

Buddhist Monasticism and Contemporary Trends. From the Viewpoint of Buddhist Women and Buddhist Nuns

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Introduction

As secularization and global consumerism corrodes the traditional monastic ideals and an ethical way of life, the concept of Buddhist monasticism as well as the roles of monastic members are undergoing review in the world today. This essay examines how Buddhist monasticism has changed in its engagement with modernity and postmodernity, and what relevance some of its modern adaptation has had especially on female monastic members who find meaning in their monastic way of life. To start with, I offer a brief background to understand the implication of Buddhist monasticism in modern times and examine whether the very foundation of its institution has changed or adapted in certain areas to accommodate modern demands while keeping its basic principles intact.

The Buddhist monastic community called the *sangha*, originally meaning ‘assembly’, is regarded as the oldest form of monasticism in the history of religions. It was formed during the life of Siddhartha Gautama,¹ commonly known as the Buddha, and continues to thrive in Southeast Asia, South Asia, in regions of the Himalayas and East Asia. It was initially comprised of the Buddha’s male disciples who practiced and devoted themselves to the dissemination of his teachings, but was later joined by female renunciants led by Mahāprajāpati, the Buddha’s foster-mother, on condition that they observed the Ten Special Rules to co-exist in harmony with the male *sangha*. As more members joined the monastic community, the number of rules and regulations increased in time in order to maintain communal cohesion and monastic order, and safeguarded the longevity of the Buddhist tradition.

Buddhist monasticism can vary in its practice from the more conservative tradition to the more liberal ones, and different doctrinal emphasis is also placed on the monastic rules according to the type of Buddhist tradition members follow. As Buddhism spreads globally to other regions and societies that have not known Buddhist monasticism before, new demands are placed on how monastic members conduct themselves in the world today. Some Buddhist

groups have re-evaluated traditional monastic practices to respond to challenges brought on by modernity and postmodernity, which we will see in a later section. Meanwhile, the notion of *sangha* itself has come to be apprehended among members of some Western Buddhist groups who see it as an exclusive, elitist, and male centred institution.² Some of those who hold modernist views even regard the status distinction between the monastic and laity to be no longer relevant in their spiritual life, and seek direct channels to achieve higher spiritual levels without the monastic intermediaries whom they see as irrelevant to contemporary worship.

However, these progressive views often promoted in Western Buddhist circles are not always shared by the majority of Buddhists in Southeast Asia or in regions of the Himalayas who continue to uphold monasticism as the foundation of their Buddhist faith. Monasticism has also offered an environment to foster lineages in respective Buddhist traditions, often as a result of close teacher and student relationships formed in the community that culminate in the direct transmission of esoteric knowledge. Furthermore, Asian Buddhists regard the interactions they have with monks and nuns to be an indispensable means for acquiring merit, which is essential for achieving good rebirth. At times of major crisis, monasteries and nunneries also become an important venue, for example, for communal activities to take place in the aftermath of natural disasters. In many of these situations, the monastic community performs various roles in supporting the welfare of society and becomes indispensable in filling the vacuum created by the lack of social infrastructure due to the incompetence of government authorities. Meanwhile, there are Buddhist groups that have modified its concept of *sangha* to foster a community of like-minded practitioners and promote a protected environment that allows members to retreat from materialism they see as detrimental to spiritual growth and practice in solitude away from the pressures of modern life.

