

# The Interpretation of the Original Text of the Eight Deferential Rules (*P. aṭṭhagarudhammā*)

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**Abstract:** In ancient India, women traditionally faced extreme discrimination. However, the Buddha emphasised that men and women are both suitable Dharma vessels and equally equipped with the capacity for liberation. In addition, he carefully and skilfully negotiated the opposition from the monks and society at large towards women and helped them establish a spiritual community (saṅgha) of their own. Nevertheless, according to the accounts of the Vinaya, the Buddha required the bhikkhunīs to abide by what are known as the Eight Deferential Rules, whose core is to pay respect to bhikkhus and to submit to the control of bhikkhu saṅghas.

Master Yinshun argued that the inequality reflected in the making of the Eight Deferential Rules originated from the social context of that era. As bhikkhus, they were obligated to oversee and educate bhikkhunīs because of their seniority in the saṅgha. As a result, bhikkhunīs were obligated to respect bhikkhus even if some were of lower social status than themselves. Therefore, Yinshun argued, the intention of setting the Deferential Rules was actually for bhikkhus to inspire and guide rather than to discriminate and suppress bhikkhunīs.

This essay analyses and interprets the Eight Deferential Rules from the perspectives of scriptural context and historical background. It infers that the right to compile and interpret scripture has always been dominated by bhikkhus. Therefore, it is likely that some bhikkhus with chauvinistic minds turned the original ethical structure of seniority in the Buddhist community into a bias of gender inequality. Consequently, bhikkhus took pride in their gender, and bhikkhunīs were overshadowed by a perception of inferiority which caused difficulties in their lives. This even led to the interruption of bhikkhunī lineages in the Theravāda and Tibetan Buddhist systems. Furthermore, the essay argues that the Eight Deferential Rules should be regarded as a product of history and be fully deconstructed. According to the author, this would liberate female practitioners' spirits, as well as hold the key to freeing the conditioned minds of male practitioners.

**Keywords:** Dependent origination (Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*; P. *paṭiccasamuppāda*, Ch. 緣起), All sentient beings are equal (Ch. 眾生平等), bhikkhunī (Ch. 比丘尼), saṅgha (Ch. 僧伽), male chauvinism (Ch. 男性沙文主義), “the Eight Deferential Rules” (P. *aṭṭhagarudhammā*, Ch. 八敬法)

## I. Introduction

Based on the principle of dependent origination, all beings result from causes and conditions. Disparities such as inferiority and superiority are not fundamental but are, rather, caused by karmic conditions. When causes and conditions vary, differences ensue. The Buddha taught: all that is conditioned is impermanent. There is no essential existence that is permanent, unchangeable, independent, and real. The Buddha also taught: all phenomena are empty and devoid of self. As a result, in Buddhist philosophy, all beings are considered equal under the principle of dependent origination.

With this premise in mind, Buddhism places specific emphasis on the equality of all human beings. In the Buddha’s time, he gently opposed the rigid caste system by examining its manifestation in society. For example, when the Brahmin Aggikabhāradvājassa<sup>1</sup> addressed the Buddha as an untouchable (P. *vasalaka*), the latter calmly explained to him that what matters is not the background of one’s family and ancestry but one’s good or bad karma (as expressed through thought and behaviour). The Buddha said: “One is not born a Brahmin due to his ancestry, it is karma that defines one as an outcast or a Brahmin” (不以所生故, 名為婆羅門, 業為領群特, 業為婆羅門).<sup>2</sup>

The Brahmins appointed themselves advocates of the gods and developed the theory of the caste system which created a hierarchy. The Buddha referred to this as a kind of forceful oppression and deprivation: “It is as if one forces others to accept meat and at the same time pay for it” (猶如有人, 強與他肉, 而作是說:「士夫可食, 當與我直!」).<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the saṅgha founded by the Buddha

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<sup>1</sup> Vasalasuttaṃ aggikabhāradvājassa brāhmaṇassa is referred to as a Zoroastrian Brahmin in *Sutta Nipāta, Khuddaka Nikāya, Pali Canon. Vasala Sutta*, Sn 1:7.

<sup>2</sup> *Za ahan jing*, T 99.2.29a26–28. All Taishō canon citations (T) refer to the digitised CBETA edition.

<sup>3</sup> *Zhong ahan jing*, T 26.1.661a25–26.

emphasised that after followers are ordained and begin studying Dharma, they no longer belong to their original castes, and from then on are only referred to as monastics.<sup>4</sup>

The foundational belief that all beings are equal causes tension within any hierarchy (including with regard to male superiority in gendered hierarchies). Yet, even when women faced serious discrimination in ancient India, the Buddha reinforced that men and women can both be dharmic vessels and reach liberation. Even under intense cultural pressure to treat women as inferiors, using skilful means, the Buddha carefully reduced bias of male monastics and of the general public, and supported the formation of a female saṅgha.

To analyse this issue deeply from the Buddhist perspective, we may say that any discrimination against others—whether based on ethnicity, identity, gender, or species—is derived from ignorance and misunderstanding of dependent origination. It is also a consequence of exaggerated self-importance, which values oneself or one's community over others. In today's world, we are overwhelmed by discriminative speech and actions. To change this, we have to face ignorance and self-important ideas, not only in social systems and collective consciousness but also in every individual. This kind of fundamental affliction is deep-rooted. Therefore, gender discrimination does not come from social bias, but from every mind that is possessed by ignorance and arrogance.

Those in the Buddhist saṅgha are not immune to the above mentality; they can be misled by the righteousness of their interpretation of sacred words and become lost in wrong views. Here we may find even more rampant gendered prejudice than in the general population. Therefore, it is necessary to re-examine the original scriptures regarded as sacred teachings and fundamentally deconstruct gender discrimination in the Buddhist world.

As a bhikkhunī who studies Buddhist philosophy academically, I have witnessed first-hand all kinds of harm that patriarchal views have caused female (and even male) Buddhist practitioners. I have long researched and tracked

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<sup>4</sup> *Zhong ahan jing*, T 26.1.477a24–28: “Practitioners may be born into the caste of *khattiya*... the caste of those who wish to pursue a spiritual life, the caste of laypeople, the caste of craftsmen. Once they shave their hair, don monks' robes, devote themselves to Buddhism, leave their home, have no home to return to, and study Buddhism, then they share only one name, that is monk.” 刹利種族姓子, .....梵志種、居士種、工師種族姓子, 剃除鬚髮, 著袈裟衣, 至信、捨家、無家、學道, 彼捨本名, 同曰沙門。

the harm of patriarchy on Buddhist practitioners, and have published a book dedicated to this subject, *Qianzai chenyin: Xin shiji de fojiao nüxing siwei* 千載沉吟: 新世紀的佛教女性思維 [Intonation for Thousands of Years: Buddhist Feminist Thought for a New Century].<sup>5</sup> This book investigates the root causes and development of this problem, and analyses it academically. The following essay will examine two focal points: the establishment of the bhikkhunī saṅgha and The Eight Deferential Rules (P. *aṭṭhagarudhammā*, Ch. *bajingfa* 八敬法). Since my book was originally written in Chinese, in this essay I hope to share my interpretation and analysis, based on scriptural and historical contexts, with the English academic world.

