

THE EIGHT STRICT RULES FOR BUDDHIST NUNS (AṢṬA GARU DHARMA)

D. AMARASIRI WEERATNE

We often see that many Buddhist writers and speakers assert that the Buddha was the first religious teacher in world history to found an Order of Nuns. It can be shown from our very scriptures that this is a fallacy. It was Mahāvīra, the founder of Jainism, who had founded an order of Nuns before the Buddha. Our scriptures mention the existence of fourteen thousand monks and thirty six thousand nuns who were his followers. Therefore it would have been difficult for the Buddha to refuse to inaugurate an Order of Nuns when the request was made to him repeatedly by Mahā Prajāpati Gotamī and Ven. Ānanda, his personal attendant.

Our scriptures mention that Bhadrā Kapilānī, the wife of Venerable Mahā Kassapa in his lay-life, renounced the household life and became a Jain Nun soon after her husband became a Buddhist monk. Later when the Lord Buddha established the Bhikkhuṇī Order she became a Buddhist Nun.

The Vinaya Mahāvagga account of the inauguration of the Bhikkhuṇī Order teems with inconsistencies and inaccuracies. Several Western and Eastern Buddhist scholars have observed in their writings that the account of the establishment of the Bhikkhuṇī Order as well as the promulgation of the Eight Strict Rules is not a reliable one, and that it was done according to the whims and fancies of the elders who took part in the First Council, the majority of whom were Brahmins brought up and reared in the anti-feminist tradition of their milieu.

Among the scholars whom I have referred to above are Dr. Rhys Davids, Miss I. B. Horner, Ven. Pandit Dhammananda Kosambi - the author of “Bhagavān Buddha”, Ven. Pandit Narawela

Dhamma-ratana, Ven. U. Vangeesa, author of “Bhikkhuṇī Śāsana”, and Ven. Pandit Pathegama Gnanarama, the author of “Three Hundred Years After the Parinirvāṇa”. The Buddha had firm and well - considered ideas on the question of the longevity of the Śāsana, Therefore it is difficult for us to accept the Vinaya story that the Buddha gave into arguments of Ven. Ānanda against His decision not to inaugurate an Order of Bhikkhuṇīs. He is said to have reversed his earlier decision and consented to allow women to be admitted to the Bhikkhuṇī Order. To make this assertion is a slur on his omniscience- attributed to him in the later texts and stoutly defended by the Theravāda orthodoxy.

Let us look into these matters in some detail. It is said that the Buddha allowed the Bhikkhuṇī Order with reluctance, after six refusals, three to Pajāpati Gotamī and three to Ven. Ānanda. He is reported to have said that as a result of this step the Good Doctrine (Saddharma) which would have lasted for 1,000 years would last for only 500 years. So this has to be taken as a prophecy of the ‘Omniscient Buddha’. This has been proved to be false. Now after 2500 years the good doctrine (Saddharma) is still alive and active. How can we believe that the Buddha would have uttered such an absurdity? The commentators observed the falsification of the prophecy. So they resorted to apologetics saying “Saddharma” here means not the Buddha’s teachings but something else, viz: the attainments to the Paths and Fruits of Arahantship. This is an attempt to whitewash the First Council Elder’s aberrations. To say one thing and mean another was not the Buddha’s practice. It is only a tactic of priest craft resorted to by the apologists.

Eight Strict Rules

Now let us consider the Eight Strict Rules. The first condition stipulates that a Senior Nun, even with a hundred years of Higher Ordination, should worship and pay obeisance to a young monk who has obtained Senior Ordination on that very day. The Cullavagga says that this was the practice with other non Buddhist contemporary religious orders by way of justification. Are we to believe that the Buddha took precedents from the existing malpractices of the Indians, especially when they were unfair and inhuman? The Upasampadā is sacrosanct and highly revered in the Dhamma-Vinaya of the Buddha. Monks have to walk behind their elders in Senior Ordination even when using a road. They have to honour and worship the monk senior in Upasampadā-higher ordination. The first strict rule violates this sanctity of the Senior Ordination and goes against the very grain of the monastic life. Therefore we are justified in doubting such an enactment by the Buddha. This is a desecration of the sanctity of Senior Ordination and homage to one's superiors in the Order. Any sensible person will agree that this is so.

