

# The significance of the monastic training system and the essential factors for the spiritual development of *bhikkhunīs* as depicted in early Buddhist discourses

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## ABSTRACT

The Buddha presents and establishes a new approach toward women's education by accepting Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī to enter the life of a *saṅgha* and lead a life based on the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* as a *bhikkhunī*. This was a great event in the history of the emergence of monastic training for women. The study investigates the essential factors supporting the development of *bhikkhunī* monastic life in the past based on early Buddhist discourses. Paper analysis methods were used in this study, and the documents used by the researchers were research material from the *Sutta Piṭaka* and *Vinaya Piṭaka*. The data was analyzed using descriptive qualitative analysis. The results revealed that by fulfilling the essential factors of the *bhikkhunī* monastic training, the Noble Ladies who had developed their lives in the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* in historical times successfully achieved the liberation of *saṃsara*. The results of this study contribute to providing several facts that women can reach the highest spiritual achievement as achieved by men.

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## Introduction

The Buddha teaches those who desire to listen to the *Dhamma* regardless of their social strata and gender. He emphasizes teaching by employing the gradual training of morality and mental development. He spearheaded this gradual training method as the first educational system in Buddhism. The fundamental component of the training is the practice of spiritual living, leading to the destruction of suffering.

During the Buddha's time, many factors contributed to the *bhikkhunīs'* training system becoming an efficacious path leading to the progress of the spiritual life. Firstly, the Buddha was an excellent teacher. Secondly, there were plenty of disciples with the maturity of meritorious deeds and persistence in the disciplines (*Vinaya*), and thirdly there was a suitable environment. Quite contrastingly, in the

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present, no teacher can compare with the Buddha in terms of their ability to teach the *Dhamma*. For instance, the Buddha has excellent knowledge for recognizing the qualities and weaknesses of all people (*D.III.287; Dh.193*). Fortunately, the Buddha Himself declared the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* as the future teacher after His passing away (*D.II.153*; Pemaloka, 2015). The Buddha's teaching will be available in the longer term if the disciples are persistent in walking on His path, depending entirely on the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* itself.

The monastic tradition of Buddhism has undoubtedly been the most widespread, both geographically and culturally (Mookerji, 2011). The traditional dates for the Buddha given in Western scholarship are 566-486 B.C. the Order He founded has existed for two and a half thousand years. Although the Buddhist Monastic Order had disappeared from India by the medieval period, it had been re-established in almost every other part of Asia. During the centuries following the Buddha's passing away, various 'schools of Buddhism arose. These ideals are preserved in the *Pāli* Canonical texts and Commentaries. They have been followed in India from ancient to early medieval periods. Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) from the third century B.C, and mainland Southeast Asia (Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia) from medieval times to the present day. Unfortunately, according to Wijayaratna & Collins (1990), the twentieth century has not been kind to Buddhism: modern governments in mainland China, Tibet, Vietnam, North Korea, Laos, and Cambodia have attempted to eradicate the religion or put very severe restrictions on the institutional possibilities for practicing it.

This writing attempts to discover the theoretical importance of the Monastic training system and the essential factors for the *bhikkhunis'* spiritual development based on the early Buddhist discourses, with the help of many works in the field of Buddhist women that authors have completed.

## Method

### Research context

This study investigates the essential factors supporting the development of *bhikkhuni* monastic life in the past based on early Buddhist discourses. Therefore, a form of library research was used. The data was collected by investigating literature from books and other sources relevant to the study. Literacy is based on the use of book sources, which is done through a semiotics method. Semiotics study helps researchers understand the central concept, research, or the true nature of a message. The specific aim of literary semiotics is to study signs and their meanings. The tool used in this semiotic approach is a descriptive simplification, grasping the definition of a concept through: (1) identifying the idea of the research topic as a question and the central concept or keywords in that question; (2) looking for background information in various references; (3) using catalogs to search for various references; (4) finding Internet resources, especially e-journals; (5) evaluating what has been found and the progress; and (6) citing what is found using a standard template (Surya et al., 2021). The reasons for using library research are: (1) the library used its resources to help answer research questions that are closely related to its mandate, (2) to help improve the understanding of one of the separate

stages, and (3) the reliability of library data for answering research questions is based on the fact that library data is collected, read, and taken notes, and processed research materials (Zed, 2018).