In addition to the common vows they share with their male counterparts, the bhikkhunīs must take additional vows including the Eight Deferential Rules which focus on respect and etiquette towards the bhikkhus, and allow the bhikkhu saṅgha to exert great power over the bhikkhunī saṅgha. In this paper, I will examine each of the rules that bhikkhunī saṅghas have followed since their inception. Firstly, I will discuss Master Yinshun's research on how these rules were historically rooted in vinaya and his perspectives on them. I will then analyse them academically, examining their impact on bhikkhunī saṅghas and lineages, and subsequently question their necessity.

## II. The Establishment of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha

In the extant Indian historical texts, women were dismissed as inferior and unworthy since the Yajurveda era (1000–500 BCE). *Manusmṛiti*, a book written around the second century BCE, also clearly states: “Unmarried women must obey their fathers and married women must obey their husbands. After their husbands pass away, they must obey their sons.”<sup>6</sup> Child marriage and dowries that did not meet the in-law's expectations led many women to be tortured by their husbands' families and, in the worst cases, even to be immolated.

When a widow lost her husband, she was considered ominous. According to tradition, she should shave her head and not be allowed to wear jewellery or colourful clothes. She cannot inherit anything from her husband's will nor remarry, and is bound to household chores for the rest of her life. Furthermore,

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<sup>5</sup> Shih, *Qianzai chenyin: Xin shiji de fojiao nüxing siwei*.

<sup>6</sup> Swayambhaura Manou, *Monu fadian*, 148–49.

via *sati*, a Hindu funerary practise, widows could be immolated on their husband's pyre shortly after his demise. Both families encouraged this living sacrifice. This custom was practised in the rural villages of Northern India as late as two centuries ago. In his work *Hindu Manners, Customs, and Ceremonies* (Ch. *Yindu zongjiao yu minsu* 印度宗教與民俗), Abbe J. A. Dubois recounted in detail a widow's process of accepting this practise in Tanjore, and how her determination turned to terror as she followed the tradition to its conclusion.<sup>7</sup> To me, this reading experience was infuriating.

These traditions for widows give some sense of the status of ancient Indian women. At that time, Yinshun writes, women were seen as “poorly educated, emotional, and lacking organisational skills” (一般比丘尼, 總不免知識低、感情重、組織力差).<sup>8</sup> Not only were they believed to be born with fewer physical attributes than men, but social conditions were to their disadvantage. Consequently, even though the Buddha believed that all beings are equal and females can also reach enlightenment, when his aunt Mahāpajāpatī Gautamī (referred to as Gautamī hereafter) along with a slew of palace maids sought ordination from him, he hesitated and did not offer an immediate promise.<sup>9</sup>

Based on the account from *Madhyamāgama*, at that time, the Buddha was in Rains Retreat in Kapilavastu Nigrodha at Sakkesu (modern-day Southern Nepal). Gautamī went to him and asked whether women were able to attain the state of arhat. The Buddha responded that females could indeed practise the Dharma and achieve enlightenment. This answer offered legitimacy to female ordination. Nonetheless, the Buddha refused to answer her question of whether women could be ordained. Gautamī persisted with two further requests despite the Buddha's initial refusal. When the Buddha completed the retreat, he put on robes and started practising mendicancy. Gautamī learned this and led the palace women to follow him the entire way to Vesali. Upon arrival, she made her third request, and once again, it was denied.

After a long arduous journey, Gautamī was exhausted and covered with dust. She stood outside of the monastery and wailed. The Buddha's attendant,

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<sup>7</sup> Dubois, *Yindu zongjiao yu minsu*, 49–51.

<sup>8</sup> Yinshun, *Chuqi dacheng fojiao zhi qiyuan yu kaizhan*, Y 0035.193.

<sup>9</sup> The long, difficult struggle of women fighting for ordination was recorded in many vinayas. For convenience, I here use the version of the *Gautamīsūtra* (Ch. *Qutanmi jing* 瞿曇彌經) in *Zhong ahan jing*, T 26.1.605a8–607b16.

Ānanda, known for his kindness and extraordinary power of memory, saw the anguished Gautamī and asked her what had happened. Upon hearing her explanation, Ānanda understood the reason for her tears. His compassion arose, and he offered to intercede with the Buddha on her behalf. In conversation with the Buddha, Ānanda also asked an essential question: can women reach various stages of awakening through practise? If so, what stops them from being ordained?

According to the scriptures, when confronted by these questions, the Buddha rejected the possibility of female ordination. His reason was that if women were allowed to take precepts—along with vows to study this right Dharma—their dedication would require them to leave their families and personal responsibilities behind. According to this account, this would make the Buddhist inner practises cease to exist forever.<sup>10</sup> All versions of vinaya later interpreted this answer as a refusal of women’s requests for ordination. In this view, if females were ordained, the true Dharma would become extinct five hundred years sooner than it would otherwise.

Nonetheless, Ānanda persisted and proposed: “In the past, Gautamī has taken care of you in many ways. After your mother passed away, she became your stepmother and took you under her wing” (瞿曇彌大愛為世尊多所饒益……世尊母亡後，瞿曇彌大愛鞠養世尊).<sup>11</sup> With this, he attempted to convince the Buddha to ordain her in gratitude for her grace. The Buddha recognised her care for him but thought he, too, had benefited Gautamī. She had taken refuge with the Three Jewels, heard teachings, upheld precepts, practised generosity, and gained wisdom. Following his conversation with Ānanda, the Buddha started drafting eight regulations for female monastics, which were later referred to as “The Eight Deferential Rules.”<sup>12</sup>

Next, we will discuss and analyse the content of these rules. The foregoing historical account seems to have many loopholes worth pondering:

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<sup>10</sup> *Zhong ahan jing*, T 26.1.605c3–4.

<sup>11</sup> *Zhong ahan jing*, T 26.1.605c12–14.

