

## The *Bhikkhunī* Revival Debate and Identity Problems: An Ethnographic Inquiry

Gihani De Silva<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The *bhikkhunī* revival movement is a transnational or a global project that has affected alternative forms of female renunciation where *bhikkhunī*-hood had disappeared or was never established. The main objective of this study is to review the identity problems that have emerged due to this new monastic status of *bhikkhunī*-hood. This ethnographic study was conducted in 2011-2012 by interviewing *dasasilmātās*, including executive committee members of the *Silmātā Jāthika Maṇḍalaya* (SMJM), *bhikkhunīs*, and a government officer. Identity problems emerge in relation to the monastic robe, as it is a visible symbol indicating the transformation from one monastic identity to another. The next arena is the seniority or social hierarchy of monasticism. *Dasasilmātās* are not immediately amenable to changes in the monastic hierarchy. Resistance is common, but occasionally they show flexibility in adapting to the situation. Shifting identities have arisen as a new phenomenon due to the tension created by the new circumstances. These identity problems can be considered as new developments within this recent change in female monasticism, part of the complex nature of contemporary Sri Lankan Buddhism.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Social Sciences, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka.  
[gihani.desilva@yahoo.com](mailto:gihani.desilva@yahoo.com).

## Introduction<sup>2</sup>

The *bhikkhunī* revival movement is a transnational or a global project that has affected distant localities where the *bhikkhunī sāsanaya* had disappeared or was never established. On the one hand, it has reshaped the perception of Buddhist female clergy in terms of constructing a *bhikkhunī* ideal. On the other hand, it has led to a revaluation of other forms of female renunciation in Theravāda Buddhism, especially the monastic lifestyle without full ordination that can be undertaken by religious women, *dasasilmātās* (ladies who take the ten vows). Although it is often assumed that the *dasasilmātās* are a muted group within the mainstream of monasticism, in reality they are a group that is highly affected by the *bhikkhunī* revival movement. Undoubtedly, this global project has an effect on fragmenting the existing alternative Buddhist female renunciants. By attempting to create homogeneity or sameness in these societies by implementing a transnational project, it has led to the fragmentation of monastic communities in several ways. Thus the very concept of the liberalized equality and freedom brought by the *bhikkhunī* revival movement is problematic in this regard. These fractions become evident only when scrutinized carefully, because these alternative female renunciants do not accept what is bestowed on them, but tend to pose counter arguments.

Although a number of studies have been done on the ongoing debate regarding *bhikkhunīs* in Sri Lanka, they have paid less attention to the consequences that have arisen due to the re-establishment of *bhikkhunī* movement, now almost twenty years ago. This research article will mainly focus on those consequences. In particular, I will examine how the *dasasilmātās*' monastic identity is affected by the renewed *bhikkhunī* movement. I begin with the most crucial areas of identity problems. First, I discuss the problems relating to the monastic robe: a visible symbol indicating the transformation from one monastic identity to another. I then examine the seniority system or social hierarchy of Sri Lankan monasticism. Even *dasasilmātās* resist the new changes in the monastic hierarchy, though occasionally they are flexible and willing to adapt. Due to these changes, female monastic identities have shifted.

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### **The *Bhikkhunī* Revival Controversy**

Scott M. Thomas, in his work *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International relations* (2005), argues that there has been a global “resurgence of religion”. He has questioned the thesis that secularization is a more or less inevitable part of the process of modernization. In his view, religion is adapting to various contexts and continues to exist globally rather than disappearing or diminishing. Similarly, in *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (2003) Talal Asad has summarized the present portrayal of religion and its influences on society:

The contemporary salience of religious movements around the globe, and the torrent of commentary on them by scholars and journalists, have made it plain that religion is by no means disappearing in the modern world. The “resurgence of religion” has been welcomed by many as a means of supplying what they see as a needed moral dimension to secular politics and environmental concerns. It has been regarded by others with alarm as a symptom of growing irrationality and intolerance in everyday life . . . if anything is agreed upon, it is that a straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular is no longer acceptable. (1)