Monastic Habitus and Socialization

Buddhist monasticism may give an impression that it is a chauvinistic institution that subjugates and is oppressive to female members. However, a monastic life offers different possibilities to Buddhist women especially in traditional societies where life options are limited compared to their female counterparts in developed countries in the West. For example, by entering a monastic life, a woman can free herself from a socially designated

place at home and devote herself full-time to meditation and the study of Buddhist scriptures. A female monastic, whom I refer to here as ‘Buddhist nun’ for convenience, is allowed to practice primarily for her own spiritual development. Having undergone the experience myself, I found living in a Buddhist nunnery to be a positive and empowering experience. A nunnery may be described as a ‘total institution,’³ where members are cut off from the outside world to a certain degree and live completely immersed in the religious ethos of the community. However the unique communal setting also provides them with an environment that may be referred to as a kind of *habitus*,⁴ where the nuns work, study and pray together, and share the fundamental values embedded in the religious tradition. They live within a secure single-sex environment, and by living and engaging daily with other like-minded women, they become shaped by its moral culture and develop into pious agents. Moreover, a Buddhist nunnery is not like a Christian convent that is closed off completely from society. Rather, it offers an open and interactive venue where lay followers frequently visit, take part in ceremonies, make donations, and sometimes staying over to seek moral guidance from the nuns.

The monastic ethos govern their daily routine and activities, which are reflected in the way Buddhist nuns walk, talk, sit, stand, bow, pray, and so on. In their everyday life, they learn about the correct manner in relating to senior members within the hierarchy as well as how to behave in relation to monks and their lay donors. Every novice nun is allocated a mentor or ‘preceptor’ who guides and trains her in the vocation, and takes on the responsibility if the novice is disobedient or diverts from the expected communal norm. Tidiness, cleanliness, and diligence are expected of every nun, and she has to show initiative in finding whatever tasks that need to be done to serve the community. Every routine work in a nunnery is inscribed with deep moral meaning and close attention is paid to achieving a body and mind balance in whatever they do, harmonising with the rhythm of communal life.

Seniority has a paramount value in the monastic community and junior nuns customarily pay obeisance to anyone senior according to the monastic rank, which is defined by the time of their initiation into the order. A junior nun has to learn her place in the monastic hierarchy as well as accept normative ways of conducting herself according to where she stands in the pecking order. The teacher-student relationship is highly valued and students tend to form a close knit group around their teacher, and the close bond and loyalty developed out of which sustains them throughout their religious life. Interestingly, a nun’s self-transformation seems to happen once she accepts her place however junior in the community and becomes a willing

participant who can dispel her selfish traits and identify with the collective interests as her own. In such a context, values such as obedience, humility and loyalty, rather than stunting her spiritual growth, seem to help her become a self-conscious and dedicated agent who is totally immersed in her new-found role as a Buddhist nun. It is almost as if one's ego has to be dissolved first in the monastic training in order for a nun to become integrated into the culture and moral ethos of the monastic community.

Meanwhile, every nun is expected to help others, especially members who are younger, older, weaker or infirm in the monastic community, and communal living instils in them the importance of interdependence and harmonious coexistence. Therefore, the monastic *habitus* provides its residents with a stable institutional framework and a common religious purpose, allowing members to cultivate their faith and confidence that ultimately benefit not only the individuals but also the whole monastic community.

Preserving Traditional Feminine Values

Buddhist nuns also play important roles in preserving traditional culture and values that pertain to the 'feminine' in many Asian societies that are undergoing rapid structural change. Modesty, humility, and obedience, and all the values associated with the conventional notion of womanhood are promoted in the monastic community. Many of the feminine qualities or moral virtues that appear 'old-fashioned' by modern standards, are given new religious meanings and provide the ethical foundation for fostering their Buddhist faith. For example, if we consider how a Buddhist nun wears her monastic robe, it demonstrates many cultural values embedded in the traditional notion of a 'good woman'. Some of its features such as the long loose robe covering down to the ankles, long sleeves showing as little flesh as possible, and the tight-fitting bodice worn underneath the robe, may all represent concerted efforts to hide her feminine curves as well as protect her inner virtues. In addition, the practice of covering up her body with a large wrap or a coat in colder regions, and also the custom to wear 'unattractive' colours of grey, black or grey, in the case of nuns in the Mahāyāna tradition, may also reflect their common desire to make themselves undesirable as woman and put them away from the public gaze.