<sup>12</sup> *Zhong ahan jing*, T 26.1.605c14–29: 瞿曇彌大愛多饒益我，謂母亡後，鞠養於我。阿難！我亦多饒益於瞿曇彌大愛。所以者何？阿難！瞿曇彌大愛因我故，得歸佛、歸法、歸比丘僧，不疑三尊及苦、習、滅、道，成就於信，奉持禁戒，修學博聞，成就布施而得智慧……阿難！我今為女人施設八尊師法。

- a. If Ānanda’s initial proposal was that women could be ordained because they were capable of reaching enlightenment, why was this not sufficient to support female ordination? It seems that the concerns over keeping Dharma teachings alive triumph over offering opportunities for half of the population on the earth to reach enlightenment. I would argue this inference is not reasonable.
- b. The development of Buddhism in Taiwan for the last twenty years provides powerful evidence to disprove the prophecy that “female monastics would prevent the inner disciplines of Buddhism from abiding in the world” (若使女人得於此正法、律中, 至信、捨家、無家、學道者, 令此梵行不得久住).<sup>13</sup> Over the last two decades, the population of Taiwanese bhikkhunīs has outnumbered bhikkhus by a factor of two. Not only has Taiwanese Buddhism not ebbed, but it has in fact thrived. In addition, bhikkhunīs’ activism has outperformed that of bhikkhus.

Taiwanese bhikkhunīs have made great strides in overcoming adversity and are making advances in engaging the world’s suffering. The most well-known example is Master Cheng Yen 證嚴上人 (1937–), who has built a compassionate international organisation, the Tzu Chi Foundation 慈濟基金會, dedicated to disaster relief. This organisation now has more than ten million members across the globe and has influenced many lives in positive ways. In my view, Tzu Chi is not only the light of Taiwan but also the glory of Buddhism.

Venerable Hsing-Kuang 性廣法師 and I co-founded Hong Shi Buddhist College 佛教弘誓學院. Practitioners in Hong Shi have actively led or participated in important social issues such as animal protection, regulation of casinos, anti-nuclear protests, and gender equality rights.

Considering the above examples, why is this premise—namely, that “female monastics will prevent inner disciplines of Buddhism from abiding in the world”—still followed?<sup>14</sup> Female ordination has never been the reason for the languishing of Buddhism in any time or place in world history. Therefore, in my opinion, upon the Buddha’s death, a group of bhikkhus whose job was to compile and edit

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<sup>13</sup> *Zhong ahan jing*, T 26.1.605c3–4.

<sup>14</sup> *Zhong ahan jing*, T 26.1.605c3–4.

classic scriptures created this pseudo-claim on his behalf to discredit the legitimacy of women in the monastic tradition. Although there is no way to verify the validity of this claim, it was misused by later generations of bhikkhu saṅghas to hinder the formation of bhikkhunī saṅghas in Theravāda and Tibetan lineages.

- c. According to history, the first Buddhist saṅgha that gathered to compile the scriptures was dominated by Mahākassapa, a senior teacher of ascetic practises<sup>15</sup> who did not support the ordination of women. He confronted Ānanda at the gathering, accused him of major misdeeds—one of which was to request female ordination from the Buddha—and asked Ānanda to confess to this publicly. Although Ānanda thought he had done nothing wrong, he confessed in order to foster harmony in the bhikkhu saṅgha.<sup>16</sup> In a society that held strong discriminatory views against women, and in which male Buddhist practitioners appropriated the right to compile and interpret the canons, it would have been difficult for them to escape the influence of the cultural view of the female gender as a source of impurity, evil, and an obstacle to monastic life.
- d. The Buddha disagreed with Ānanda's second point regarding the parental nurturing he had received from Gautamī. He believed that the benefits were reciprocal. Moreover, he argued, principles cannot be based on an individual case. If he agreed to use this point to justify her ordination, what about other women who sought the same but did not have a personal connection with him?

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<sup>15</sup> For the record of “the first Buddhist saṅgha that gathered to compile the scriptures,” see *Sifen lü* 四分律 (Skt. \**Dharmaguptakavinaya*, *Four-Part Vinaya*) for details. T 1428.22.966a14–968c17.

<sup>16</sup> Regarding this aspect, Master Yinshun, as a male practitioner with a gentle and wise character, wrote this article “Enan guo zai hechu” 阿難過在何處 [Was there Any Fault with Ānanda?] and offered an in-depth detailed analysis of this account. He concluded that Ānanda requested the Buddha to ordain women and the Buddha had granted his request. This symbolised a view of equal opportunity for the liberation of both men and women. What Mahākassapa represented was the traditional male-centred view which regarded females as ominous and with lesser capacity. Instead of a full investigation into the reasons for a potential downfall of the Dharma, Mahākassapa attributed it to female ordination. In fact, however, Ānanda never failed to follow the Buddha's perspective. See Yinshun, “Enan guo zai hechu,” Y 0027.88–114. [Editorial Note: This essay is included in translation on p. 245 of this issue, entitled “Ānanda's Faults.”]

- e. Ānanda did not further other points for female ordination, but the Buddha immediately started to make rules for the bhikkhunīs. If these accounts were a movie, this moment might be seen as a jump cut. Therefore, I infer that Ānanda’s initial proposal was the main catalyst for ultimately allowing female ordination. As an enlightened being who understood interdependence, he certainly cared about equality—the core theory of interdependence. It is unreasonable that an enlightened being like the Buddha, who permitted the lowest caste (Skt. *sūdra*) to be ordained, would use any excuse to deprive women of the same opportunity of a pathway to awakening.<sup>17</sup>
- f. The recorded dialogues between the Buddha and Ānanda in various scriptures seem incoherent and lack rationality. Therefore, I infer that the Buddha did not respond to Ānanda directly. There may have been many reasons for him to hesitate to offer female ordination in the scriptures, some of which sound like attacks and insults stemming from the bhikkhus’ assumptions.

However, why did the Buddha refuse Gautamī’s repeated requests? I believe that the Buddha was mainly concerned with practical difficulties. First of all, female monastics’ safety could hardly be guaranteed. According to vinaya, there once were bhikkhus who passed by a wilderness and had their belongings and clothes robbed by bandits. They then had to go naked to the capital of Sāvatti (舍衛城), and the bhikkhus in Jetavana vihāra (祇園精舍) kindly gave them clothes to cover themselves. Even though these were men with physical advantages, they were still not spared from robbery.<sup>18</sup> At that time, monastics lived a wandering lifestyle and only stayed in one place for three months of the year. How could they ensure the safety of the female monastics travelling through the wilderness of the forests? Who could guard them against male violation? Even if they could walk with bhikkhus to avoid the aforementioned issues, and even if they had pure intentions, having both

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<sup>17</sup> Yinshun, “Enan guo zai hechu,” Y 0027.100.

<sup>18</sup> The robbing by thieves of the bhikkhus’ robes and bowls is recorded in various scriptures of different sects. Volume 8 of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya* (Ch. *Genben shuoyiqie youbu pi’naiye* 根本說一切有部毘奈耶) specifically records their embarrassment when they were robbed and asked for help naked. (T 1442.23.667a15–b18).

genders living in close proximity could provoke criticism from the general public. These were practical concerns without an obvious or proper solution.

