

Revival of the Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha

- Island of Light (Extract), T Y Lee

After having disappeared for almost a thousand years, the Order of Theravada nuns has been revived in Sri Lanka in recent years. Prior to this, women could not ordain and could only be what are called Dasa Sil Matas, or Ten Precept Mothers. This group was founded in 1903 by Catherine de Alwis who became a Dasa Sila Mata in Burma.

Many people, both lay and Sangha, realized that this was unfair to women and inconsistent with the Buddhist spirit of equality between the genders. It was also not in keeping with the Buddha's fourfold division of his disciples, that is, monks and nuns, lay men and lay women.

Historically, Sinhalese nuns from Anuradhapura had established the bhikkhuni Sangha in China in 429 CE, where they ordained 300 Chinese women in Nanking. Chinese bhikkhunis therefore trace their lineage to these Sri Lankan nuns. There were at least three groups of nuns and one group of monks who travelled to China around that time.

Today, many senior monks and laity are supportive of the revival of the Sinhalese bhikkhuni Sangha through ordination by Chinese nuns. Although there were a few earlier unsuccessful attempts to do this, the bhikkhuni Sangha was finally restored in December 1996 at Sarnath in India. The Sinhalese nuns returned to Sri Lanka a year later, where they ordained a group of Dasa Sil Matas in Dambulla.

This revival was encouraged by many senior and influential people, among them the heads of the Malwatta and Asgiriya chapters of the Siyam Nikaya who approved of the bhikkhuni ordinations at Dambulla. However, there is still some resistance from several members of the Sinhalese and Thai Sangha, who tend to focus on the technicalities of the ordination procedure rather than the spirit of the Buddha's teachings.

Nonetheless, the island has now become the centre of this revival of the bhikkhuni Sangha, and there are now more than 500 properly ordained Theravadin nuns in Sri Lanka.

One of the most well-known nuns of recent times was Ayya Khema who in 1979, became the first western woman to become a Theravadin bhikkhuni. Born in Germany, she helped establish Buddhist centres in Australia and Germany and wrote more than 20 books, which have subsequently been translated into several languages. She went on to ordain several other Sri Lankan and western nuns before she passed away in 1997.

With more and more women becoming nuns, the Buddha's fourfold Sangha is becoming a reality again.