



## Venerable Sujato - "White Bones and Red Rust: How the bhikkhuni order came and went"

The role of women in monasticism is perhaps the most controversial issue affecting modern Buddhism. It is apparent that female renunciates play a decidedly secondary role in most traditional Buddhist cultures. Increasingly, this assumed secondary status is coming under close scrutiny, and sometimes direct challenge.

It is well known that the Buddha set up a two-fold monastic community – the male bhikkhus and the female bhikkhunis. The existence of a monastic community specifically founded by the Buddha would seem to render the position of bhikkhunis unassailable.

Of the three main Vinaya traditions alive today, only the Chinese tradition, following the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, retains the bhikkhuni lineage. It can be no coincidence that wherever this tradition is followed – for example, Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam – there are many nuns, and they play a central role in religious life. In the Theravada and Tibetan (Mulasarvastivada) traditions, there is traditionally no bhikkhuni ordination, and hence the opportunities for women to renounce are poor.

In recent years there has been a revival of the bhikkhuni lineage in both Theravada and Tibetan Buddhism. This, however, has not been accepted by the majority of monks in these traditions. While this opposition is usually gentle but trenchant, in some cases women have been jailed simply for being a bhikkhuni.

An inquiry into the reasons for this opposition takes us back to the canonical sources of the order. The canonical passage on the founding of the bhikkhuni order depicts the Buddha's foster-mother Mahapajapati begging for ordination and being repeatedly refused. Even when the Buddha relents, he pronounces that the ordination of women will bring about the doom of Buddhism in 500 years. In addition, the Buddha laid down eight 'rules of respect' governing the relationships between male and female Sanghas, rules that are usually interpreted as subordinating the female Sangha. This passage is found, with the usual variations, in all the existing Vinayas (and sometimes Suttas). This story makes it seem as if the bhikkhuni order was forced on a reluctant Buddha, and hence exerts a powerful influence weighing against the reintroduction of bhikkhunis.

This forum will examine some of the issues around bhikkhuni ordination. In particular, we will focus on some specific strategies of revisioning the early texts, with a keen ear for the 'minority report' – the voices of the nuns themselves.