My own teacher, Master Yinshun—who I knew to be wise and kind and had an extraordinary memory like Ānanda—also regarded this issue from a practical view. He said:

At the time, discrimination against women was common practise. Men were more valued and respected. According to vinaya, it was a lot more difficult for women to practise mendicancy than men—they received far less food and other donations than bhikkhus. Travelling, accommodation, education level, the danger of being raped, and physical inferiority... all of this made them potentially more vulnerable than men. In addition, they were seen to have stronger attachments (for example, concerns for their children), believed to be more emotional, less rational, and narrow-minded. These habitual patterns seemed to unavoidably increase the saṅgha's challenges. Nevertheless, the Buddha finally promised to offer female ordination for the reason that when a challenge arose, it should be addressed rather than cursed. In the Buddhist spirit of compassion to the world, lay women were finally given the chance to be ordained, the equal opportunity to dedicate their lives to Dharma, and the chance to reach enlightenment.<sup>19</sup>

Though Ānanda helped women gain ordination, after the Buddha's death Mahākassapa brought harsh and unfair charges against him specifically about this. From Mahākassapa's reaction, we see how much this incident disturbed those conservative senior members who were entrenched in the chauvinism of the times. Modern Buddhist Master Yinshun made the following comments about the records of female ordination in the scriptures. Noting the equality of men and women as vessels for Dharma, he states:

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<sup>19</sup> Yinshun, "Enan guo zai hechu," Y 0027.100a08–a13: 在重男輕女的當時社會，女眾受到歧視。據律典說，女眾從乞求而來的經濟生活，比比丘眾艱苦得多。往來、住宿、教化，由於免受強暴等理由，問題也比男眾多。尤其是女眾的愛念（母愛等）重，感情勝於理智，心胸狹隘，體力弱，這些積習所成的一般情形，無可避免的會增加僧伽的困難。但是，釋尊終於答應了女眾出家。因為有問題，應該解決問題，而不是咒詛問題。在慈悲普濟的佛陀精神中，女眾終於出家，得到了修道解脫的平等機會。

Men and women share no difference in belief, morality, conduct, wisdom, nor in their capacity to understand Buddhist philosophy.... Both women and men can practise Dharma and reach liberation. They are both wonderful vessels for Dharma and equally capable. Therefore, physiology does not matter.... For two thousand years, Buddhist philosophy has been held in the hands of male practitioners. This situation has not only hindered the Buddhist spirit of equality for both genders but also elevated the male status and subjugated the female status. Instead of being uplifted, female practitioners have been despised, reviled, and considered to lack the intelligence and worthiness to receive Buddhist teachings from these male practitioners. That is a total distortion of the Buddha Dharma!<sup>20</sup>

### III. Deconstructing the Eight Deferential Rules and Discriminatory Precepts in Monasteries

Below, I will quote Master Yinshun's analysis of the Eight Deferential Rules, and share my responses to his analysis. It should be emphasised that while Master Yinshun took a more empathetic perspective and exercised understanding and tolerance of the Eight Deferential Rules, I am inclined to deconstruct and analyse their correctness and legitimacy thoroughly. The reason is that, from my own observation, these rules are like a ball on a tilted slope. The ball does not stay at the point at which it is placed; rather, it keeps rolling downwards—the so-called slippery slope effect. No matter how much tolerance and understanding we have of them, we must consider clearly how these rules are gender-biased. We cannot ignore the practical harms they bring to the Buddhist community. In the legend of Gautami's ordination, she practised the Eight Deferential Rules. Therefore, it is said that she adopted this practise in exchange for her ordination. However, Master Yinshun examined the texts and asserted that Mahāsāṃghika and the Saṃmitīya schools offered different interpretations of these rules.<sup>21</sup> Both require bhikkhunīs to show deference

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<sup>20</sup> Yinshun, *Fofa gailun*, Y 0008.173a03–174a04: 男與女, 約信仰、德行、智慧, 佛法中毫無差別……女眾與男眾, 同樣的可以修道解脫。依這道器的平等觀, 生理差別的男女形相, 毫無關係……二千多年的佛法, 一直在男眾手裡。不能發揚佛法的男女平等精神, 不能扶助女眾、提高女眾, 反而多少傾向於重男輕女, 甚至鄙棄女眾、厭惡女眾, 以為女眾不可教, 這實在是對於佛法的歪曲!

to bhikkhus. Master Yinshun pointed out: “The Eight Deferential Rules are nothing but a set of rules that regard bhikkhunīs as bhikkhus’ property. These rules demonstrate the status of bhikkhunīs in Buddhism, which is that they are obliged to recognise the superior leadership of bhikkhus” (「八敬法」不是別的, 是比丘尼僧屬於比丘僧的約法(八章)。說明了比丘尼在佛教中的地位; 也就是比丘尼承認比丘僧的優越領導權).<sup>22</sup> However, why must bhikkhunīs submissively accept the superior leadership of bhikkhus? Will this unbalanced situation lead the preferred gender to develop arrogance, prejudice, and other twisted mindsets? Master Yinshun offered no answers.

In addition, after making a detailed comparison of the existing records, Master Yinshun discovered minor differences in the content of these Eight Rules in various versions of vinaya.<sup>23</sup> This proved that this was not a consistent set of regulations even before the division of Buddhism into various schools. These differences undermine the credibility of the rules themselves and further call into question those who attributed them directly to the Buddha to strengthen their legitimacy.

Among the Eight Rules, one states:

**(8) A bhikkhunī who breaks any of the vows of respect must undergo *mānatta* discipline before both orders.**

(比丘尼, 犯僧殘(罪名)應於半月中在二部之僧(比丘、比丘尼)中行摩那埵)

*Mānatta* is the eighth Deferential Rule and is the punishment for violating any of the others. Whether this punishment is reasonable will be discussed later. Let us first examine the remaining rules.

In his comparison, Master Yinshun discovered that in different versions of the vinaya, the following four rules appear in all versions:<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Yinshun, *Yuanshi fojiao shengdian zhi jicheng*, Y 0033.402.

<sup>22</sup> Yinshun, *Yuanshi fojiao shengdian zhi jicheng*, Y 0033.402a03–a04. Regarding Master Yinshun’s comparison, categorisation, interpretation, and judgement of the Eight Deferential Rules, please refer to his work *Chuqi dacheng fojiao zhi qiyuan yu kaizhan*, Y 0035.193–96. The thesis in this paper only cites several of his viewpoints and responds to them.

<sup>23</sup> Yinshun, *Chuqi dacheng fojiao zhi qiyuan yu kaizhan*, Y 0035.192.

