



“Buddhist Nun” in Sri Lanka in 2016, by Tomek Nacho, Flickr Creative Commons <http://bit.ly/2s7uh6u>

Note on this Case Study:

When considering this case study, remember that every major world religion originated and has grown in patriarchal societies—that is, societies where men hold most of the culture’s power, and people of any other gender are largely excluded from power. In this patriarchal context, religions have responded in very different ways, sometimes upholding and supporting misogyny, and sometimes subverting and rejecting it in favor of gender equality. Powerful women, feminists, and members of the LGBTQ community have played major roles in all faith traditions, in diverse ways across different times and cultures.

As always, when thinking about religion and gender, maintain a focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and embedded in specific cultures.

The Religious Literacy Project is directed by Diane L. Moore and all content is constructed under her editorial direction.

The Ordination of Nuns in Sri Lanka

From the beginning of Buddhism, both men and women have had roles in ordained ministry. Monks known as *bhikkhus* and nuns known as *bhikkhunis* formed the Buddhist *sangha*, or monastic community, supported by devoted lay people known as *Upāsaka* (males) or *Upāsikā* (females). However, these groups are rarely endowed with equal authority. The Buddha always affirmed women’s ability to achieve *nirvana*, but according to some Buddhist scripture known as *vinaya*, or rules for monastics, the Buddha was reluctant to ordain women. According to this text, he only agreed to form the community of *bhikkhunis* after the repeated insistence of his aunt and foster mother Mahapajapati, and the intercession of a man: his attendant Ananda. He agreed, but only under the condition that nuns follow eight additional rules, which included showing unquestioning subservience to their male counterparts, regardless of experience or age.¹ In addition, male monastics are instructed to follow only 227 precepts, compared to 311 for nuns.²

However, though nuns may originate with teachings of the Buddha himself, in actual practice, this did not occur in all Buddhist cultures. For example, while *bhikkhunis* have been common throughout history in largely Mahayana areas such as China and Japan, there were never female monastics in some regions, particularly in Theravada regions such as Thailand.³

In Sri Lanka—a South Asian island nation which is about 70% Buddhist⁴—debates surrounding the

ordination of women have recently intensified. Unlike many majority Theravada Buddhist nations, Sri Lanka has a history of female monastics. However, while *bhikkhunis* were present on the island from Buddhism’s arrival in the 3rd century BCE, the order died out sometime around the 11th century CE.⁵ Still, devoted female followers remained a force in Sri Lankan Buddhism, even without official recognition. In the early 20th century, a vibrant community of *Upāsikās* was founded known locally as *dasa sil mātāvo*. While not formally recognized as part

¹ Alan Sponberg, “Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism,” in *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón (Albany: Statue University of New York Press, 1992), 14-15.

² Tessa Bartholomeusz, “The Female Mendicant in Buddhist Sri Lanka,” in *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón (Albany: Statue University of New York Press, 1992), 51; Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, “Nuns of Thailand,” in *Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1988), 149.

³ Kabilsingh, “Nuns of Thailand,” 145.

⁴ World Religion Database, ed. Todd M. Johnson and Brian A. Grim (Boston: Brill, 2015).

⁵ Bartholomeusz, “The Female Mendicant,” 38-39.

of the *sangha*, these women became important parts of the religious landscape of 20th century Sri Lankan Buddhism, and played similar roles to traditional Buddhist nuns.⁶ In the 1980s and 1990s, calls for the official ordination of these *dasa sil mātāvo* as *bhikkhunis* grew, stemming mainly from Theravada Buddhists in the West—particularly in the US—and from Sri Lankan government researchers. These voices from outside the *dasa sil mātāvo* community called for the reinstatement of the female *sangha* in order to promote an agenda of human rights and gender equity.⁷ In 1988 and again in 1996, the first Sri Lankan nuns in nearly a millennium received their ordinations. They were able to do so with the help of Mahayana nuns from east Asia, to fulfill the quorum of ten nuns required by the *vinaya* to be present at an ordination.⁸