This condition violates the Chattari Saṅgha Vastu- the four virtues advocated by the Buddha in social relationships. Samanātmata (Equality) is the fourth of these virtues. The first strict condition violates it. According to this condition a monk cannot honor or show respect or pay obeisance to a Nun, however virtuous or saintly she may be. Even if she is an Arahāt she will have to worship novice monks who have not attained to any of the paths and fruits that lead to Nirvāṇa. Monks even very junior in Upasampadā need not pay her the honor due to her Arahātship. That this requirement was not enacted by the Buddha is borne out by the fact that the Buddha honoured Prajāpatī Gotamī at the time she visited him to seek permission to pass away to Nirvāṇa. The Buddha rose from his seat, and escorted her up to the doorway or gate of the monastery. It is unlikely that He will set a bad example by violating the first strict rule which He enacted. It is likely that Buddha's demise, the

Buddha's behavior in this instance shows that He was not aware that He has to set an example by adhering to the first Strict Rule.

There can be little doubt that the First Council Elders were unsympathetic to women. They censured Ven. Ānanda for pleading with the Buddha to inaugurate the Order of Nuns. They censured him for allowing women to see the dead body of the Buddha before men could pay their respects. They censured him for trampling on the Buddha's robe while stitching up a torn part. They were foolish enough to believe that the gods would have held the robe if there was nobody to hold it in the correct position for sewing. At the time of the First Council there were Arahāt Nuns highly proficient in the Vinaya. None of them were admitted or consulted when adopting the Eight Strict Rules as actions of the Buddha. Therefore it could be presumed that the Eight Strict Rules were drawn up and accepted behind the backs of the Arahāt Nun disciples of the Buddha.

Second Strict Rule

The second rule stipulates that a nun should not observe Vās (rainy season) in an area where there is no suitable monk to give advice and guidance. This stipulation is a requirement in the Vinaya Pācittay Rules. This is also connected to the Vinaya rule pertaining to consultation of monks regarding the Full Moon days and receiving admonitions, and also to the third strict rule. This strict rule enjoins that a nun should terminate her observance of Vās in the presence of both monks and nuns. The fifth strict rule stipulates that a nun who incurs a lapse in disciplinary rules (Vinaya) should atone (practise Manatta) in the presence of both Orders (i.e.monks and nuns).

The four strict rules appertain to observing the rainy seasons, ceremonially terminating it, ascertaining full moon days, deciding on the commission of disciplinary lapses, and atonement, all of these procedures in the observance of the Vinaya. We should bear in mind that Vinaya rules had not been enacted by the Buddha at the time

of the inauguration of the Bhikkhuṇī Order. The Vinaya was promulgated during the 20th year of the Buddha's ministry. As such it makes no sense to say that the above mentioned Vinaya procedures were insisted upon by the Buddha in the 5th year of his ministry at the time of founding the Bhikkhuṇī Order. Ven. Urugamuve Vangeesa, the author of "Bhikkhuṇī Śāsana" held that the Cullavagga account of the Buddha promulgating eight strict rules binding on Bhikkhuṇīs at its very inception is a dubious proposition. Taking into account Vinaya requirements enacted much later shows that the Eight Strict Rules were cooked up by the First Council Elders after the Buddha's demise to keep down nuns and enforce servitude on them.