### ***Instrument and data collection***

This study's data was collected from various sources and literature on research issues. In this study, two types of data were used: primary and secondary data. Primary data comes from the original or primary sources (Bajuri, 2013). The primary sources used in this study came from the Buddha's teachings found in the Tipitaka scriptures, primarily based on the *Sutta Piṭaka*, *Vinaya Piṭaka*, and other commentaries (*atthakathā*). Secondary sources are sources that have been collected after the primary data has been collected. Secondary sources can help supplement primary data. A literature review collects secondary data from books, journals, papers, and previous studies.

### ***Data analysis***

Triangulation is used to ensure the validity of the data; it is the triangulation of source, methodology, and theory. The analysis models used are interpretative analysis models and paradigmatic theoretical models. Data analysis is done through the stages of data collection, data reduction, data presentation, drawing/verifying conclusions, and identifying concepts of the essential factors supporting the development of *bhikkhunī* monastic life in the past based on early Buddhist discourses using paradigm theory analysis (Surya et al., 2020).

## **Findings**

### ***Buddhist monastic training system***

The Buddhist monastic training system has resulted from a gradual development process under the pressure of the sociological environments, internal enthusiasm, and the principle of evolution. This system is considered the most conducive to attaining the ultimate goal outlined in Buddhism (*M.II.211*; Meyer, 1953). This progress is clearly shown in the Early Buddhist Discourses of the *Sutta Piṭaka* and the Principle Codes *Vinaya Piṭaka*. The Buddha is the founder of this system (Dutt, 2015). He went from home to homelessness to find the truth and was recognized by other ascetics as the great ascetic (*mahā samaṇa*). After that, when the monastic developed, His disciples were named after *samaṇa*, the sons of Sākya (*samaṇa sākyaputtiya*) (Dutt, 2015) and daughters of the Sākya (*sākyadiṭha*) (*Thig.336*).

As a result of the development of both *saṅgha*, *bhikkhu*, and *bhikkhunī*, according to the Buddhist stratification, society is divided into four groups; *bhikkhu*, *bhikkhunī*, *upāsaka*, and *upāsikā* (*D.II.104-105*, *III.125-126*, *148*; *M.I.493*, *III.255*; *A.II.29*; Anālayo, 2008; Abeynayake, 2003; Tsomo, 2000). The monastic community is made up of two groups: the order of monks (*bhikkhu saṅgha*) and the order of nuns (*bhikkhunī saṅgha*); together, they are called the twofold community (*ubhatosaṅgha*) (*M.III.255*). Another term used to refer to the entire community is

the community of the four quarters (*cātudissa saṅgha*). This phrase is found in the Vinaya texts' ancient inscriptions to symbolize the community's familiar spirit and joint ownership of property (Wijayaratne, 1990).

The existence of the *bhikkhunī* order in Buddhist society occurred over a long period. Several facts are discussed in the work of *bhikkhunī* Kusumā concerning the period of *bhikkhunī*'s first ordination. This occurred five years after the Buddha's enlightenment (Kusuma & Akincana, 2015; Friedman, 1987). Because the conventional view pressured Indian women regarding their role and occupation in society, it is easy to understand that it may not have been easy for them to participate in religious activities and study religion and life. The study of several works on the historical background of India reveals the way women struggled with their family life, religion, and society due to customs influenced by religious conceptions. Some scholars mention that the treatment of women in ancient Indian culture changed immediately after the arrival and settlement of Aryans in India. With the arrival of the *Aryans*, men came to the forefront, and women were pushed to the background. Women descended from their former pedestalled position (Altekar, 1999).

The illustration of ancient Indian women's lives was clearly understood through many laws and judgments that prevailed in those times. When the priestly *Brahmans* dominated society and religion lost its spontaneity and became a mass of ritual, women tended to a downward position. At the outset, *Manu* deprived women of enjoying their religious rights and spiritual life. Having thus denied them any spiritual and intellectual nourishment, *Manu* elaborated the myth that all women were sinful and prone to evil. The best way to prevent women from advancing in spiritual life was to keep them occupied with motherhood and domestic duties (Das, 1962). However, in actual practice, it could be said that *Manu*'s reputed Code of Laws did influence social attitudes towards women, at least in the higher rungs of society. Thus, it was accepted that women had no religious life (Abeynayake, 2003). There will be significant differences in modern life even though some traditions remain with the same practice and rules.