It is noteworthy that many Asian women become Buddhist nuns before having had any sexual encounters, and in the context of their societies virginity is highly valued, symbolically equated with the notion of moral purity. A nun's religious character reflects this

notion as her inner purity is constantly displayed in the bashful and modest manner in conducting herself. It is common to see an Asian nun stand with her arms folded in front of her chest or while doing the walking meditation, which may give an impression of ‘submissiveness’ to Western bystanders, but again, this is an expression of modesty and self-control that is fundamental to her religious identity in the monastic life. In addition, the colour of white commonly worn by Buddhist nuns in Southeast Asia reflects their deep aspiration for purity and simplicity as they surrender their ego and focus single-mindedly on the practice. The neat and tidy manner in which they present themselves and the restrained manner in which they carry themselves are all said to be a visible expression of their inner virtue and moral integrity.⁵ Therefore, every feature of their religious attire as well as the mode of conduct is aimed at preserving feminine virtues and the traditional notion of honour surrounding them, which subsequently replicates the ideal of a ‘good woman’, who is pious, chaste (in this case celibate), and virtuous in a patriarchal society.

Many of these conventional values and expectations regarding how woman should behave, however, are increasingly at odds with emerging values in contemporary Buddhist societies undergoing rapid social change. Against such social backdrop, these nuns seem to be finding new meaning in preserving traditional values and implications of what a pious Buddhist woman should be, which subsequently makes them unwitting transmitters of cultural values embedded in the traditional notion of feminine. Meanwhile, the nuns themselves are not entirely immune to the influence of modern fashion trends and some are already expressing themselves in the subtle manner they wear their monastic robes. Today we also notice that Buddhist nuns especially in urban nunneries have started to wear smart overcoats, wristwatches, gold-rimmed glasses, and even shoes (rather than sandals), however there are no rules to regulate these details regarding their dress code, and minor changes are tolerated as long as they do not interfere with the overall virtuous image of a Buddhist nun.

Monastic Rules and Abstinence Practices

Observing the precepts of not harming life, not stealing, or not saying falsehood, for example, are fundamental rules for Buddhists regardless of their traditions or affiliations, but the rules stipulated for monastic members are much more rigid and clearly different from what are observed in the outside world. Many of these rules have been laid down in order to safeguard the welfare of monastic members and passed down for generations to assure its healthy

relationship both within and with those outside the monastic community. But the main purpose of monastic rules has been to encourage members to learn the discipline and co-exist harmoniously in the community rather than to impose severe disciplinary code on them. Today Buddhism has spread globally and been transported to countries that are originally non-Buddhist so that host societies do not always provide the support nor understand why Buddhist monastics continue to observe certain rules. As monks and nuns travel more widely, they also have to adjust to colder climates and different dietary requirements, and modify the monastic rules according to the context in which they live, which may not always be conducive to their traditional mode of living. For instance, it is unrealistic to expect the monks to go around collecting alms barefoot if it is snowing outside and also to expect a non-Buddhist neighbour to offer them cooked food on a daily basis. Thus even monks in some situations may end up cooking their own food if there is no one to offer them alms. The aim and essence of traditional monastic rules were to ensure the cohesion of the monastic community, but if the community is very small or dispersed living in urban apartments, or sometimes comprised of only a few monks in a foreign land, which is the situation in diasporic contexts, their efforts may be focused on adhering to the main practices such as that of celibacy to sustain the core principle of their religious identity.⁶ Under these circumstances, however, less attention may be paid to minor monastic rules they have inherited as the emphasis shifts to individual survival and practicalities rather than sustaining the communal monastic tradition.