Feminist movements, including feminist scholarship on reclaiming women’s right to freedom of religion, have arisen within the larger context of this global resurgence of religion. Feminist scholarship on religion and its claims have been from the outset mostly concerned with liberal notions of equity and freedom. The feminist struggle in promoting, and seeking to reclaim, the rights of religious women is not surprising. These rights were historically neglected and not adequately addressed. Achieving equal opportunity for the ordination of women has become more significant within those rights. Meredith McGuire writes,

The issue of the ordination of women is one of the most controversial issues because of its great symbolic importance and because the role of the clergy is more powerful than lay roles. The significance of the ordination of women is that it presents an alternative image of women and an alternative definition of gender roles. (135-136)

The present debate about *bhikkhunī* higher ordination occurs within this context of reclaiming rights that have been eroded (in places such as Sri Lanka, India, and Burma) or never established (in places such as Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Tibet).

In the study of the interrelationship between Buddhism and feminism, less attention is paid to gender inequalities in Buddhism as compared to other major religions. Emma Tomalin thinks that this is “. . . perhaps underpinned by views that Buddhism is less gender unequal than other religions, or that Buddhist cultures are less oppressive environments for women” (108). However, the spread of Buddhism into the West has given rise to a renewed interest in questioning the inherent ambiguities of Buddhism and an intense interest in finding an equal place for female renunciation (*bhikkhunī* higher ordination) in Buddhism. From the outset, liberal feminist ideologies played a crucial role in shaping this *bhikkhunī* debate. However, although the *bhikkhunī* revival movement is sometimes stigmatized as a product of Western liberal feminism alone, in fact it is a product of multiple transnational *bhikkhunī* advocacy projects. South Korean and Taiwanese organizations played a prominent role in the Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī* ordinations.

The recent history of the *bhikkhunī* movement is unfolding and noticeable efforts to re-establish it were visible in the late 1990s. In 1996, ten Sri Lankan *dasasilmātās* travelled to Sarnath, India to participate in the dual higher ordination led by the Sri Lankan Ven. Mapalagama Wipulasara together with the Sri Lankan *bhikkhu saṅgha* and the Korean *bhikkhunī saṅgha*, led by the President of the Council of Korean *bhikkhunīs*, Kwang Woo Sunim. In 1998 twenty Sri Lankan *dasasilmātās* received *bhikkhunī* precepts at an International Higher Ordination arranged by Master Hsing Yun of Foguangshan at Bodhgaya in India together with 132 women from 22 countries (De Silva *Reclaiming the Robe* 128-129). In 1998 more Sri Lankan *dasasilmātās* received the dual higher ordination in their own country from Sri Lankan *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs*. On March 14, soon after the *bhikkhunīs* returned from Bodhgaya, Ven. Inamaluwe Sumangala organized and administered this ordination to 22 *dasasilmātās* who had completed their training at his center. With the assistance of the *bhikkhunīs* who had been ordained in Bodhgaya, five senior monks conducted a *bhikkhunīs*’ ordination at the Rangiri Dambulla Monastery in the same hall where monks ordinarily receive their ordination (De Silva *Reclaiming the Robe* 129). This *bhikkhunī* ordination was the first to be held in Sri Lanka for 1000 years. According to *Sakyadhītā*, from 1996 to mid 2010 there were around 500 to 1000

*bhikkhunīs* in Sri Lanka and many *sāmaṇeris* waiting to be qualified for Higher Ordination. An exact number cannot be given, as there is no record of it (<http://www.sakyadhita-srilanka.org/index.php/Sakyadhita/History>). In the year 2003, the first international *bhikkhunī* ordination took place in Sri Lanka. There are ordination ceremonies taking place regularly in Sri Lanka and internationally in which Sri Lankan female renunciants participate.

The new *bhikkhunī* revival movement is liable to controversy due to lack of recognition from *saṅgha* authorities and the government, because religious conservatives considered the very attempt to reestablish the *bhikkhunī* higher ordination (*upasampadā*) a violation of the law of the Buddha or a defilement of pure Buddhism. Nevertheless, the new *bhikkhunī* movement, empowered by its transnational Buddhist feminist networks, proved formidable. Premakumara De Silva has called these Buddhist feminist movements, which were sponsored by feminist scholarship and community, “an inevitable or unstoppable movement...” (25).

