that Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī accepts the Eight Garudhammas.

A full understanding of the place of women in Buddhist monastic law goes beyond the Eight Garudhammas. To gain insight into this subject matter, it is necessary to consider the Bhikkhunī Vinaya and the Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha. In the Theravādin tradition, there are 311 rules in the Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha as opposed to 227 in the case of the bhikkhus (Horner, *Book of the Discipline* 354-60). These rules were formulated over time and not at once. The rules have been put in place to ensure that there is discipline in the sangha and that its members are progressing spiritually. Many of the rules are related to practical matters, such as issues of safety, movement, residence, relations with the laity, and prevention of abuse. Some rules are connected to biological and social facts about women in the society of the time (Anālayo 137-45). From the Bhikkhunī Vinaya, it becomes clear that many of these rules had the purpose of providing protection and organizational assistance rather than being restrictive.

The Eight Garudhammas

The Eight Garudhammas (Pāli: *Aṭṭha Garudhamma*) were the basic set of rules laid down by the Buddha when he initiated the Bhikkhunī Sangha, recorded in the *Cullavagga* (*Vinaya Piṭaka*, X.1-2). These rules were designed to govern the interaction between the Bhikkhunī Sangha (the order of nuns) and the Bhikkhu Sangha (the order of monks). Acceptance of these Eight Garudhammas by Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī was essential for the establishment of the Bhikkhunī Sangha. The word Garudhamma could be translated as "heavy rules" or "weighty principles." These rules were aimed at structuring the social hierarchy and disciplinary norms in the early Buddhist Sangha, which established the precedence of Bhikkhunīs below Bhikkhus irrespective of their seniority and attainments (Horner 140). While the Garudhammas have frequently been condemned for their patriarchal nature, it is also believed that these rules had practical applications for ensuring peace within the recently founded group of monks and nuns (Trainor 85).

1. **Respect for Bhikkhus Regardless of Seniority:** “A Bhikkhuni, even if ordained for a hundred years, must greet respectfully, rise up, salute with joined palms, and perform proper duties to a Bhikkhu ordained that very day.” In **Pāli** “*Yāva-jīvam upasampannāya bhikkhuniyā bhikkhusaṅghassa abhivādanam paccuṭṭhānam añjalikammaṃ sāmīcikkammaṃ katabbam, tam na accāyikā bhikkhunī.*”
2. **Rainy Season Retreat (Vassa) Must Be Near Bhikkhus:** “A Bhikkhuni may not spend the rains-retreat (Vassa) in a residence where there is no Bhikkhu Sangha.” In **Pāli**: “*Na bhikkhuniyā saṅghato bhikkhusaṅghato ananuññātā ratticchedo uposatho pavāraṇā ca kātabbā.*”
3. **Fortnightly Instruction from Bhikkhus** “A Bhikkhuni must seek instruction from the Bhikkhu Sangha every fortnight regarding the Uposatha (Observance day) and the disciplinary rules.” In **Pāli**: “*Bhikkhuniyā dvattikkhattum pavattati uposatho bhikkhusaṅghato sikkhāpadāni pucchitabbāni dve ca kārāpitabbā.*”
4. **Invitation for Admonition at Pavāraṇā Ceremony:** “At the end of the rainy season, the Bhikkhuni must hold the Pavāraṇā ceremony before both Sanghas Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis.” In **Pāli**: “*Pavāraṇā bhikkhuniyā dvīhi saṅghehi kātabbā bhikkhusaṅghassa ca bhikkhunīsaṅghassa ca.*”
5. **Confession and Penance before Both Sanghas:** “If a Bhikkhuni commits a grave offense (Sanghādisesa), she must undergo penance and confession before both the Bhikkhu Sangha and the Bhikkhuni Sangha.” In **Pāli**: “*Bhikkhuniyā āpatti chassa pācittiyassa aññataram āpannam sā bhikkhuniyā ubhatosu saṅghesu ārocetabbā.*”
6. **Dual Ordination Requirement:** “The ordination of a Bhikkhuni must be carried out by both Sanghas: first by the Bhikkhuni Sangha, and then by the Bhikkhu Sangha.” In **Pāli**: “*Bhikkhuniyā upasampadā dvehi saṅghehi kātabbā bhikkhusaṅghassa ca bhikkhunīsaṅghassa ca.*”
7. **Bhikkhus May Admonish Bhikkhunis, Not Vice Versa:** “A Bhikkhuni may not admonish a Bhikkhu; however, a Bhikkhu may admonish a Bhikkhuni.” In **Pāli**: “*Bhikkhunī bhikkhum na vattabbam (admonish), bhikkhu bhikkhunim vattabbo.*”
8. **Disciplinary Cases Must Be Settled by Both Sanghas:** **English:** “Formal disciplinary actions regarding Bhikkhunis must be carried out by both Sanghas.” In **Pāli**: “*Bhikkhuniyā chassa āpattiyo ubhatosu saṅghesu kātabbā.*”