Calls for inclusion in the *sangha* were met with mixed reaction from Sri Lankan Buddhists. Male *bhikkhus* of Sri Lanka largely rejected these efforts. Some claimed that since the *bhikkhuni* quorum in the ordinations were made up of Mahayana Buddhists from Korea and China, not Theravada Buddhists from Sri Lanka, the ordinations of Sri Lankan nuns were invalid. They claimed that since there were no longer any Theravada nuns in the world, that future ordinations were impossible.⁹ Most *dasa sil mātāvo* also rejected ordination. Some agreed with the monks that the lack of Theravada nuns to create a quorum made the ceremony impossible. Other women were concerned that becoming *bhikkhunis* would subject them to subservience to the male monks due to the eight conditions that the *vinaya* claimed the Buddha put on *bhikkhunis*. Many of these women believed that the eight additional rules did not come from the Buddha at all, but were later additions from the editors of the *vinaya*. These women felt that their current status as *dasa sil mātāvo* gave them a position of greater equality than they would receive as *bhikkhunis*.¹⁰

However, a small group of nuns in the region did actively pursue ordination. Even though *dasa sil mātāvo* are generally very well respected by the citizens of Sri Lanka, some of these women believed that the fact that they are not members of the *sangha* contributed to what they saw as their low status in society. They claimed that because monastics are the providers of merit for Buddhist lay people, that Buddhists generally chose to support the official male monastics with donations rather than the *dasa sil mātāvo*. They also pointed to the fact that male monks generally held their female counterparts in low esteem, a view that the laity began to reflect.¹¹

Today, while hundreds of Buddhist women in Sri Lanka have been formally ordained as *bhikkhunis*, few of the *dasa sil mātāvo* have actively sought out ordination. Few were ordained as part of any broad protest movement within their community. Rather, the women waited until “the conditions leading to [ordination] met their approval,” and when they saw more benefits than detractions, they accepted the official designation.¹² In the meantime, the rest of the Theravada Buddhist world has reacted in diverse ways to the growth of female ordination in Sri Lanka. Some Buddhists, particularly those living in North America, have cheered these developments, while others, particularly those living in Southeast Asia, have decried the efforts, and redoubled their attempts to prevent female ordination in the Buddhism of their region.¹³

⁶ Bartholomeusz, “The Female Mendicant,” 51.

⁷ Nirmala S. Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice: In Search of the Female Renunciant*, (New York: Oxford UP, 2013), 131-2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 161-4.

⁹ Bartholomeusz, “The Female Mendicant,” 52.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 52-3.

¹² Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice*, 13, 145-6.

¹³ Bartholomeusz, “The Female Mendicant,” 54; Salgado *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice*, 162.

Additional Resources

Primary Sources:

- For a translation of the Vinaya on female ordination, see page 406-409:
<http://bit.ly/2sfeTnJ>

Secondary Sources:

- BBC description of the struggle of the first ordained women in Sri Lanka (2004):
<http://bbc.in/2seZNP8>
- The Nation—one of Thailand’s English news sources—on diverse reactions in Thailand to the ordination of nuns in Sri Lanka and elsewhere (2016):
<http://bit.ly/2sUeKnW>
- Asia Times story about an American Buddhist Nun being met with violence after challenging Thailand’s rejection of female ordination (2017): <http://bit.ly/2s2DoCv>

Discussion Questions

- How do different Buddhists in Sri Lanka respond to female ordination? Why might they respond in this way?
- How do different Buddhist interests across the world (Sri Lanka, Thailand, the United States, etc.) respond to the possibilities of ordaining Theravada women? Why might these interests respond in such divergent ways? How might questions of power play a role in these questions?
- Buddhist women in the community of *dasa sil mātāvo* have responded to questions of ordination in very different ways. What do these differences tell us about the intersection of religion and gender?
- Nirmala Salgado, a scholar of female Buddhist monasticism said that “promoting the higher ordination of women [in Sri Lanka] was primarily about ensuring the success of Theravada missionary efforts in America.”¹⁴ Why might missionary efforts by American Buddhists be influenced by ordination practices in Sri Lanka? How might this statement impact your understanding of the *dasa sil mātāvo*’s response to receiving ordination?
- How might the many newly ordained *bhikkhunis* change the way Buddhism is practiced in Sri Lanka?



“Ordination of a Upasikā as a nun in Sri Lanka” by Vihanga SA, Wikimedia Commons:
<http://bit.ly/2s7EDn3>

¹⁴ Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice*, 162.