<sup>24</sup> Yinshun, *Chuqi dacheng fojiao zhi qiyuan yu kaizhan*, Y 0035.193.

- (1) **As an initiate, a bhikkhunī trains in six disciplines for two years, then should she wish to seek higher ordination from both saṅghas, she may do so.**

(於兩眾中受具足) (Skt. *upasampanna*)

When women take their full ordination, not only do they have to be endorsed by ten bhikkhunīs but also by ten bhikkhus. This is referred to as the *ubhato*-saṅgha, also known as the twofold saṅgha. It means that if women hope to receive their full ordination, they must have the bhikkhus' verification in order to live a monastic life. If any of their actions are found to break the vows, then bhikkhus can deny their request and block their ordination.

- (2) **Every half month, a bhikkhunī saṅgha should request two things from the bhikkhu saṅgha: a) further Buddhist teachings and b) arrangement of confessional ceremony (Skt. *upavasatha*) to recite the monastic rules of conduct.**

(半月從比丘僧請教誡, 問布薩) (Skt. *upavasatha*, P. *posatha*, *uposatha*)

For this rule, the opportunity for all of the saṅgha to gather in one place and discuss vows has two purposes. One is that all members of the saṅgha can review the content of their vows in order to carefully observe them. The other is that if there are any infractions, a member is expected to confess and ask for redemption. Accordingly, bhikkhunī representatives are sent to the bhikkhu saṅgha to request Buddhist teachings and guidance on their vows. As a result, the bhikkhus provide a qualified teacher to expound Buddhism and receive reports on vow-keeping from the bhikkhunīs to ensure that they have been maintaining good conduct.

- (3) **A bhikkhunī must not spend the rains retreat in a residence where there are no bhikkhus.**

(不得無比丘住處住) (Skt. *vārṣika*, P. *vassa* 指安居)

Each year, the saṅgha members who follow the vinaya are required to stay in a particular location for the annual three-month rains retreat. When bhikkhunīs choose a location for their retreat, it must be set in a place near the bhikkhus for the convenience of petitioning for teachings.

**(4) A bhikkhunī must make an “invitation for feedback” (Skt. *pravāraṇā*) before both monastic orders with respect to three matters: what was seen, what was heard, what was suspected.**

(安居已, 於兩眾行自恣) (Skt. *pravāraṇa*, P. *pavāraṇā*)

When the rains retreat is completed, there should be a ceremony of invitation for feedback in which a bhikkhunī invites others to report any infraction that she has committed and then repents according to the vows to regain purity. For bhikkhunīs, apart from doing this in their own community, they must also repeat the entire process before the bhikkhu saṅgha and ask for their correction.

Master Yinshun considered the first four rules to be the actual way in which the Eight Deferential Rules were implemented. On why these rules were written, he wrote:

In general, bhikkhunīs were thought to be emotional, poorly educated, and because of their family confinement they lacked social skills and worldly experience (this was the general situation in ancient India). Consequently, it could be challenging to expect them to follow all the precepts and vows involved with wandering monastic lifestyles and maintain the purity envisioned in the Buddhist teachings. As a result, these rules were intended to show respect for the bhikkhus, who they depended upon for guidance and education. From the point of view of the bhikkhus, the purpose of the rules was to maintain harmony and purity in the bhikkhunī communities. As senior monastic members, their obligation was to oversee the lives of the bhikkhunīs.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, this interpretation failed to resolve the following questions:

- a. In ancient times, noble Indian women received an excellent aristocratic education. They were not likely to be judged as “poorly educated,”

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<sup>25</sup> Yinshun, *Chuqi dacheng fojiao zhi qi yuan yu kaizhan*, Y 0035.193a02–a05: 一般比丘尼, 總不免知識低、感情重、組織力差(這是古代的一般情形)。要他們遵行律制, 過著集團生活, 如法清淨, 是有點困難的。所以制定「尊法」, 尊重比丘僧, 接受比丘僧的教育與監護。在比丘僧來說, 這是為了比丘尼僧的和樂清淨, 而負起道義上的監護義務。

overly “emotional,” or disorganised. Therefore, why were those bhikkhus, many of whom came from the lower castes and were poorly educated, not required to emulate the bhikkhunīs? Instead, this rule proposed that all bhikkhunīs, regardless of capability and level of education, surrender to the bhikkhus.

- b. Even if we assume, for the sake of argument, that all bhikkhunīs in ancient India indeed faced the adversities outlined above, numerous modern bhikkhunīs are highly educated, responsive, and possess strong organisational skills. Why should they be required to observe these outdated provisions?
- c. Even if we were to assume that modern bhikkhunīs are still plagued with these problems and therefore not so different from their historical counterparts, it still does not make sense to require them to observe these Eight Rules, which demand piety only to enviably qualified bhikkhus. Why not respect all people—laity and monastics alike—who possess such excellent qualities?
- d. If men have the right to “educate and oversee” women, it would continue the institutional patriarchal practise of regarding women as men’s property found in both ancient Indian and China. This kind of ideology promotes obedience to father, husband, and son, and diminishes women’s social status. Buddhism is known to be a religion of egalitarianism. Is it reasonable for the Buddhist saṅgha to continue this inherited biased ideology?
- e. While it is true that newly ordained monastics may need education and monitoring, why should these rules extend to senior bhikkhunīs and ones with distinguished records of observing vows?

When the first bhikkhunī saṅgha was nascent, they had limited Dharma knowledge. The Buddha could not be there to oversee and guide them in the long run. Therefore, the responsibility of teaching the bhikkhunī saṅgha fell on the shoulders of the bhikkhus. However, the rules were not intended to connote a type of privilege for bhikkhu members. Rather, they were made to remind the bhikkhu saṅgha, which was established long before the bhikkhunī saṅgha, to select assistant teachers from senior members with both the morality and knowledge required to guide this new saṅgha.

How does a bhikkhu fulfil his duty as an “assistant teacher”? First of all,

to improve bhikkhunīs' level of precepts, meditation, and development of wisdom, every two weeks, on a designated date, bhikkhunīs are required to seek instructions from the bhikkhu saṅgha. Two bhikkhus who have already demonstrated ten desirable qualities are selected as assistant teachers and educate the bhikkhunīs in the Three Higher Trainings.

According to the *Sifen lü* 四分律 (Skt. \**Dharmaguptakavinaya*, *Four-Part Vinaya*), the ten qualities that make a bhikkhu qualified for this are: 1) having received full ordination; 2) possessing outstanding powers of memory; 3) capable of reciting the two sets of vows; 4) determination; 5) competence in offering teachings; 6) not coming from the lowest caste; 7) having appealing looks, so that joy arises when bhikkhunīs see him; 8) capable of teaching Dharma with inspiration and able to elicit joy; 9) understanding that dressing in monastic robes without the intention of pursuing the Buddhist path is a serious infraction; and 10) is at least twenty years old or even older, which most likely means that one has been fully ordained for at least twenty years.<sup>26</sup>

The purpose of listing these ten conditions is to help readers understand that these rules are like ethical codes for a profession which, in this case, is a monastic assistant teacher. These rules are neither constructing a bhikkhu's right to leadership over bhikkhunīs nor emphasising patriarchal gender ethics.