Sixth Condition

The sixth rule stipulates that a novice nun should be given Senior Ordination (Upasampadā) after a period of 2 years probation. But it is clear that neither Prajāpatī Gotamī nor her band of original nuns have conformed to this requirement. They are said to have vowed to be bound to the Eight Strict Rules as long as they lived. Even nuns who followed them did not adhere to this practice. Neither the biographers of the nuns nor the Commentary to the *Therīgathā* give any such information. They were not on 2 years probation. The first nun we hear of conforming to this requirement is Saṅghamittā. The nun under probation is required to observe six rules including one which stipulates celibacy. So they have to be celibate for 2 years. As such there is no need to have a Vinaya rule requiring that an expectant mother, a nursing mother breast-feeding her infant should not be given Upasampadā. A further Vinaya rule becomes redundant. If the nuns were bound by the 6th strict rule, then the above-mentioned Vinaya rule becomes uncalled for and redundant. Here we see the inconsistency between the Eight Strict Rules and the Vinaya disciplinary rules. Thus our inference should be that the sixth strict rule was one concocted by the Elders of the First Council or some others in the name of the

Buddha after his demise, to keep the nuns down and enforce an eternal servitude on them. The idea appears to be to keep the nuns bound and subservient to monks in terms of the Aṣṭa Garu Dharma. If the Bhikkhuṇīs were strictly bound to the Eight Conditions it becomes quite superfluous to enact new Vinaya rules which repeat them. The inference we can draw is that the Eight Strict Rules did not exist during the life-time of the Buddha. If they had existed neither the Buddha nor the nuns, could have contravened even in a small measure. New Vinaya rules repeating the same thing will be unnecessary. The seventh condition renders the nuns helpless even in the face of a grave injustice to a nun by a monk, for which she would have legitimate ground for complaint or accusation. This is flagrantly unjust. It is unbelievable that the Buddha should be a party to such injustice.

Eighth Strict Rule

The prohibitions included in the second and third rules are reproduced in a different form in the eighth condition. Bhikkhuṇīs are asked not to admonish monks but to obey admonitions from monks.

Here we see the same idea given in two different forms. It would have been convenient to incorporate them in one. We see here an attempt to enslave the nuns and keep them docile and obedient. We have seen that the eight rules have not been observed on several occasions. Ven. Pandit Dhammananda Kosambi in his book "Bhagavān Buddha" pointed out that they have no historical value. Thus we are not in a position to be sure that they are enactments of the Buddha. The same idea is put in different forms in the Eight Rules. They are again enacted in the Vinaya rules. The leader of the Bhikkhuṇī Order did not comply with them. There is no reason to think that the Eight Rules were enacted by the Buddha.

Observance of penalties are developments that came later in the Śāsana, that is at the monastic stage. These observance of the monastic stage have found a place at the very inception of the

Bhikkhuṇī Order 15 years prior to the enactment of the Vinaya rules. Thus we find Vinaya rules non-existent at the time of the founding of the Bhikkhuṇī Order finding a place in the Eight Strict Rules known as the Aṣṭa Garu Dharma. This is evidence enough for us to conclude that the Eight Strict Rules are not enactments of the Buddha but the work of Elders who came after Him. They reflect the Brahmin ideology and thinking on the position of women in Indian religion and society in general. They carry cover tones of the Manusmṛti-the Code of Hindu Laws laid down by Manu, at a later day, after the Buddha's time. Commenting on Manu's laws Dr. B. R. Ambedkar said:

There is nothing new or startling about the laws of Manu about women. They are the

views of the Brahmins ever since Brahminism was born in India. Before Manu they existed only as a matter of social theory. What Manu did was to convert what was a social theory into the law of the state.*

Thus we see though the Buddha emancipated women from the shackles placed on the women by the Brahminic laws, after the demise of the Buddha the First Council of Elders took over the role of the Brahmins and downgraded women. They were responsible for the severe, unnecessary, and harsh conditions laid down on Bhikkhuṇīs. Their unkind anti-feminism is re-echoed in the opposition made by some Saṅgha Elders to the very idea of the restoration of the defunct Bhikkhuṇī Order in Sri Lanka.



* B.R. Ambedkar, 'The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman', *Mahā Bodhi Journal*, June, 1952