The *bhikkhunī saṅgha* gradually emerged after Mahāpajapātī Gotamī, and 500 women accepted to live their life as *bhikkhunīs*. Previously, they were unordained nuns with shaven heads and donned the yellow robes (*Vin.II.253-256; A.IV.274-278; S.II.80*). They walked from Kapilavatthu to Vesālī and approached the Buddha, asking for ordination. The first lady who got ordained was Mahāpajāpātī Gotamī, and her ordination was known as the ordination by acceptance of eight 'important rules' (*aṭṭhagarudhamma*) (*A.IV.276*). Thus, the *bhikkhunī* monastic training system began and developed in many ways. It can be seen in the increasing of rules, including the changing of the regulation of *bhikkhunī* ordination, recognition of the different qualities of *bhikkhunīs*, which contributes to the successful practice of the disciplines, and the Buddha's teaching methods that lead to the success of the monastic lives of many *bhikkhunīs* occurred.

### ***Essential factors for the spiritual development of bhikkhunīs***

The spiritual development of *bhikkhunī* depended on some factors. It was the presence of the Buddha and His teachings, the establishment of the rules, and

excellent disciples. The result of merits from the past and persisted in the Buddha's teaching became the fundamental factors contributing to the development and success of the *bhikkhunīs*' spiritual life.

### *The Buddha and his teaching*

It is common for religious masters to seek advice or teaching from deities or God, but this would never happen in the case of the Buddha. Deities are also beings caught in the circle of rebirths because they could not find the way out of it. The Buddha did not seek counsel from deities and human beings either and relied solely on His knowledge of the *Dhamma*. He placed Himself among the latter as one who teaches a *Dhamma* that he has directly known for himself (*M.II.211*).

The Buddha taught all classes of men and women without distinguishing between them. Out of His compassion and Wisdom, the Buddha guided His disciples to be more independent and aware of their spiritual potential. Therefore, the Buddha's dispensation is the right place for female disciples to gain more religious life opportunities and acquire essence and the best of bodily existence.

Bhikkhunī Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī received the Buddha's first teaching to bhikkhunīs regarding the method that undoubtedly facilitates enlightenment. The Buddha made significant utterances related to understanding the differences between *Dhamma* and non-*Dhamma*, disciplines and non-disciplines, and the Buddha's and others' teachings. It is said that when things lead to dispassion, detachment, dismantling, fewness of desires, solitude, arousing the energy, and being easy to support, these should be recognized as Dhamma discipline and the Buddha's teaching.

Many stories mention successful therīs in the Commentary, providing evidence of the Buddha's teaching methods. By understanding the mental state of His disciples, He guided them to increase their level of self-realization. About the stories of Paṭācārā (*ThīA 108*; *AA.1:356*; *DhA.2:260, 3:434*; *DA. 3746*; *MA.1.232*; *UA 127*; *J.6.481*). Moreover, Kisā Gotamī testifies to this practice. They were two remarkable *bhikkhunīs* who renounced the world through many painful experiences where they lost their dear ones and even became mentally unstable. They could not reason because of their stress from separation from their loved ones. Although the people called them crazy women, the Buddha treated them quite differently. The Buddha knows they can correctly understand and overcome their problems through His compassion.

When Paṭācārā wanted to approach the Buddha, the assembly called her a crazy woman and did not allow her to get close to Him. However, the Buddha said, "Do not restrain her." And then, she was instructed by the Buddha to regain her mind, and she did. After regaining her mind, she related her problem to the presence of the Buddha. The Buddha said, "Paṭācārā, do not think about that. You have come into the presence of one who can be of support to you."

While on the other occasion, when Kisā Gotamī approached Him and begged Him to heal her son, He comforted her with words full of empathy. The Buddha understood her thoughts and agreed to raise her dead son under one condition: she was required to collect mustard seeds as medicine from a family that had never lost one of their family members by death. At the end of her search, she had acquired the

ability to endure her pain by accepting the reality that her son was dead, and afterward, she realized that “everything is impermanent.” After that, due to their practice in the *Dhamma-Vinaya* and the Buddha’s instruction, they achieved *arahantship*.

#### *The bhikkhunī’s rules (bhikkhunī pāṭimokkha)*

The term ‘*pāṭimokkha*’ has been understood through various definitions. Etymologically, it is explained in the *Mahāvagga* of the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, *pāṭimokkha* based on the word ‘*mukha*,’ ‘entrance’; ‘*pāṭimokkha*,’ ‘the start, entrance, or forerunner of a good state’ (*Vin.I.103*). The term serves the basic code of training rules and the basic principles of the Buddha’s teaching: ‘The non-doing of all evil, the performance of what is skillful, and the purification of one’s mind’ (*Dhp.183*).