(1) Sexual abstinence

The departure of the Buddha into the wilderness may provide a key image in understanding the path of a 'renouncer' when left his young family and royal status to pursue the quest for truth. 'Renunciation' in early Buddhism was the first step in going forward for a male practitioner, and celibacy was not only a practical requirement in engaging in austerities, but also an indispensable practice in accessing higher spiritual power. However, a celibate life nor ascetic practices were never regarded as normative for women in Hindu or Buddhist societies. I have written elsewhere (2001) that celibacy in fact implied something different for a female practitioner compared to that to a male practitioner. That is, a woman in traditional societies is expected to take on socially designated roles as obedient daughter, chaste wife, and nurturing mother, and her primary task has been to assure the continuity and prosperity of her family and kin. Thus while a male practitioner is praised and supported by sublimating his sexual desires and selfishly pursuing his path, a woman comes under heavy criticism if

she opts out to become a nun since that implies a going against the social mores, and literally ‘cutting off’ the social ties and family relationships that had previously nurtured her.

Therefore, a married woman is generally discouraged from becoming a nun and those who attempt to do so to escape marital problems or domestic disputes are either rejected or dissuaded at the point of entry. Even if she manages to enter the monastic order, unless her decision is supported by a firm commitment to the Buddhist faith, it is difficult to endure the hostility in society as well as rigid discipline required in the monastic life. And yet many nuns whom I interviewed had left home often on their own accord, and many at a fairly young age, despite fierce opposition from their family and relatives. So many had defied social conventions and gone against family wishes to fulfil their socially designated womanhood.⁷ Here similar themes could be discerned in the motives of many Buddhist women. For example, the theme of wanting to ‘break free’, which we find in many women’s motives who become nuns today, resonated with that in the verses of *Therīgāthā* recited by ancient female renunciants. This suggested that patriarchal issues surrounding a Buddhist woman’s life have not changed fundamentally since the times of the Buddha, which ultimately seem to spur women decide to become nuns.⁸ Some nuns told me that it was a great relief that they no longer had to deal with the sensitive issue of female sexuality or worry about getting married. A celibate life in the nunnery had brought them peace and tranquillity, and subsequently helped them develop a capacity to operate and think as an independent agent freed from the many constraints women are under in patriarchal societies.

(1) Other abstinence practices

There are many other practices of abstinence that regulate their monastic life, such as fasting after midday, abstaining from alcohol, refraining from cash transactions, not dancing and not singing, or going out with friends. Female members in particular are encouraged to conduct their monastic life around stoicism and simplicity, and do not indulge in so-called ‘vanity items’ such as fragrant cream or use mirrors. Many of these monastic rules were laid down in ancient India and it is difficult for modern day monastics to observe them to the word as social conditions and circumstances in which they live have changed significantly. Moreover, different denominations place different emphasis on abstinence practices and the manner in which they are observed is not so uniform despite the principles of having stipulated these rules in the first place. Chinese Buddhists, for example, practice vegetarianism as part of their training to cultivate compassion and eat in moderation, but do not fast like their counterparts in Southeast Asia or Sri Lanka. Many of these practices are supported by practical reasons

that sustain their monastic life, for example, fasting is understood to keep sexual desires at bay. Nonetheless, Buddhist fasting is not like Ramadan, which is observed only during a designated period, but is practiced daily in the afternoons as long as one stays in the monastic community. The practice of fasting also frees the nuns from the laborious work of preparing meals and cooking in the afternoons, so that they can focus on spiritual matters that take priority in their religious vocation.⁹

These abstinences are practiced as part of their religious training to achieve a level of self-control that is required to live and work together in a monastic community. Contemporary lay Buddhists also endorse and take up many of these practices traditionally confined to monasteries that help them abstain from the ills of drinking, smoking, gambling, over-eating, and other indulgences in their modern life. Thus ascetic practices that were followed by a handful of forest ascetics in the past and routinely practiced in the monastic community are now spreading out and taken up in the context of ‘this-worldly asceticism’. Many new Buddhist groups or individuals practice abstinences today, which are not necessarily aimed at achieving nirvana or better rebirth, but as a practical means to support their spiritual training and aid self-development. Going on temporary retreats to monasteries and spending time in meditation centres may also allow people to escape from the incessant demands of work and family life, and become revitalised as they reclaim the inner self even temporarily.