The *bhikkhunī* revival movement has become a transnational or a global project for constructing the ideal of the higher ordained *bhikkhunī*. Nirmala Salgado writes, “The ideal of the higher ordained nun . . . represents a homogeneous ideal that evokes the egalitarian vision of a sisterhood among Buddhist nuns across the globe” (*Buddhist Nuns* 211-213). Chandra Mohanty has also commented that the condition of women is universal. She writes that “the homogeneity of women as a group is produced not on the basis of biological essentials but rather on the basis of secondary sociological universals. What binds women together is a historical notion of the sameness of their oppression and, consequently, the sameness of their struggles” (56). If we understand the global project of *bhikkhunī* revival in terms of Mohanty’s argument, the dominant global ideal of *bhikkhunī*-hood has bridged the differences among female renunciants. In that sense, it has compelled everyone to accept the *bhikkhunī* as the female renunciate ideal. Although this project has the positive outcome of reclaiming women’s religious rights, it sometimes fails to recognize the legitimacy of local conceptions of female renunciation. As Thomas Borchert observes, “. . . contemporary Buddhism is marked by a tension between the transnational and the national” (529).

It is important to examine the lives of female renunciants who may have disregarded such influences and how these alternative groups of non-*bhikkhunīs* view the consequences of the *bhikkhunī* revival movement. These groups include the *dasasilmātā* of Sri Lanka, *thila-shin* of Burma, *mae-chi* of Thailand,

*donchee* of Cambodia, and *maekhao* of Laos. *Dasasilmātās* wear orange or brown robes, the *thila shin* of Burma wear pink or brown, while the *donchee* of Cambodia, the *maekhao* of Laos, and the *maechee* of Thailand wear white (<http://www.buddhistwomen.eu/EN/index.php/Texts/BuddhistNuns>). These female renunciants mostly observe ten precepts and there are no commonly accepted ordination procedures. Therefore there are large variations in monastic procedures, practices and behaviour.

Non-*bhikkhunīs* are outnumbered in Theravāda countries where the *bhikkhunī* movement has already been established. Although many studies have been conducted on new *bhikkhunī*-hood, alternative forms of renunciants were to some extent regarded as a neglected, abandoned group or "peripheral category of the monastic community-in Thai *mae chee* tradition (quoted in Cook 152)" within the mainstream discussion (see more in Tambiah 1984). Therefore bringing the voices of non-*bhikkhunīs* to the forefront is a timely need within the *bhikkhunī* ordination controversy.

### Identity Problems

According to McGuire, "Self-identity refers to each person's biographical arrangement of meanings and interpretations that form a somewhat coherent sense of 'who am I?' Often the question 'who am I?' is answered in terms of 'this is where I belong'" (52). Buddhist female renunciants form their self-identity in part by belonging to a specific monastic group, which also acquires a group identity. But often studies categorize these renunciants as belonging to a specific monastic group as a realm of power even though the renunciants themselves do not believe that they really belong to the said monastic group. For instance, a female renunciant who wanders in sacred premises or lives with her own family members in a separate room may not identify herself as a *dasasilmātā* but just as a renunciant.

Monastic identity is profoundly social because it is constructed through interaction with others. Monastic communities are constructed over time and space by interaction and competing with "the other", i.e., other types of female renunciants, the lay community, and the *bhikkhus*. These identities are defined by the teachings of a particular religion and what has been added through the evolved historical conjunctures. Although society seems to recognize *dasasilmātās* and *bhikkhunīs* as similar renunciants because of the similarities in their outer appearance, they in fact belong to groups that are distinct in terms of

their history, precepts, robe, seniority, etc. Therefore, the visibility of resistance and counter resistance from these two competing female monastic groups is not surprising. But at the same time, as a result of interacting with each other, *dasasilmātās* share the features of the new *bhikkhunī* identity where they see it as more convenient or an enhancement of their monastic vocation. The focus here will be on the identity problems of *dasasilmātās*, in terms of issues related to the monastic robe, hierarchy, and shifting identities. The presentation of counter arguments by the *bhikkhunīs* will be discussed in describing how even *bhikkhunīs* are affected by the same issues.

