Bhikkhunis and spiritual leadership

- Bhante Sujato, for the Asian Buddhism Connection (ABC) Conference 2018

Abstract

Bhikkhuni ordination, despite initial resistance, has taken root and flourished in Theravada Buddhism. Women's leadership is critical for any community, all the more so due to the multitude of challenges facing us today. By supporting and encouraging our bhikkhunis, we are building a more resilient and adaptable Buddhism for the future.

Like most men, I grew up simply not noticing the ways in which my gender offered me opportunities and advantages that were denied to women. Even after becoming a monk, I just accepted the fact that women could not ordain as a fact: that's just "the way it is". But I couldn't deny one thing: that everywhere I went, it was mostly women coming to the temple, and mostly women who were meditating. But the moment that pierced my heart was when my own sister said to me that she could never full commit to a religious path, because none of them treat women equally.

I started to research the issue and found, as have so many others, that there are no real obstacles to bhikkhunis ordaining. I wanted to share the good news with my fellow monks. And while many of them were indeed delighted and supportive, I found, to my surprise and growing disappointment, that many of them were simply not interested. Instead of seeing this as wonderful chance for growth and renewal in Buddhism, they felt threatened, and did all they could to oppose ordination.

It was then that I understood—discrimination against women is not just "the way it is". It is actively and deliberately constructed by men. And so long as we oppose such a basic and obvious moral reality, we drag down those who would create a better and fairer world, and empower those who use their power to bully, harass, and abuse women. The reality of discrimination in Buddhism is our great shame. It was not something created or taught by the Buddha. It stems from our failure to live up to the ideals that he taught; our failures of compassion and wisdom. The good news is, we can change; we can do better.

Now, due to the sustained and constructive work by thousands of people, mostly women, all over the world, the bhikkhuni order has taken root in Theravada Buddhism. There are bhikkhunis almost everywhere, and they are doing great things. We can see them practicing, learning, studying, serving, worshiping, supporting their communities, inspiring by their example.

In my work on Buddhist texts for SuttaCentral, I work closely with Ayya Vimala, a Dutch bhikkhuni who has quietly made incredible contributions to our field. She is only one of many bhikkhunis who are now quietly and effectively building the Dhamma in their own way. Now that the ordination is done, we can move ahead, building a Buddhism for the future.

When we encourage and support women's aspirations to practice the spiritual life, we lift up all women. And when we lift up women, we lift up men, too. It's not a zero-sum game. We're setting an example for the community, showing them that women, no less than men, can be wise,

compassionate, and strong. When we take our daughters to the temple, they can see those qualities embodied in women. They can hear women teaching, women being treated with respect, and women as leaders. Then they know that they can do those things, too.

The world is in dire need of moral leadership. We are faced with an unprecedented range of challenges and threats, all of them cascading at the same time: climate change, pollution, and deforestation; tens of millions of people displaced from their homes; massive and growing inequality and racism; the decline of the international rule of law; destabilizing technologies like AI, robotics, the Internet of Things, and blockchain; and the pernicious threat of religious extremism. Our leaders, whether political, corporate, or spiritual, are paralyzed, reactionary, fearful. They don't understand what is happening, and they don't have any plans for how to deal with it.

There is a precedent for a kind of leadership that can rise to such radical changes. The Buddhist king Ashoka, who lived a couple of centuries after the Buddha, is justly renowned for his moral integrity and honesty. But what is less appreciated is the fact that he, too, lived in a time of great and unpredictable turmoil. In the decades before his ascension, his predecessors had established dominion over most of continental India, creating the first historical India empire. Not only did he have to hold together his massive and incredibly diverse nation, he was also faced with the challenge of dealing with multiple external kingdoms, from Sri Lanka to Egypt and Greece.

How did he do it? With Dhamma, of course! In his writings, you will not find much reference to "Buddhism". But he is constantly referring the "Dhamma". And by that he meant a compassionate and rational ethics, a set of behaviours undertaken specifically in the recognition that it was the best thing for both this life and the next.

But there is something else. His fine words would have had little weight if he had not established his own moral authority. And he did that with one simple act: he said sorry. As was exemplified so many times in the Suttas, he acknowledged that he had done wrong. And he confessed this to his people in his own words:

> Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Priyadarsi, conquered the Kalingas eight years after his coronation. One hundred and fifty thousand were deported, one hundred thousand were killed and many more died (from other causes). After the Kalingas had been conquered, Beloved-of-the-Gods came to feel a strong inclination towards the Dharma, a love for the Dharma and for instruction in Dharma. Now Beloved-of-the-Gods feels deep remorse for having conquered the Kalingas. (Ashoka, Rock Edict 13)

By focussing on Dharma, rather than Buddhism, Ashoka was able to frame his ethical ideas in a way that could appeal to people of all religions and none. Perhaps we should follow King Ashoka's example—and indeed the Buddha's example—and be a little less concerned with "Buddhism" and a little more concerned about actually living in accordance with the Dhamma.

The Dharma has an incredible potential to provide us with the kind of moral leadership that empowered Ashoka.

Environmental problems like climate change and pollution stem from unbridled greed and lack of compassion for the other. Inequality comes from the same source. The Dharma teaches us how to be content with less, to find happiness through helping others. It teaches us to recognize that all

beings, not just humans, are intrinsically valuable and their lives should be cherished. The Suttas specifically address climate change and assert that it is driven by human activity and human greed. We are part of the environment, we are actors in it, and our actions shape the world in which we live.