Economic Transactions with Society

Since early Buddhist monasticism, ordained members were prohibited from handling money stipulated in the *Vinaya* as the accumulation of wealth and property of individuals was regarded to disrupt the cohesion and unity of the monastic community. Moreover, material attachment, in the Buddhist doctrine, was seen to be one of the prime causes for the cycle of suffering to start and greed was also regarded a main hindrance in their spiritual development. Even today, the issue of cash handling can be a contentious issue for serious practitioners who look for ways to safeguard their moral purity, for example, by employing an assistant who could look after the financial side of their interactions with society. However, not every monk has secretaries to whom he can delegate the role of cash handler and on many occasions he may find himself in a position to bend the monastic rules. Moreover, it is almost impossible to abstain from cash transactions in the contemporary world and monastic members cannot be completely exempted from such social reality. Meanwhile, there are also

new inventions such as credit cards or online banking that could alleviate some of the burden since they do not have to literally ‘touch money’ in the transactions. However, these modern facilities cannot be the ultimate solution in safeguarding their moral position as attachment to wealth is still there to tempt and pollute the mind.

In Buddhist countries such as in Myanmar, some Eight Precepts observing nuns have worked out a ‘division of labour’ and made themselves useful by looking after the monks’ financial interests. They take on the roles of book keepers or managers and are often summoned by monks to help procure goods and prepare for large ceremonies. They may safeguard the purity of monks by taking in the ‘pollution’ implied in cash transactions, but the ability to handle cash can also become an impediment for the nuns’ moral standing as they stand as a kind of ‘buffer’ warding off the corrupting influences of society so that monks can retain their ‘holiness’. Meanwhile, there are also nuns who observe the Ten Precepts and do not handle money at all in Sri Lanka, and few as they may be in number, these nuns are highly respected for their detachment and moral purity.¹⁰

In large Buddhist organisations such as Foguangshan in Taiwan that operate internationally beyond their temple headquarter, they normally have managers or accountants who deal with the financial side of running an organization and monastic members are provided with whatever material needs they require without having to engage directly in cash transactions. In Chinese Buddhism in particular, offering money for the purpose of helping others is seen as an important part of the Bodhisattva path they follow and members do not see the act of handling money as violating the basic precept when they receive cash donations, which would be used for their charity work. Therefore, their members can handle money without becoming corrupt since it is interpreted that when the mind is detached and compassionate, they can overcome the negative consequences of cash transactions.¹¹

Nonetheless, Buddhist monks and nuns are theoretically ‘mendicants’ and are generally sustained by donation offerings from society. People’s generosity has been traditionally focused on the monks, who are seen to provide a supreme ‘field of merit’; donors ‘plant’ their good deeds in the field and ‘reap’ the consequence of their enhanced karmic states. Therefore, monks have to adhere to a high set of moral rules that stipulates a clear distinction between their monastic lifestyle and that of the laity, and the interlocking between these two domains has been essential in providing a complementary system of Buddhist worship.

Nuns, compared to monks, have generally endured a much more ambiguous position and there has been a proportional disparity between a monk and a nun in regard to the amount of donations and material support they receive from society. The issue of generating income also poses problems for fully ordained nuns in countries such as China or Japan, where the monastic community is expected to find other ways of making ends meet rather than just relying on donations. On the other hand, lay devotees are on a constant lookout for a worthy monastic beneficiary who is endowed with unique spiritual qualities that deserve their attention and support. Thus although there are charity trends and economic factors that affect the decisions of lay donors, which has been traditionally more favourable to supporting the monks, the gender of prospective monastic beneficiary is becoming increasingly irrelevant in making their decision as to whom to support. Nuns themselves engage in a multitude of religious transactions within the monastic community, both among themselves and in relation to the monks. When they receive more than they need, items are redistributed to other nuns positioned lower in the hierarchy. Expensive and valuable gifts they receive tend to be re-donated to senior monks, and surplus food and necessities are passed down the pecking order to those with no rank. The more prominent a nun is, the more donations she may receive, but she is also expected to be generous, and the skill in accepting just the right amount for herself and judging how and what resources need re-allocating adds to her reputation as an effective leader. Therefore, the notion of 'merit' also has to be examined in the context of status and reputation, as well as in interpersonal and transactional relationships that are ongoing in the monastic community today.