### ***Bhikkhunī Robe (kaḍa sivura) and Pride***

In her fieldwork, Cheng has recognized the importance for a *bhikkhunī* of *bhikkhunī* ordination and having a *bhikkhunī* robe. They confer on her the same level of status as the *bhikkhu*, apparently giving her a sense of equality and empowerment. As stated by a Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī*: For example, the Chinese SA 490 reports the wanderer Jambukṣadaka as asking Śāriputra thus:

I have always believed that becoming a *bhikkhunī* is important . . . when you are a ten-precept nun, you are just like an ordinary lay person. But when you don the (*bhikkhunī*) robe, you have status, and people respect you better . . . because of the special robe, people know the difference between ten-precept nuns and *bhikkhunī*. Previously a nun's robe was an ordinary garment with trousers. But the *bhikkhunī* wear the same as the *bhikkhu*. And we can do the same works as the *bhikkhu*. So we are formal monastic members . . . (Cheng 173-174)

Although the above quotation raises many controversial issues, it is interesting to look at whether it is possible to recognize the differences between *dasasilmātās* and *bhikkhunīs* from the appearance of their robes. According to many *dasasilmātās* who were interviewed for the present study, people do not seem to recognize the difference. Dhammabuddhi *silmātā* mentioned, "People do not care whether we are *dasasilmātās*, *sāmaṇerīs* or *bhikkhunīs*, but what we do is important to them." *Dasasilmātās* hold such a standpoint because they do not like to undermine their monastic vocation as *dasasilmātās*. All these female renunciants perform the same rituals like *bōdhi pūja*, *pirit* chanting, etc. for the laity, except that they do not participate in for *sāṅghika dāna* (alms giving for the

*saṅgha*) or accept *aṭṭa pirikara* (eight standard requisites used by the *saṅgha*). *Bhikkhunī* respondents agree to this point as stated by Kusalā *bhikkhunī*: “Most people do not see the difference between these two groups but this difference is seen mostly by their own *dāyakas* (lay devotees). But it should be so as the *bhikkhunīs* need more recognition.” She thinks that the difference, not being easily identifiable, is an obstacle to a higher level of respect for *bhikkhunīs*. In other words, she says that there should be a difference and it should be identifiable as they are following *adhi sīlaya*.<sup>3</sup>

The main distinction of the *bhikkhunī* robe, *kaḍa sivura*, lies in the procedure through which the robe is produced.<sup>4</sup> Therefore this difference is not immediately noticeable. *Dasasilmātās* have been using the same colour robes as *bhikkhunīs* for many years. There was a controversy over *dasasilmātās*' using robes similar to those of *bhikkhus* in the 1980s. This was severely criticized by the *bhikkhus* who point out that they are not eligible to do so (Daily Mirror). According to Anulā *silmātā*,

Our greatest *hāmu māṇiyō* (Sudharmacārī *silmātā*- the first *silmātā* in Sri Lanka) wore a white robe. Then the colour changed dramatically. Even *dasasilmātās* are using other robes today. It is wrong. But I myself never change this yellow robe. Because there should be a difference between the *bhikkhu* robe and ours.

The very purpose of using a variety of colours was to indicate the difference between *bhikkhus* and female renunciants. The colour of the robe is used to perpetuate the subordinate social status of female renunciants. Here Anulā *silmātā* seems to be an example of the internalization of such subordination. But now there is no agreement on the colours of the robes used by the *dasasilmātās*. Some groups of female renunciants use specific traditional colours. However, this causes confusion among outsiders.

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<sup>3</sup> *Sīlaya* is often synonymous with the precepts that Buddhist female renunciants have to follow. Here *sīlaya* also refers to the “virtue” and “morality” of Buddhist renunciants. For *dasasilmātās* it is ten precepts or *sikkhāpadas*; for *bhikkhunīs* it is 311 *pātimokkha* rules. These high numbers of *Vinaya* rules denote higher virtues or morality. Therefore it is called *adhi sīlaya*.