Not only did the Buddha provide an ethical code, but he was also practical. He understood human nature and realised beautiful looks were valued. Therefore, he even officially listed "having appealing looks" (Ch. *yan mao duanzheng* 顏貌端正) as one of the ten official conditions. Thus, we know that those who are physically unattractive cannot be potential instructors.

Following this logic, we can easily understand the requirement in the second, third, and fourth Eight Deferential Rules. When bhikkhunīs attempt to find a location for the Rains Retreat, they are required to not stay too far away from the bhikkhu saṅgha, such that they can easily go for their instructions every two weeks (the third rule). In addition, they can also invite the bhikkhu saṅgha to point out their faults at the end of their retreat (the fourth rule).

Finally, because the bhikkhunī saṅgha was newly formed, whether new members were qualified to be ordained was also an issue. Perhaps because

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<sup>26</sup> Regarding the rule of bhikkhunīs admonishing bhikkhus, please refer to *Sifen lü*, T 1428.22.767a18–b2: 戒律具足、多聞誦二部戒利、決斷無疑、善能說法、族姓出家、顏貌端正、比丘尼眾見便歡喜、堪任與比丘尼眾說法勸令歡喜、不為佛出家而披法服犯重法、若滿二十歲若過二十歲。

these recently ordained bhikkhunīs were not yet capable of using their best judgment, new members who wished to be ordained had to have consent from both bhikkhunīs and ten bhikkhus (the first rule). This provisions for ten people to approve these new members' applications and another ten to examine their qualifications. As a result, twenty bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs would be required.

These first four rules are more likely to have been made by the Buddha in the early stages of the monastic community's development. Out of compassion, he instituted these rules to protect and take care of the bhikkhunī saṅgha. Who would have thought that later on, patriarchal bhikkhus would use them to confine the bhikkhunīs' development?

I personally often suspect that the rule "a new bhikkhunī member should receive ordination in the presence of both saṅghas" could be the main contributor to the near extinction of the Theravāda and Tibetan bhikkhunī lineages. There is no reason for bhikkhunīs to want to stop ordaining new members, for why would they want to reduce their own membership? Nonetheless, bhikkhus can refuse to form a group of ten members to audit the qualifications of female applicants. This would prevent new bhikkhunīs from joining the order due to failure to complete the entire official ordination procedure. As a result, as existing members of each bhikkhunī saṅgha slowly pass on, in less than two decades, bhikkhunī saṅghas around the world could disappear. What was initially intended as a positive support for the bhikkhunī saṅgha has turned into a convenient weapon for repressing the growth of their saṅghas. Over thousands of years, this is one of the most regrettable situations we have witnessed in Buddhist communities.

Therefore, I often express empathy for the female Theravāda and Tibetan novices and the women of eight or ten precepts. Those bhikkhus who oppose the continuation of bhikkhunī lineages, some of which are already broken, with trivial excuses or "Buddhist teachings" practically break their vows. The reason the Buddha instated any vow was to prolong the continuation of the right Dharma, but these bhikkhus are doing the opposite, making it impossible for the other half of the world's population to maintain the Buddhist inner disciplines.

Moreover, due to the precedent requiring the involvement of both saṅghas when it comes to bhikkhunīs, everything bhikkhunīs are required to do is increased or even doubled. This is a clear proof of the aforementioned slippery-slope effect. In other cases, such as the aforementioned *mānatta* rule, for

the same transgression the punishment for the bhikkhunīs is always greater. Is this equitable? It seems like this rule is based on a double standard. Transgression and punishment in both saṅghas should be equal and fair. It makes us wonder: why? Is it because the processes of expiation and absolution should also be approved by the bhikkhu saṅgha?

The next three rules of the Eight Deferential Rules are:

**(5) Any bhikkhunī, even if she has been ordained for a hundred years, must greet every bhikkhu respectfully, rise from her seat, salute with joining palms, and prostrate to him even if he were newly ordained that day.**

(受具百歲, 應迎禮新受具比丘)

**(6) Admonition of bhikkhus by bhikkhunīs is forbidden.**

(不得呵罵比丘)

**(7) A bhikkhunī must not report any misdeed by a bhikkhu she witnesses.**

(不得說比丘罪)

Master Yinshun considered that the Eight Deferential Rules were written to address saṅgha relations. The first four rules are meant to demonstrate respect for bhikkhus. The next three rules are intended to address etiquette. The aforementioned eighth rule refers to the expiation for those who transgress the other seven rules. If all of them are considered to be Deferential Rules, transgressors would be expected to practise *mānatta*—the penance for the second category of probationary offence—in front of the two saṅghas on the second and fourth week of the month. Yinshun considered this punishment too harsh. Compared to the rules affecting bhikkhunīs in vinaya, he discovered that for the same level of infraction in the case of bhikkhus, the penance is *pācittiya*, which is a lesser category of violation and can be translated as “a misstep.” Therefore, Yinshun concurred that it must have been practically impossible to apply *mānatta*, which is why the penance was changed to the lesser.

I suspect conservative bhikkhus added this harsher penance (*mānatta*) in order to control bhikkhunīs more strictly. By doing so, these rules are very different from the original vinaya for bhikkhunīs. First of all, regarding the

penance for breaking the Deferential Rules, I believe it is impossible to initially make an infraction a serious second-level probationary offence, and to then later change it to a smaller penalty. To the contrary, it was highly likely that a misstep incur a lesser punishment initially but that the rule was later altered by bhikkhus with an authoritative mentality. It seems like the opposite should be the case. An important feature of vinaya is that a rule is made *only after* a misdeed is committed. As a result, the first seven rules were introduced due to an initial transgression. It would, therefore, be impossible that these rules already existed during the founding of the bhikkhunī saṅgha. The listed precepts in the “Differentiation of the Discipline” (*Lü fenbie* 律分別) in the bhikkhunīs’ vinaya offers a clear clue.<sup>27</sup> According to the original texts of Prātimokṣa,<sup>28</sup> infractions of the Deferential Rules were originally categorised as lesser offences. Nevertheless, later on, conservative senior bhikkhus added harsher penance, such as practicing *mānatta* every two weeks in front of both saṅghas, which, in my opinion, seems like a means to tighten the control of bhikkhunīs.