The *Bhikkhunī Pāṭimokkha* contains 311 rules (*Bhikkhu, 2019*). It consists of 304 training precepts (*sikkhāpada*) and seven *adhikaraṇa*. Some writers interpreted the different number of the rules between *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī* as a sign of some rules being added to oppress the *bhikkhunīs* unfairly. However, it should be noted that the additional rules were formulated to protect *Bhikkhunīs* from the abusive or careless behavior of other *bhikkhunīs*. For instance, two additional rules, *Pācittiya*s 6 and 44 (*Vin.IV.314*) aim to prevent *bhikkhunīs* from putting themselves in a position of servitude to *bhikkhus* or laypeople based on the rules’ original stories. Moreover, three different rules, *Pācittiya*s 59, 94, and 95 (*Vin.IV.314,342-343*), were formulated after *bhikkhunīs* complained to the *bhikkhus* about an errant in *bhikkhunī*’s behavior (*Thanissaro, 2013*).

Paṭācārā was the one who succeeded in practicing the *Vinaya* rules as the fundamental element of training. The Buddha proclaimed her the foremost among the nuns well-versed in the *Vinaya* (*Al.25*). In the time of the Buddha Padumuttara, she saw the teacher place a certain *bhikkhunī* in the leading position among those who knew the discipline. She performed a meritorious deed and aspired to attain that position. She inspired other nuns by teaching the Doctrine and practicing morals and virtuous conduct (*ThiA.118-120*).

*Bhikkhunī Pāṭimokkha* is the set of rules that must be followed by *bhikkhunīs* as guidance towards cultivating wholesome deeds in monastic life. The rules were laid down by the Buddha based on the ten reasoning: for the excellence of the order, for the comfort of the order, for the restraint of evil-minded nuns, for the ease of well-behaved nuns, for the restraining of cankers belonging to the here and now, for combating cankers belonging to other worlds, for pleasing those who are not (yet) pleased, for increasing the number of those who are pleased, for establishing what is verily *Dhamma*, and for following the rules of restraint (*Vin.III.21*).

Nuns who took place for each offense regarding the promulgating and increasing the Discipline rules were Thullanandā, Sundarīnandā, Caṇḍakālī, Six nuns, Bhaddā Kāpilānī’s pupil, and other certain nuns. Thullanandā is mentioned more frequently in the stories of the *Bhikkhunī Vibhaṅga* than any other individually named nun. Buddha laid down 37 rules regarding her misbehavior. Those rules were raised as a form of direct responsibility regarding the promulgation of two *Pārājika*, four *Saṅghādisesa*, seven *Nissaggiya* (forfeiture), and twenty-four *Pācittiya* rules. Caṇḍakālī was responsible for five offenses because she could not control her emotions and one offense concerning her close relationship with householders. She found it difficult to control her emotions, got involved

in quarreling, and was angry and displeased toward other *bhikkhunīs*. The six *bhikkhunīs* were responsible for their careless behavior for pleasure and desire. In brief, those responsible for guarding others against committing offenses were the very ones who found it challenging to maintain their behavior and lacked respect toward the Buddha's teachings and disciplines.

## Discussion

*Bhikkhunī* (Skt. *Bhikṣuṇī*) is a female mendicant, almswoman, or nun of the Buddhist monastic order (Pāli-English Dictionary, 1999). That name knows because of their habit of begging for alms (H.R.P.,1971). Buddhist texts say that the Buddha first established the community of monks. Later, apparently with reluctance and after the intercession of his faithful companion Ānanda (Rita, 1993: Anālayo, 2008), he granted the wish of his aunt and foster-mother Mahāpajapatī and established the community of nuns (*bhikkhunī saṅgha*) (Vin.II.253; A.IV.274-279; Gupta, 2009).

Some arguments have been raised to prove that women were given only a secondary position in Buddhism regarding quotations from the discourses and numbers of *bhikkhunīs'* rules. For instance, women were characterized by their inferior wisdom (*parittapaññāyā*) (Dhs.181, 584, 1018, 1034), foolish or incompetent (A.V.139), and lack of self-control (A.II.83; S.II.92). With regards to rules, *bhikkhunī* must obey more rules than *bhikkhu*. However, quoting only one part of the text should not conclude easily. From other canonical records, it is understood that the admission of women into the *saṅgha* proved a success in the monastic training system.