<sup>4</sup> ... The whole cloth used for the robe is first shredded into parts and then stitched together to appear segmented. This pattern the Buddha himself likened to the paddy fields of the Magadha region of India." This '*kada sivura*' simply signifies the intricacies that one should encounter to withdraw any attachment and it would be thoroughly devalued item that which would not even motivate theft... (<http://exploresrilanka.lk/2011/08/sivura-the-story-of-the-saffron-robe/>).



Although *dasasilmātās* are not particularly concerned about the colours of their robes, there are occasions, when they have had to face problems regarding the different robes. For instance, Dhammakanthi *silmātā* highlighted an important issue faced by the young *dasasilmātās* in her district.

Some of these *bhikkhunīs* are using the robe to show their power. There is no such worth in the robe . . . Our young *dasasilmātās* are worried about being rejected from some of the places (University), as they do not wear *bhikkhunī* robes. They are worried about their monastic status. Some of these young undergraduate *dasasilmātās* told me that they do not introduce themselves as *dasasilmātā*. Some of them, at sometimes, don *bhikkhunī* robes.

It seems that these young *dasasilmātās* use the *bhikkhunī* robe to temporarily escape from the difficulties they encounter (this is not the generalized picture of all the young *dasasilmātās*). However, this is not the only example that can be cited to show the uses of the *bhikkhunī* robe by *dasasilmātās* while at the same time they reject the status of *bhikkhunī*-hood. For instance, Dhammakanthi *silmātā* told me that some *dasasilmātās* have worn the *bhikkhunī* robe when they have traveled to other countries. Some of these *dasasilmātās* know that there is more respect for the *bhikkhunī* status in foreign lands; they believe that these countries support the revival of the *bhikkhunī* movement. This creates a contradiction. Although rejecting *bhikkhunī*-hood, they want to garner its benefits. Therefore it can be seen that the *bhikkhunī* robe has a symbolic significance and this is used to indicate the worthiness of the monastic identity of *bhikkhunīs*.

On some special occasions, *dasasilmātās* have been asked to wear robes similar to the *bhikkhunī* robe. It was intended to identify *dasasilmātās* as *bhikkhunīs*. However, this made some participants uncomfortable.

We were asked to wear that robe. I do not exactly know whether it is a *bhikkhunī* robe. We were not in a position to refuse. I did not like to wear that piece of covering strip. I felt uncomfortable when I wore it (interview with Dhammapradīpā *silmātā*).

It seemed that the organizers of the event wanted to show a common identity shared by student *dasasilmātā* and student *bhikkhunīs*. Perhaps the organizers

were not aware of the discomposure of the *dasasilmātās* or perhaps the resistance shown by the *dasasilmātās* was ignored/disregarded.

Apart from the *dasasilmātās* who were asked or even compelled to don the *bhikkhunī* robe, some other *dasasilmātās* do not care about the difference between the *bhikkhunī* robe and *dasasil* robe. For instance, Suwarnamālī *silmātā* said,

I do not consider whether I am using a *bhikkhunī* robe or any other robe. It is worn to protect one from the hot and cold climate. Other than that, there is no such specialty. Sometime I wear a *kaḍa sivura* when I am in the *ārāmaya*. But I don a *dasasil* robe when I'm outside. Actually, we don what we receive. Can we ask our *dāyakas* not to offer *bhikkhunī* robes? They do not understand the difference. I am not going to teach them the difference. If I do so, they will not offer us anything.

Although she says that she is not concerned with what she wears, she chooses to don the *bhikkhunī* robe when she is in the *ārāmaya* but not when she is outside. She has concerns about explaining this to the *dāyakas* as it might create problems with the offerings made to her. *Dasasilmātās* are compelled to act like this, as some of them do not get sufficient donations and offerings. In this sense, rather than following the practices of the *Vinaya* code, they are redefining and adapting to the circumstances of their day-to-day renunciate lives.