The *Eight Garudhammas* laid the foundation for the integration of women into the Buddhist monastic community. Whereas the rules established some form of hierarchy between the two genders, they are also significant in the sense that they opened up an entirely new path through which women could be liberated spiritually (Nibbāna). As depicted in the historical records in the Vinaya Piṭaka, the rules were seen to reflect a revolutionary period in the history of religion where the rights of women to achieve salvation were acknowledged in light of the prevailing social conditions of ancient India. The Buddhist Saṅgha comprises two main communities – Bhikkhus (monks) and Bhikkhunis (nuns). The two groups represent those ordained individuals in the Buddhist community who have decided to leave worldly affairs behind to embrace the teachings of the Buddha on their way to attaining enlightenment.

In general, the relation between Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunīs in the Saṅgha can be described in terms of spiritual companionship founded on mutual respect and devotion to the teachings of the Dhamma. However, such relations have some form of hierarchy imposed on them.

When Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, who is the foster mother of Buddha, approached Buddha with the request of ordaining women into his order, Buddha first refused but accepted afterwards, under the provision that they would have to observe other set of rules referred to as the Garudhammas (*Cullavagga, Vinaya Piṭaka* X.1). These rules ensured harmony between both parties while simultaneously giving the Bhikkhu superiority over the Bhikkhunī, irrespective of her seniority among the latter order (Horner 142). As per the Vinaya, the Bhikkhunī should have reverence for the Bhikkhu, seek instructions from him regarding Dhamma and perform some of the activities of the Sangha in conjunction with Bhikkhu Saṅgha (Trainor 105).

Despite the formal hierarchical organization, however, the connection between both groups is more spiritual and supportive. The Bhikkhus instruct the Bhikkhunīs with teachings of Dhamma, advice, and monastic discipline; the Bhikkhunīs support the Saṅgha with their spiritual practices, teachings to other women, and participation in community activities (Gross 57). Both Bhikkhu and Bhikkhunīs are parts of the Fourfold Assembly (*Catura Saṅgha*), along with laymen (*Upāsakas*) and laywomen (*Upāsikās*); together they maintain and spread teachings of Buddhism (Harvey 220). Throughout history, the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha became extinct in most of the Buddhist countries for various reasons. At the same time, attempts to revive it have been undertaken, especially in the Theravāda tradition in Sri Lanka and Thailand among others. Such revival involves an attempt to restore the full status and involvement of the Bhikkhunīs, thus changing established relations based on the principle of equality and cooperation characteristic of other teachings by the Buddha regarding *karuṇā* and *paññā* (Gross 121).