In our current economic order, companies reap profits by externalizing costs to the environment, to the poor, and to future generations. We must re-imagine economies so that *all* the costs of economic activity are borne by those who benefit from that activity, i.e. the buyers and sellers. That includes all damage to the environment, all pollution, all climate change impacts, and all impacts to the poor and underprivileged. This is how the law of karma works: it is the one who does the deed who experiences the result. The economy is simply a product of human choices, and we can make different choices. By applying the law of karma we can ensure that the economy works in alignment with the natural order, not against it.

And what of displaced peoples? The movement of people, both within their country and without it, has proven to be one of the most powerful drivers of political extremism and cruelty, and an immediate threat to international peace. As an Australian, I feel deeply ashamed at my own government's treatment of asylum seekers. For twenty years now, our politicians have sought votes by playing on people's lowest and meanest instincts, their fears and cruelty. Rather than calling citizens to aspire to a higher morality, they are dragging us down. But the reality is that people are being displaced from their homes due to tribalism and racism, a zero-sum game that assumes one of us must win and the other lose. In stark contrast, Buddhist ethics are based on universalism: those wonderful words, *sabbe sattā*. What is good for others is good for me and mine also. The dreadful plight of the Rohingya is a lasting witness to the fact that such tribalism is found in Buddhism just as anywhere else. Can we not grow beyond this? Can we not take a pride in our culture and our history, without ever seeing this as a reason to attack and harm others?

Destabilizing technologies arise from the basic defilement of programmers: conceit. Don't get me wrong: I love tech, and I work with programmers every day. Programmers are just people, but they tend to have one flaw: they think they work in a world of objectivity and rationality, and their work will naturally make the world better. But they're wrong: code is not objective, it stems from desire.

Every line of code that has ever been written exists because someone wanted something. And the new technologies that seem to spring up more and more frequently all arise from some need, some desire: to make money, to gain influence, to change the world. That's inevitable, it's how humans work. What is not inevitable is that morality is excluded from this process.

We must build a new kind of technology, an ethical programming. It should start with solving ethical problems, and see how they can be embodied in code. Buddhism, since it deals with cause and effect and explains morality in purely rational terms, is an ideal framework for technologies based on the principle of the happiness of all sentient beings. Protecting privacy, ensuring safety, eliminating hate speech: these things should not be an afterthought, tacked on in a half-baked way at the end, if at all. They should be the very purpose of why we build technology.

And then there is religious extremism and fundamentalism. This is a toxic virus that infects all the world's religions in one way or another. And one thing is very clear: the extremists of the worlds religions have a lot in common. In fact, extremists are more like each other than they are like liberal or progressive voices in the different religions. Extremism always bases itself on hate, on ignorance, on blind tribalism, on narrow-mindedness. The good news is that the converse is

true as well. Liberal and progressive voices, no matter what religion they stem from, have much in common. They work from compassion, from reason, from an informed and critical faith, not from blind conviction. In Australia, I regularly work in interfaith forums, and have always been inspired and delighted by the warmth and wisdom of the people I have met.

And one thing that we don't acknowledge enough is that the Suttas present us with many wonderful examples of interfaith dialogue. The Buddha did not live in a Buddhist culture. He was constantly interacting with brahmins, ascetics, religious people of very diverse faiths; and people who had no religion at all. And in every case we see how he acted, not to attack or disparage, but to find the truth, the healing truth that dispels suffering. In DN 25 Udumbarika Sutta, the Buddha says this to the wanderer Nigrodha:

> Nigrodha, you might think: 'The ascetic Gotama speaks like this because he wants pupils.' But you should not see it like this. Let your teacher remain your teacher.
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> You might think: 'The ascetic Gotama speaks like this because he wants us to give up our recitation.' But you should not see it like this. Let your recitation remain as it is.
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> You might think: 'The ascetic Gotama speaks like this because he wants us to give up our livelihood.' But you should not see it like this. Let your livelihood remain as it is.
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> You might think: 'The ascetic Gotama speaks like this because he wants us to start doing things that are unskillful and considered unskillful in our tradition.' But you should not see it like this. Let those things that are unskillful and considered unskillful in your tradition remain as they are.
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> You might think: 'The ascetic Gotama speaks like this because he wants us to stop doing things that are skillful and considered skillful in our tradition.' But you should not see it like this. Let those things that are skillful and considered skillful in your tradition remain as they are.
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> I do not speak for any of these reasons. Nigrodha, there are things that are unskillful, corrupted, leading to future lives, hurtful, resulting in suffering and future rebirth, old age, and death. I teach Dhamma so that those things may be given up. When you practice accordingly, corrupting qualities will be given up in you and cleansing qualities will grow. You'll enter and remain in the fullness and abundance of wisdom, having realized it with your own insight in this very life.

This is the Dhamma, and *this* is what we must be doing. Let us stop, forever, harming ourselves and harming others by pursuing discrimination against women. Let us admit our faults, learning from the example of King Ashoka that moral authority begins with honesty and personal integrity. Let us stop dragging Buddhism down by obsessing about petty feuds and tribal insecurities. Let us, instead, recognize the very real challenges facing ourselves and our people, and let us show genuine leadership by stepping towards those challenges equipped with the Dhamma. Let us face the future without fear, knowing that the Dhamma gives us all we need. It is simply up to us to apply it.

We have changed. We saw that there was a problem—women did not have the same opportunities to practice the Dhamma that men did. We realized that this is unfair, it causes suffering, and it is against the Dhamma. We investigated the Buddha's teachings and found that this was not what the Buddha envisaged. So our communities worked together to fix the problem, and now the fix is well under way. We should be proud of what we've accomplished! Future generations will wonder what all the fuss was about.

Our challenges have only just started. We are already seeing the renewal and vitality that women's spiritual leadership can bring. We need women's voices and women's leadership to lift us up when we're down, to comfort us when we suffer, and to show us the way when we're lost. The tide is rising and we need all hands on deck.