Although the *bhikkhunī* robe is an enhancement of their monastic status, *dasasilmātās* are anxious about it. According to them, sometimes *bhikkhunīs* misuse their monastic robe. Dhammacārī *silmātā* mentioned, “The *bhikkhunī* robe has become jewelry for them (*bhikkhunīs*).” Jewelry is a personal adornment used as a marker of a specific social status and personal status; it belongs to the laity. The *dasasilmātās* are concerned that such practices promote vanity and arrogance among *bhikkhunīs*. Dhammakaṇṭhī *silmātā* called this “giving into pride, in ignorance of the consequences.” But instead of blaming the *bhikkhunīs*, she criticized the people who have created the problems or who have given the *bhikkhunī* ordination to renunciants. Her argument is that *bhikkhunīs* behave in such an arrogant manner because they are not correctly guided and neglect to nurture the spirit of renunciation. It indicates indirectly that female renunciants, whether they are *dasasilmātās* or *bhikkhunīs*, should always be guided. This again reflects the internalization of subordination by female renunciants.

However, some *dasasilmātās* are very displeased with the arrogance of *bhikkhunīs*. For instance, they call the ordination a “worthless thing” or “piece of board”. On the other hand, they seem to pay reverence to their own monastic robes. One said, “We were given this *dasasilmātā* robe and it instilled respect and fear for it. Thus we never do anything unnecessary against it. But those youngsters who don *bhikkhunī* robe do not have *lājja-baya* (shame-fear).” According to Obeyesekere, “Practice of *lājja-baya*—to be ashamed of subverting norms of sexual modesty and proper behavior and to fear the social ridicule that results from such subversion—is instilled into Sinhala children through early childhood training” (505). The *dasasilmātā* who said this comes from a rural background, where she was brought up with a deep sense of *lājja-baya*, and she looks at the conditions in monastic life through the same lens. What she means by lack of *lājja-baya* is the forwardness of the *bhikkhunīs*. This will be elaborated in the following section.

### **Hierarchical troubles**

The hierarchical problems among the Buddhist female renunciants can be identified in terms of the seniority of the monastic vocation. Seniority of monastic vocation is highly respected in the Buddhist monastic community. Seniority is based on the date of higher ordination. *Dasasilmātās* base seniority on the date of their renunciation of lay life. In that sense, *bhikkhunīs* are in a higher monastic position than the *dasasilmātās*. However, when it comes to practice, the situation is vastly different.

The emergence of *bhikkhunī*-hood created a status problem. Although *bhikkhunīs* think of themselves as higher in status than *dasasilmātās*, *dasasilmātās* do not seem to accept the seniority of newly ordained *bhikkhunīs*. For instance, Uttarā *silmātā* pointed out:

We were frustrated by the behaviour of some *bhikkhunīs* in our district. There was a funeral ceremony of one of our *māṇiyō* (*dasasilmātā*) and they did not allow *bhikkhus* to perform rituals. They interfered and sabotaged it. The *bhikkhus* were tolerant and patient. We also had to put up with this conduct, as the *bhikkhus* did not seem to have any negative reactions. Not only that, but the same group behaved in an unpleasant way during the ceremony held on *dēvālaya* premises. Again, *bhikkhus* were not allowed to sit in the front seats. These *bhikkhunīs* came earlier and sat. All these things happen because of their arrogance.

I have myself noticed such an incident in an almsgiving (*dāṇaya*) for clergy in 2012. As a part of the almsgiving there was a *pirit* chanting. When the *bhikkhus* began to chant *pirit*, suddenly one chief *bhikkhunī* who had a microphone began to do the same. But her voice was louder than the *bhikkhus*' , and the *bhikkhus*' voices were hardly heard. A leading *bhikkhu* advised all the *bhikkhunīs* not to let it happen again, warning them to be conscious of their position in the monastic hierarchy. It seemed that the *bhikkhunī* with the microphone felt no subordination to the *bhikkhus*. Symbolically the ceremony was an occasion for reconciliation to bring *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs*, and *dasasilmātās* into the same forum. But in the *saṅgha* hierarchy, *bhikkhunīs* are expected to be mindful of their subordinate position, including their conduct, the place where they are, and whom they are with.