Contemporary Trends: Temporary Initiation

It is common for Buddhist women in countries such as Thailand or Sri Lanka to spend a short spell or weekends in meditation centres or nunneries to practice meditation and retreat from their daily life, however in their lay status. However, temporary initiation for girls was never an established practice in any of the Buddhist denominations and it was normally for life when they entered the order.¹² Meanwhile, there were instances in the past whereby a lone Buddhist woman would take up temporary initiation and spent time in a nunnery to recover from illness, or to overcome the grief caused by death or of separation from loved ones. It was the result of desperation or a serious life crisis that made her withdraw from society and spend her days in prayers or meditation in a secluded environment for a designated period of

time. In such a context, she gave up her long hair and all material comfort, and the bundle of hair often offered on the altar was a token symbol of her temporary sacrifice. A daughter would endure such material deprivation on behalf of her sickly parent(s) and a mother would retreat from the world to pray for the recovery of her child's health. These women became temporary nuns to petition the Buddha and gods for help, and to get some kind of resolution in return.

In recent decades, however, it has become common especially in Myanmar for urban women from middle-class background (this phenomenon is spreading to semi-rural areas) to spend a temporary period in prominent Buddhist nunneries.¹³ Just like vocational nuns, they undergo an initiation ceremony, have their heads shaved, don the same monastic robe, and follow the Eight Precepts. However, the present-day practice is different from that in the past when a solitary woman made a serious resolution, often as a last resort, and withdrew from society to practice a kind of penance. Buddhist women today undergo temporary initiation to have their ambitions realized, for example, to pass exams, or to win the heart of a desired man, or to succeed in their career. Some may have been tempted by the academic achievements of nun scholars that are circulated in the social media and women's magazines, for example, but many simply seem to follow the emerging trend in these societies. In other words, the popularity of temporary initiation among young women points to the fact that there are positive images of Buddhist nuns emerging in society and people are becoming more accepting of the notion of female renunciation. Thus what was once regarded as a major sacrifice for a woman to become a nun is now seen more commonly as a meritorious undertaking, and parents send their daughters into reputable nunneries where they can learn the prayers and religious etiquette that may help them to become respected Buddhist adults, but safe in the knowledge that their experience is only for a temporary period.

Although they may not be obstructed from doing so, it is uncommon to see temporary nuns commit themselves to a lifelong vocation in the Buddhist order. In other words, temporary initiation may be a contemporary fad that tempts young women to join the monastic community, but this can be transient fashion like any other trend, and it will take time until the social climate surrounding women's renunciation is to truly turn in their favor with a more positive image of Buddhist nuns entering the public conscience.

Gender and Empowerment

Contemporary Buddhists who are seeking egalitarian gender relations within the monastic institution find inspiration in the spiritual ideals set out by the Buddha in early Buddhism. The picture, however, is modified by doctrinal elements, which appear to qualify or contradict the original ideal of spiritual equality, and also by institutional features of the *sangha* that relegate women to a secondary status in the monastic hierarchy. In addition, there are passages in Buddhist scriptures that appear to be misogynist, such as the representation of woman as ‘temptress’ who are there to obstruct the spiritual progress of male practitioners.¹⁴ The notion that a woman’s birth is inferior and that she has to be reborn as a male first to progress in the spiritual ladder, is also perpetuated in common narratives that has become the source of derogatory stereotypes. Nonetheless, in Asian societies where men have always retained access to authority and positions of power, a negative judgement on women’s fate might be simply reflecting the empirical reality. Matters have been exacerbated by the institutional structure of the *sangha*, stratified by seniority and gender so that even senior nuns are relegated to a junior position in relation to all ranks of monks. These textual representations and their junior institutional rank may put them in a generally pessimistic light, however, Buddhist nuns themselves do not perceive their religious identity with ambiguity or with negativity. On the contrary, the majority of nuns I interviewed described their experience with a great deal of positivity and monasticism had given them the foundation in developing their commitment and faith.