Comparison between Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis in the Buddhist Sangha

Aspect	Bhikkhus (Monks)	Bhikkhunis (Nuns)
Ordination	Established first by the Buddha	Established later, with additional rules
Vinaya Rules	Fewer compared to Bhikkhunis (around 227)	More rules (311 in Theravāda tradition)
Hierarchy	Senior in Sangha regardless of ordination date	Junior to Bhikkhus even if senior by ordination
Role	Teach Dhamma, guide Sangha, perform rituals	Practice Dhamma, teach women, assist Sangha
Support System	Supported by lay community and Bhikkhunis	Supported by Bhikkhus and lay followers
Revival Status	Continuous throughout Buddhist history	Revival ongoing in many countries

Although the formal structure gives precedence to the Bhikkhus, the spirit of their relationship lies in collaboration, as both have a common goal of propagating the teachings of Buddha. Modern trends have ensured a more equal relationship between the Bhikkhus and the Bhikkhunis, who have become more recognized for their role in Buddhism worldwide.

However, the issue of women attaining the highest spiritual objective of *Nibbāna* (*nirvāṇa*) was openly addressed by the Buddha. According to the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* (AN 4.159), the Buddha states that women have the potential of attaining the four stages of enlightenment: Sotāpatti (Stream-entry), *Sakadāgāmi*

(Once-returner), *Anāgāmi* (Non-returner), and Arahantship (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 52). In this way, the Buddha refutes any form of gender biases that existed in the religious practices of ancient India (Gross 73). One of the most significant literary sources that confirm women's spiritual capabilities includes the *Therīgāthā*, a canonical literature in the Khuddaka-nikāya collection of the Pāli Canon. The *Therīgāthā* is a poetic work created by early Bhikkhunīs, which narrates the experiences and spiritual insights gained during the process of attaining enlightenment (Anālayo 45). In this way, these verses provide clear evidence of the ability of women to attain the highest levels of spirituality. Some of the most renowned Bhikkhunīs mentioned in the *Therīgāthā* include Patachārā, Kisā Gotamī, and Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī. These Bhikkhunīs had undergone extensive personal hardships before attaining enlightenment (Horner 178).

For instance, Patachārā experienced immense personal tragedy when she lost all her family members, from her husband to her children and her parents. In spite of her extreme sorrow, she took refuge in the monastic community and achieved arahantship after contemplating the idea of impermanence (*anicca*). In her verses, Patachārā explains beautifully the truth of impermanence:

*“Just as dried leaves get blown about by the wind,
In the same way man's life gets swept off by death.” (Therīgāthā, verse 127)*

In the same manner, Kisā Gotamī gained widespread recognition because of her meeting with the Buddha at the time of her son's death. She was initially driven mad due to her sorrow but eventually understood that death is an inevitable truth in everyone's life. She joined the Buddhist Order and also became an arahant. Her verses emphasize the universal nature of death, freeing her from personal sorrow. Among the most significant figures is Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha's foster mother, who was also the first woman to be ordained as a Bhikkhuni. Her verses (*Therīgāthā* 157–162) celebrate her liberation and spiritual accomplishment. In these verses, she reflects on her past worldly attachments and celebrates her final release:

*“My bonds are cut, my burdens laid down,
Done is what had to be done.
Free am I from all taints,
With the utter destruction of craving. (Therīgāthā, verses 161–162)*

Her attainment of arahantship stands as direct evidence of the Buddha's affirmation that women, like men, are capable of the highest realization. Furthermore, the *Cullavagga* (Vinaya Piṭaka, Book 10) records the Buddha's establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, acknowledging that women can live the celibate, renunciate life leading to liberation. Although the acceptance came with the formulation of the *Garudhammas*, which placed Bhikkhunis under certain formal subordination to Bhikkhus, the spiritual attainment of arahantship was fully accessible to them.

Indeed, the *Therīgāthā* is not just literature or a biography; it is a testament to the teachings of Buddhism. It shows how these Bhikkhunīs' spiritual journey proves the deep teaching by the Buddha that liberation transcends gender. One gains *Nibbāna* from the understanding of the Three Marks of Existence i.e. impermanence, suffering, and non-self. The main sources on early Buddhism leave no doubt that Bhikkhunis had the same spiritual potential as Bhikkhus. They proved their ability to achieve the ultimate

goal of Buddhism, arahantship, which means that there is no place for gender in the spiritual domain at all.