The success of Buddhist women leading lives as *bhikkhunī* is recorded in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, *Vinaya Piṭaka*, and the Commentaries. For instance, the *Therīgāthā* is full of stories of brilliant, noble ladies in the Buddhist Order and their psalms indicate their success in the monastic training. *Therīgāthā* represents personal accounts of the older nuns in poetic form, offering insight into their personal and spiritual lives. The verses describe their awakening experience through their struggles and hardships. The verses by those noble ladies or *bhikkhunīs* are portrayals of honesty and are free from self-pity or blame. The verses also emphasize that women have converted the hardships in their life into steps toward freedom and understanding spirituality; *Culla Vagga* and *Bhikkhunī Vibhaṅga* give ideas about progress *bhikkhunī saṅgha* and *bhikkhunīs'* rules; *Anguttaranikāya* and *Saṃyuttanikāya* mention about prominent Buddhist women. Those Canonical records denote that, whether it be in following the *Dhamma*, in their persistence in practicing moral conduct, gaining knowledge of *Dhamma*, and sharpening their spiritual potentialities, women were able to stand shoulder successfully shoulder with men (A.III.25; S.I.129; Haddad and Findly 1985; Abeynayake, 2003).

The *Ettadagavagga* of *Anguttaranikāya* mentions 13 foremost *Bhikkhunī*: Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī (in seniority), Khema (in great wisdom), Uppalavaṇṇā (in psychic potency), Paṭācārā (in discipline), Dhammadinnā (in delivering the *Dhamma*), Nandā (in meditation), Soṇā (raising energy), Sakulā (in divine sight), Kuṇḍalakesā (attaining direct knowledge quickly), Bhaddā Kāpilānī (in recollecting past lives), Bhaddā Kaccānā (attaining excellent direct knowledge), Kisāgotami (in wearing coarse robes), Sigālamātā (resolving through faith) (A.I.25-26). *Bhikkhunī*

Khemā and Uppalavaṇṇā are the standards and the best criterion for the Buddha's disciples (A.I.88).

Among that remarkable *bhikkhunīs*, *Therī* Khema and Upalavaṇṇā were declared the chief disciples of the Buddha among the *bhikkhunīs*. They were the role models for other *bhikkhunīs* in leading a monastic life. The Buddha said, “Bhikkhus, a *bhikkhunī* endowed with faith, rightly aspiring, should aspire thus: ‘May I become like *bhikkhunīs* Khemā and Uppalavaṇṇā!’ This was a standard criterion for *bhikkhunī* disciples that is Khemā and Uppalavaṇṇā” (A.i.88).

Besides that prominent *bhikkhunīs* who have excellent characteristics, many *bhikkhunīs* proved their success in practicing the monastic life. They restrain from careless behavior and unwholesome thoughts, and with meditation, they conquer *Māra* and attain Arahantship. Hundreds of poems are expressed as evidence of the success of '*therīs*' and prove that their wisdom develops through education in a monastic environment.

## Conclusion

In ancient times, women's ability to develop themselves spiritually was greatly hindered by old traditions, rules, and doctrines that gave women a secondary position in society. By rendering futile these old traditions, the Buddha opened the door for women to attain liberation from the cycle of suffering through the admittance of women into the monastic way of life. The acceptance of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī's entering the life of a *Saṅgha* by the Buddha was a significant milestone in history. It marked the emergence of *bhikkhunī* monastic training for women as a new approach. Without argument, the Buddhist Monastic Training System is considered the most conducive to attaining the ultimate goal outlined in Buddhism. The Buddha taught those who desired to listen to the *Dhamma* regardless of their social strata and gender. He taught all classes of men and women without distinguishing between them. This, in turn, resulted in many women attaining significant spiritual advancement in the Buddhist Order, and they include; *Therī* Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, Khema, Uppalavaṇṇā, Paṭācārā, Dhammadinnā, Nandā, Soṇā, Sakulā, Kuṇḍalakesā, Bhaddā Kāpilānī, Bhaddā Kaccānā, Kisāgotamī, and Sigālamātā. *Bhikkhunī* Khemā and Uppalavaṇṇā are known as the standard for disciples of the Buddha. The *Therīgathā* comprises many stories of brilliant, noble ladies in the Buddhist Order and their psalms are evidence of their success in the monastic way of life. Therefore, the significance of the Buddhist Monastic Training System and its three factors, namely the *Dhamma*, the presence of aspiring disciples with a maturity of meritorious deeds and persistence in the disciplines (*Vinaya*), and a suitable environment, cannot be ignored in the study of the spiritual development of the *bhikkhunīs*.

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