The bhikkhus’ tampering with these rules left evidence that is contrary to the true intention of the Buddha. We should consider the legitimacy of these rules. If a bhikkhunī fails to prostrate to a newly ordained bhikkhu, or speaks about a bhikkhu’s misdeed, she would be guilty of a probationary offence (*mānatta*) that is only second to the most serious downfall. She would also be one step closer to being expelled from the saṅgha. Are these seemingly minor infractions really so detrimental? Is it necessary to apply such heavy penance? It makes one question the justness and legitimacy of the practises.

Further, for the fifth, sixth, and seventh rules, there is evidence against them in vinaya scriptures. In the beginning, there was not necessarily a set of eight rules. As stated above, rules were made out of necessity. Therefore, the Buddha was unlikely to make, for example, a rule against verbal abuse or admonition of a bhikkhu unless there was a precedent. When examining various versions of vinaya, I found that bhikkhunī Gautamī reported misdeeds of

<sup>27</sup> *Dabiqiu sanqian weiyi* 大比丘三千威儀 [Three Thousand Regulations for Great Bhikkhus]. T 1470.

<sup>28</sup> *Biqiuni boti mucha* 比丘尼波提木叉 in *Sifen biqiuni jieben* 四分比丘尼戒本 (*Four-Part Bhikkhunī Precept Book*), T 1431.22.1038a4–12. The penalties in the relevant articles are all *pācittiya* (*boyiti* 波逸提), not *mānatta* (*monaduo* 摩那埵). *Pācittiya* is the punishment for the minor precepts and *mānatta*, belonging to *saṅghādisesa* (*sengqie boshisha* 僧伽波尸沙), is the punishment of the next most important precepts. The punishments for the two categories are very different.

the Six Bhikkhus to the Buddha.<sup>29</sup> The Buddha did not stop her from reporting, and reprimanded the six misbehaving monks. Consequently, a rule was made to ensure that only bhikkhus who had met the aforementioned ten qualities of a dignified teacher could provide teachings to the bhikkhunī saṅgha. Therefore, I highly doubt the credibility of the seventh rule.

*Upāsakas* are permitted to admonish bhikkhus. In the “Two Types of Ecclesiastical Offences” (P. *dve aniyatā dhammā*, Ch. *Er buding fa* 二不定法) found in the vinaya for bhikkhus, female lay practitioners could indeed report the misbehaviour of bhikkhus who broke their vows.<sup>30</sup> Why are female lay practitioners allowed to point out the misdeeds of bhikkhus while bhikkhunīs are not? Even if we do not consider that “all beings are equal,” is a bhikkhunī’s status considered lower than that of a female lay practitioner? The sixth rule basically sets up the potential for panic and resentment among spiritual sisters and brothers.

In addition, the reason for the rule against bhikkhunīs reprimanding bhikkhus was recorded in the *Sifen lü*. Bhikkhu Kapila was reprimanded by some bhikkhunīs because he destroyed the relic chamber of a deceased bhikkhunī.<sup>31</sup> In ancient India, some senior females were from noble or wealthy families. One example is Mṛgāra-mātṛ, known by her worldly name as Viśākhā, who had deep faith in Buddhism and became a major patron of the bhikkhu saṅgha.

Like Viśākhā, some female patrons took robes later in their lives, and after their demise, their relic chambers were constructed on the land they had kindly offered for use by monastic saṅghas. At times, these relic stūpas were built by their younger family members or fellow bhikkhunīs on land occupied by bhikkhus. This was perfectly reasonable. After all, the lands were the possessions of these patrons’ families; even though the buildings constructed on them may have belonged to the bhikkhu saṅgha, the lands were not necessarily their property.

However, according to the description in the vinaya, some bhikkhus not only prevented bhikkhunīs from building relic chambers, but also destroyed

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<sup>29</sup> Regarding the details of Gautamī’s report of the misdeeds of the Six Bhikkhus, please refer to *Sifen lü*, T 1428.22.647b26–8b28. Regarding the rule of bhikkhunīs admonishing bhikkhus, please refer to *Sifen lü*, T 1428.22.767a18–b2.

<sup>30</sup> Shih, “Jiejie yuanwei yu zhijie yuanli,” 360.

<sup>31</sup> *Sifen lü*, T 1428.22.776b19–c7.

existing ones. Understandably, these acts stirred anger within the bhikkhunī saṅgha. If the situation had been reversed, the acts would not have been tolerated. Nevertheless, the critique of the bhikkhus' behaviour has since become seen as a transgression on the part of the bhikkhunīs.

The bhikkhus escalated the argument and proposed that bhikkhunī relic chambers would no longer be built within the boundaries of a bhikkhu saṅgha from then on.<sup>32</sup> Initially, the admonishment of a bhikkhu was deemed a mere *pācittiya* transgression. Who would have thought that the bhikkhus, who intended to escalate this issue, would make the admonishment a probationary offence? The main point is that neither bhikkhus nor bhikkhunīs should denigrate anyone, and that anyone with infractions should receive the penance of *pācittiya*. Is this not the common principle of vinaya? When did this two-way principle become a one-way penance?

The most grievous provision of the Eight Rules is “a nun who has been ordained even for a hundred years must greet respectfully, rise from her seat, salute with joined palms, prostrate to a bhikkhu ordained but that day.” In other words, bhikkhunīs should offer their respect from a position of inferiority in terms of deportment. Essentially, a bhikkhunī is required to “look up to” all her male counterparts. From this rule, we see that gender bias becomes ubiquitous and influences all Buddhist community members (rather than solely bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs).

If we consider this rule from its historical context, when Gautamī first established the bhikkhunī saṅgha, perhaps the Buddha encouraged respect for bhikkhus as a practise of humility for the first bhikkhunīs due to their former royal status. When they interacted with bhikkhus from inferior castes, the bhikkhunīs were not to behave in a superior manner based on their noble castes but rather to defer to them as senior members. In ancient times, prostration may have expressed this kind of etiquette and respect. However, in modern society, in which equality is highly valued, bowing is enough to show respect.

To sum up, the first four rules from the Eight Deferential Rules should be perceived as ethical codes of behaviour in schools where junior members show courtesy to senior members. It should never have turned into an issue of

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<sup>32</sup> Regarding the above categorization, interpretation, and judgement of the Eight Deferential Rules, please refer to Master Yinshun's work *Chuqi dacheng fojiao zhi qiyuan yu kaizhan* 初期大乘佛教之起源與開展, Y 0035.193–96.

gender bias that promotes male superiority and female inferiority. Nevertheless, the unreasonable and absurd rules—namely, rules five through seven—are presented as gender ethics instead of gender bias.

Today, human civilization is constantly progressing in places where equality and mutual respect are highly valued. Secular societies have moved toward an “all beings are equal” stance, but parts of the Buddhist world are lagging behind. These communities, instead, deter the progress toward gender equality.