All of these examples involve *adhi sīlaya* (higher virtues) that are observed by *bhikkhunīs*. The establishment of the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* was contingent on women agreeing to follow many rules in addition to those laid down for *bhikkhus*, in particular rules of deference to the *bhikkhus*. *Bhikkhunīs* are expected to follow 311 *pātimokkha* rules, whereas *bhikkhus* are expected to observe 227 *pātimokkha* rules.

Although *bhikkhunīs* follow *adhi sīlaya*, some of the senior *dasasilmātās* do not wish to bow down to *bhikkhunīs* who have been ordained recently. For instance, one of the senior *dasasilmātā* was displeased as she had to follow junior *bhikkhunīs* at one of the almsgiving ceremonies. Her proposed solution was to organize two separate rows for *dasasilmātās* and *bhikkhunīs*. This forced the organizers to have two separate alms givings for *bhikkhunīs* and *dasasilmātās* whereas their intention was to build a space for reconciliation between the parties where they could interact with each other. *Bhikkhunī* Sraddhā shared her views regarding this as follows.

It is true that we sometimes felt uncomfortable about sitting at an almsgiving together, as they are not even ordained as *sāmaṇerī*. But in our district we do not have any problem. We never think of them as subordinate to us. Our *sīlaya* (virtue) is with us. We keep silence when there are such troubles. We never made any troubles for them. Because we were also *dasasilmātās* before we were ordained. Therefore we never degrade them.

When it comes to practice, it is not surprising that both groups feel uncomfortable in face-to-face interaction, as each group claims seniority over the other. Although some of them attempted to be reconciled, as *bhikkhunī* Sraddhā said, they are not always successful. Sumitrā *silmātā* stated that she and her pupils avoid *bhikkhunīs*. They never participate in almsgiving or any other event if they have to sit with *bhikkhunīs*.

However, there are some rare occasions on which both *dasasilmātās* and *bhikkhunīs* live together under the same roof of an *ārāmaya*. For instance, Tilakā *silmātā* lived with her *gōlayā* (pupil), who was ordained as a *bhikkhunī*. The pupil decided to become a *bhikkhunī* by obtaining the permission of Tilakā *silmātā*, but after the ordination she did not have any place to stay, so she stayed for some time with Tilakā *silmātā*. However, due to the practical problems that both of them encountered, the *bhikkhunī* is now living on her own in a separate small *ārāmaya*. The pupil was now senior in status due to her higher ordination, but neither wanted to worship the other. Moreover, Tilakā *silmātā* told me that after the higher ordination the pupil seemed to change. Thus Tilakā *silmātā* herself helped her to build a separate *ārāmaya*. The pupil often visits her.

My *gōlayā* (pupil) is senior to me in terms of higher ordination. But I cannot offer any reverence (worship) to her, because I am her *dasasil* preceptor. Likewise she is unable to do so as she is now a *bhikkhunī*. Earlier I felt uncomfortable. But we have got used to it. She does not worship my feet, rather she seems to respect me.

Unlike some other cases, this relationship did not give rise to conflict. They seem to have a mutual understanding and a desire to continue their relationship. However, we cannot expect the same on other occasions (see more in Mrozik 8 and Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns* 153-159). In most cases, *dasasilmātās* do not accept the monastic seniority of *bhikkhunīs*. Tusitā *silmātā* added more in this regard:

We could bow down to [*bhikkhunīs*] if they were in a high status of *sīlaya*. There is no such spiritual development, but some of them are just arrogant. Therefore we do not like even to sit for *dānaya* (almsgiving) with them. They often sit in the front seats. We are senior to them, so why should we sit behind them?

To avoid being degraded in front of *bhikkhunīs*, Tusitā *silmātā* seems to present her disinclination for *bhikkhunī*-hood as due to lack of virtue in *bhikkhunīs*. In other words, although *bhikkhunīs* follow 311 *pātimokkha* rules, this *dasasilmātā* does not think these *pātimokkha* rules have had an impact on the cultivation of spiritual development in *bhikkhunīs*, as they use the *pātimokkha* rules as a means of showing pride (a form of power) over *dasasilmātās*.