In the context of globalization, Buddhist women in recent decades have been crossing borders and overcoming traditional denominations. The international movement to revive the higher ordination for Buddhist nuns in the Theravāda and Tibetan traditions started in the mid-1980s, originally instigated by Western Buddhist nuns and Asian feminists, it received international support in uplifting the position of Buddhist nuns.¹⁵ Initially supported by the assertion that the *bhikkhunī sangha* in Southeast Asia could be re-instated by members of the female ordination lineage in the East Asian Buddhist traditions, the movement led to two higher ordinations conducted for nuns in the 1990s; in 1996 in Saranath and in 1998 in Bodhgayā, both in India. Although the majority of nuns in the Theravāda or Tibetan traditions remain as observers of Eight or Ten Precepts, an increasing number of nuns have become ordained as *bhikkhunīs* in the last two decades.¹⁶ In the Mahāyāna tradition of East Asia, ordained nuns are also increasing their social influence and emerging as a collective force in society. Taiwan, for example, has the largest number of Buddhist nuns of any country who are well

educated and active in many areas of education and social welfare. Among them, Ven. Cheng Yen; the founder of Tzu Chi, sometimes described as the Taiwan's version of 'Mother Teresa', is internationally renowned for her social engagement; for helping the poor and sickly, and more recently for her work in disaster relief.

However, as far as gender is concerned, the monastic authority has generally retained its traditional and conservative outlook towards the position of its female members. The *bhikkhunī* revival movement has also shown that in Buddhist countries such as Myanmar where monasticism is intact and widely influential, senior monks assume authority in making decisions about matters that affect the whole monastic community. Buddhist nuns themselves also seem to accept the official position of the *sangha* that *bhikkhunīs* cannot be reinstated in their tradition, reaffirming a strict adherence to their historical legacy and the conservative Theravāda claim that there is no longer an authority to revive the female *sangha*. In such discussions, nuns normally adopt a pragmatic attitude in negotiating their interests and survival, and position themselves as a non-threatening force in relation to the *sangha* authority.

Conclusion

The issue of *bhikkhunī* revival has highlighted the tension between the progressive ideologies of feminism, equal rights and individualism promoted in the modern Western world and the traditional notions of duty and service promoted and adhered by members in the monastic community. Moreover, issues monastic members encounter today are increasingly of a secular nature, and what people take for granted may not take into consideration the immediate needs of faith-based communities that operate on religious values and priorities that are not the same as the outside world. Asian Buddhist nuns, in particular, who have been trained to respect seniority and experience, as well as to become 'selfless' and obedient in their religious vocation, now find themselves under pressure to fight for equality in competition with the monks and their teachers. The modern ideals of justice and equality we take for granted in the 'post-Enlightenment' world may be useful as a means to attain better treatment and improve living conditions for the nuns. However, we also need to ask whether modern 'rights based' values are relevant or helpful for monastic members in sustaining their religious life, since these progressive ideas are aimed at 'secularizing' monasticism, and

progressing in that direction may be ultimately be self-defeating in their quest for spiritual liberation.

Meanwhile, the number of Buddhist nuns has seen a large increase in the last half a century in contrast to the decreasing number of monks and they are becoming an important force in promoting Buddhist monasticism.¹⁷ Many of these nuns have made tremendous efforts in fostering and enhancing monastic education, and as a result nunnery schools are on the increase as well as many nun students pursuing a scholastic career. There are even celebrated nuns who have become internationally famous for their chanting voices or *dhamma* talks, attracting and commanding public attention in an increasingly competitive religious market. In this respect, Buddhist nuns are at the forefront of a changing public perception regarding the benefits of monasticism. Lay Buddhists and devotees today are also in search for a worthwhile monastic beneficiary who can satisfy their contemporary criteria of ‘holiness’, and gender no longer seems to determine the worth (or lack of it) of a monastic member in such a quest.