Master Yinshun thought that these rules were derived from the context of women being treated unequally in traditional societies. Therefore, the original rationale for establishing these rules was to create a conducive environment where bhikkhunīs respect bhikkhus and the latter guide and educate the former. The intention was to inspire and enhance the monastic membership, not to dismiss and repress half of it. He lamented:

Ever since the Buddha passed away, Mahākassapa and other senior bhikkhus’ undisguised rejection of bhikkhunī ordination makes it understandable why these rules to respect bhikkhus have turned into the Eight Deferential Rules. These rules are no longer a means of guidance and education for bhikkhunīs (to observe whether they act and study according to the Buddhist teachings) but have become a means for the strict management of them, which allows bhikkhus to exert power over bhikkhunīs.<sup>33</sup>

從釋尊涅槃後，摩訶迦葉等上座比丘，對比丘尼出家所持的厭惡情緒，可以想見從「尊法」而集成「八尊法」的目的。「尊法」已不是對比丘尼應有的監護（是否如法）與教育，而成為對比丘尼的嚴加管理，造成比丘對比丘尼的權威。<sup>34</sup>

When obligation turns into privilege, and kind intention is distorted into disgust, is this not further solid evidence of the slippery slope?

As a bhikkhu in a saṅgha that was filled with chauvinistic ideology, Master Yinshun still managed to propose a historical analysis and present a positive perspective towards female monastics with his interpretation of the original texts. His willingness to respond to the pressure of his peers from the

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<sup>33</sup> Regarding this perspective, please read a detailed analysis in Shih Chao-Hwei’s “Jiejie yuanwei yu zhijie yuanli,” 109–10.

<sup>34</sup> Yinshun, *Chuqi dacheng fojiao zhi qiyuan yu kaizhan*, Y 0035.193a10–a13.

Buddhist community is worthy of respect. As for myself, I insist on treating the Eight Deferential Rules as a product of history and altogether deconstructing them. When the right to compile and interpret the Buddha's teachings belongs solely to the bhikkhus, some of the contents and provisions might be erroneously explained by the bhikkhus to restrict and control the bhikkhunīs.

#### IV. Conclusion

In the Buddha's teaching of the "Four Reliances" (*si yi* 四依), we are taught that one is to rely on real meaning, not provisional meaning. Real meaning refers to the ultimate reality that all beings are equal. Any other ideology that professes hierarchy is not ultimate. In the same vein, having studied vinaya, I have discovered a similar principle that is found in modern monastic jurisprudence. In Buddhism, no rule can contradict the ten benefits (root vows) that are fundamental to the saṅgha establishment. The purpose of this is to support the right Dharma, so that Buddhist inner discipline may abide in the world. The ten root rules of the precepts are the foundation for this. Any rule, as long as it is instituted for a specific time or environment, may be transgressed due to changing times and places. And any rule that is contradictory to the fundamental rules should be nullified.

In today's world, local jurisdictional rules cannot take precedence over fundamental rules, just like any regional law cannot conflict with a national constitution. Those who are sentenced according to civil law or criminal law can even be vindicated by appealing to a higher judicial body to overturn their conviction. Similarly, any of the minor rules that were made to meet the practical development of the Buddhist saṅgha should be nullified if: a) they are later found to contradict the ultimate meaning of universal equality, or b) might prevent the right Dharma or the inner discipline to abide.

Today, I believe that both the quantity and quality of bhikkhunīs are greater than that of bhikkhus. Some bhikkhus, with chauvinistic pride, avoid occasions where bhikkhunīs teach Dharma, which, I believe, is their loss. However, why are the bhikkhunī saṅghas still required to seek teaching from them? This was a practical need when the bhikkhunī saṅgha was newly founded, but now it seems to have become a mere formality. Seeking guidance was rightfully necessary when bhikkhunī saṅghas did not understand the Buddha's teachings,

but now that the bhikkhunī saṅghas are mature and fathom the teachings, why should they still follow this custom?

Today, bhikkhunī saṅghas are more independent than ever before. In this context, the Eight Deferential Rules require overall re-examination. I hold the following questions: a) Should bhikkhunīs still be required to seek teachings from bhikkhus every two weeks? b) Regarding the Rains Retreat, when bhikkhunīs choose a place to settle, is it necessary to stay near the bhikkhu saṅghas? c) Once the retreat is completed, should it be mandatory for bhikkhunīs to invite bhikkhus to point out their faults and confess in front of them? d) Is it essential that bhikkhunīs receive ordination and confess in front of both saṅghas? From a practical perspective, I think all these rules can be forgone, especially those which were clearly intended for monastic women to defer to men, such as the required prostration and the inability to report faults of bhikkhus.

From the ancient to modern saṅghas, the root of Buddhist correct thought and behaviour is Dharma: the principles of interdependence, impermanence, and selflessness—all of which are based on the premise that all beings are equal. From my nearly three decades of observation in the Buddhist community, I have found that whenever thought and behaviour are not in accordance with the Dharma, they cast shadows in practitioners' minds and create difficulties in their lives.

To highlight the issues that women in Buddhism continue to face, I have examined the challenges they were up against when seeking ordination, and the context in which The Eight Deferential Rules were made and applied. I have addressed the activism of Taiwanese bhikkhunīs and have touched on the plight of Theravāda and Tibetan female practitioners. Due to the differences in causes and conditions, a variety of distinct paths for female practitioners have unfolded. I believe that if we ignore the natural evolution of saṅghas which occurs due to interdependence, if we refuse to make collective choices according to Dharma principles, and if we allow ignorance and self-importance based on individual bias or conventional social systems to guide the future of Buddhist women, we will have made a mistake. This would be unfair and bring further problems to both monastic saṅghas. It is not only bhikkhunīs who are afflicted by this unfair system, but also Theravāda women of eight or ten precepts and Tibetan anis.

After all, if bhikkhus' devotion to the Buddhist teachings and strict adher-

ence to their vows occur under the delusion of ignorance and self-importance, they will completely deviate from the wisdom of interdependence and selflessness. As a result, I firmly believe that we should make a conscious choice to revise our monastic system based on the Dharma principle of asserting the equality of all human beings. This choice is based on the wisdom of interdependence, impermanence, and selflessness, and could help deconstruct the male chauvinism that still persists in the Buddhist world today. If this could happen, it would provide equal opportunities for both female and male practitioners to reach their ultimate pursuit of a liberated mind.

## Abbreviations

- Sn            *Sutta Nipāta*. See Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, trans.  
T            *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*. See Takakusu and Watanabe, eds.  
Y            *Yinshun fashi foxue zhuzuo ji*. See *Yinshun fashi foxue zhuzuo ji*.

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