Distinguishing the Garudhammas from the Bhikkhunī Vinaya

However, an important point should be drawn on distinguishing between the Eight Garudhammas and the rules of the Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha. The Garudhammas are found in the Cullavagga as preconditions for acceptance by Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī before the creation of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha (Vinaya Piṭaka X.1-2). As a result, it should be considered that they are different both in terms of content and chronological placement than the rules, which emerged at a later period. The Pātimokkha was developed gradually as the monastic order was being formed, and it included solutions to disciplinary problems arising during that time. While Garudhammas mainly define the institutional relations between bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs, the Pātimokkha includes provisions related to individual conduct, procedures within the monastery, ordination process, confession, and overall discipline (Tḥānissaro 15-24). Currently, many scholars have become more aware of the significance of distinguishing these categories of rules. According to Kabilsingh, equating the Bhikkhunī Vinaya to Garudhammas is not appropriate and distorts the understanding of the overall picture (Kabilsingh 82-89).

Re-examining the Significance of Yasodharā Re-examining the significance of Yasodharā in the emergence of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha is crucial. Previous studies sometimes hinted at the possibility that Yasodharā might have been the pivotal person who made possible the ordination of Buddhist nuns. But there seems to be no conclusive evidence in the canonical scriptures about this theory. In the Vinaya traditions, the first bhikkhunī was identified as Maha Pajapati Gotami who had the most significant contribution to establishing the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha (Vinaya Piṭaka X.1-3). Though Yasodharā is one of the prominent figures in Buddhist scripture, the claims regarding her leading role in organizing the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha cannot be proven through the available canonical evidence.

Conclusion

With the help of an exclusive use of the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, *Anguttara Nikāya*, and *Therīgāthā* as source materials, this research highlights the complicated but beautiful journey undertaken by the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha in the earlier period of Buddhism. This study shows how the institutional framework established for the women's monastics is accompanied by their personal stories, voices, and spiritual accomplishments. The Eight Garudhammas are frequently cited as examples of the hierarchical relationship between genders in the Sangha. It cannot be denied that these guidelines placed the Bhikkhunīs in a subordinate role in relation to the Bhikkhus. Nevertheless, these very same guidelines have enabled women to walk the monastic path, which is a path leading to Nibbāna.

The stories narrated in the *Therīgāthā* serve as a remarkable testament to the spiritual power, wisdom, and tenacity of the early Buddhist nuns. It is important to note that figures such as Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, Khemā, Kisā Gotamī, and many more did not simply take on the robes but actively embraced the Dhamma, reaching the level of enlightenment as well. Thus, their stories reveal a profound understanding and detachment from the illusory world of attachments, which proves that enlightenment is accessible to both men and women, according to the Buddha's own assertion. In addition, the fact that

the Vinaya represents a living dialogue of the history should be highlighted. This is because the changes within the rules applicable to Bhikkhunīs prove that there was a constant struggle between certain social restrictions and the Buddha's mission. What emerges from this study is a nuanced understanding of how early Buddhist communities navigated the tension between tradition and transcendence.

An even-handed consideration of bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs would necessarily have to include the Vinaya in its totality rather than only the Garudhammas. Both groups were formed for the sake of realizing the same religious ideal – liberation from dukkha by means of ethical practice, meditation, and wisdom. Both take part in the Fourfold Assembly and play a role in the preservation of the teachings of the Buddha. Whereas the Bhikkhunī Vinaya includes more rules and also requires double ordination, there is no lack of acknowledgment in the canon that women can attain all stages of enlightenment, including that of an arahat. There are ample examples in the Therīgāthā, which speaks about many famous and spiritually advanced bhikkhunīs like Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, Khemā, Uppalavaṇṇā, Kisā Gotamī, and Paṭācārā (Rhys Davids 48-65). Thus, the Vinaya represents a unique combination of pragmatic considerations related to social conditions on one hand and recognition of the principle of spiritual equality between men and women on the other.

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