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Endnotes

¹ There is no consensus as to when Siddhartha was born although several dates have been proposed. The many contradictions and inaccuracies in different chronologies and dating systems seem to make it impossible to come up with a satisfactory date. However, modern scholarship generally agrees that he passed away at some point between 410 and 370 BCE.

² Triratna Buddhist Community, one of the largest Western Buddhist organizations in the UK, has been critical of the traditional notion of Buddhist monasticism. The organization, formerly known as the Friends of Western Buddhist Order (FWBO), was established in 1967 by Sangharakshita, an English Buddhist monk. Its members have promoted an inclusive view of the *sangha* so that they do not have to renounce their secular status or lifestyle to become part of the Buddhist community.

³ Erving Goffman (1984), p. 11.

⁴ Mauss Marcel (1979); Pierre Bourdieu (1977).

⁵ Mohan Wijayaratna (1990), pp. 44–45.

⁶ A set of gravest offences that a monastic member could commit is called Pārājika, which includes the violation of celibacy rules, murder of parents, falsely claiming to possess supra-mundane powers, and inciting schism in the *sangha*. The transgressor is expelled from the community.

⁷ Hiroko Kawanami (2013).

⁸ Isaline B. Horner (1964); Susan Murcott (1991).

⁹ Fasting after midday is seen as an essential part of their religious identity especially for Buddhist nuns in the Southern tradition. If one cannot keep up with the fasting regime, it is normally regarded better to leave the monastic life rather than stay in deception.

¹⁰ See Lowell Bloss (1987), p. 8. He describes how Ten Precept nuns tried to uplift the status of female practitioners to a different spiritual level by strict adherence to moral discipline and the practice of *Vipassanā* meditation.

¹¹ In the case of Dharma Drum Mountain and Foguangshan in Taiwan, see Tzu-Lung Chiu (2013), pp. 25-27. Although members can handle cash, they are not allowed to invest, profit from interest, or accumulate private wealth in areas that could jeopardise their moral purity.

¹² This was in stark contrast with boys from Buddhist families who customarily became novices and spent a short spell in monasteries, which was an accepted part of their initiation rite in mainland Southeast Asia.

¹³ I interviewed a Myanmar woman who had spent time as a temporary nun in a nunnery in the 1960s. She said it was still rare for a young girl to become a temporary nun then and she felt quite lonely staying in a nunnery. She added she did not know of or meet any other girl who wanted to experience temporary initiation at that time. After almost half a century, the same nunnery is crowded with young girls spending time as temporary nuns during summer holidays when schools are closed.

¹⁴ One of the prominent female representations in the Buddhist scriptures is embodied in the three daughters of Māra, who tried to tempt and distract the Buddha deep in meditation. The features of these women can be discerned in their names: Rāga (sexual attraction), Arati (aversion), and Trsna (attachment).

¹⁵ It is said that the *bhikkhunī* lineage disappeared in Sri Lanka in the 11th century and in the 13th century in Myanmar, and since then the religious position of Buddhist nuns in their tradition has not been officially sanctioned. On the international *bhikkhunī* revival movement, see Karma Lekshe Tsomo (1999); Hiroko Kawanami (2007); Wei-Yi Cheng (2007).

¹⁶ Today there are more than 1,000 *bhikkhunīs* in Sri Lanka alone, who are leading the way in enhancing awareness and working for the empowerment of Buddhist women.

¹⁷ In Myanmar, there are currently about 55,000 Buddhist nuns, non-ordained but officially registered with the Ministry of Religious Affairs.