However, *bhikkhunī* Kusalā had a different response on this issue. “*Dasasilmātās* most probably do not participate at almsgivings with us, as they are incapable of accepting the *sāṅghika dāna* (almsgiving offered to *saṅgha*). Even we did not accept *sāṅghika dāna* when we were *dasasilmātās*.” Theoretically, *dasasilmātās* are not allowed to accept *sāṅghika dāna* or *aṭṭapirikara* (eight standard requisites offered to the *saṅgha*) or to participate in *pāmsakūla* (funeral rites performed by the *saṅgha*). However, more and more often *dasasilmātās* are participating in these events. They are redefining the limitations and boundaries of the monastic sphere of *dasasilmātās*.

It is interesting to see how *dasasilmātās* define the precepts that they follow. They are the same set of *sikkhāpada* that *sāmaṇerīs* (female novices) observe.<sup>5</sup> But according to Dhammacārī *silmātā*, “We observe *sāmaṇera dasasil* because we were given *sil* (precepts) by a *bhikkhu* when we were ordained. That is not the *gahaṭṭha dasasil* (lay ten precepts). Thus we even can wear a *bhikkhunī* robe (*kaḍa sivura*).” What she wants to emphasize is that there is no real difference between *bhikkhunīs* and themselves, as they already follow the same code of discipline for novice renunciants (for more on this, see Salgado *Religious Identities* 935-953). But she also wants to contend that the *dasasilmātā* observation of the precepts goes beyond what laypeople do when they elect to observe the precepts.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Sāmaṇera sil* or precepts are the training precepts one should follow prior to becoming a *bhikkhunī*. *Sāmaṇeras* and *sāmaṇerīs* observe the ten precepts as their code of behavior.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, Sumedhā *silmātā* explained the differences between the *gahaṭṭha dasasil* and *sāmaṇera dasasil*. According to her, in terms of precepts, *dasasilmātās* have to follow precepts that are very similar to the precepts that *sāmaṇerīs* have to observe. But *dasasil* (ten precepts) can be observed even by a lay person. There is a difference between the manners of observing precepts. The *sāmaṇera sīlaya* is observed all together at once, whereas *dasasil* should be observed one by one. If someone breaks one precept of *sāmaṇera sīlaya* she/he has to observe all the ten precepts again, as they are observed together. *Sāmaṇera sīlaya* is often given by a *bhikkhu*.

Perhaps one might argue that this is purely a rhetorical strategy on the part of *dasasilmātās* to enhance their monastic status. However, Dhammacārī *silmātā*'s statement was accepted not only by *bhikkhunīs* but also by some *dasasilmātās* who said that they are strictly following the *gihi* or *gahaṭṭha dasasil* by even wearing the yellow *dasasil* robe.

These statements reflect diversity among *dasasilmātās* regarding the precepts they follow. They give different explanations about their practices based on their knowledge, prior experiences, and preceptors. Some of them have received the *sāmaṇera sil* from a *bhikkhu* although they call themselves *dasa-silmātās*; others observe *gahaṭṭha dasasil*. These differences are reflected in the way they wish to be addressed. Tusitā *silmātā* refused to be addressed as *dasasil māṇiyō*. Instead, she proposed the term *mehenin vahanse*- venerable ordained women (a term normally applied to a *bhikkhunī*). She added:

If someone says simply *dasasilmātā* it indicates certain limitations. Although we follow the ten precepts, they are similar to precepts followed by a *sāmaṇera* (male novice). Sometimes I used to hear them calling us *sīlammā* or *upāsikammā*. At such times, I correct them. We are not *upāsikā* who only observe five precepts. We are Buddhist renunciants who have sacrificed our whole lives for the *sāsanaya*. We should be addressed as *mehenin vahanse*.

Her words indicate that she is totally against being addressed as *sīlammā* or *upāsikammā*, terms generally used for Buddhist laywomen. Such an intermediary position between the status of laywomen and Buddhist renunciants would not give *dasasilmātās* the appropriate position in monasticism. On the contrary, it would place them in a subordinate position (Bartholemeuz uses the term “lay nun” for *dasasilmātās* to show their ambiguous position). Tusitā *silmātā* proposed *mehenin vahanse*, which is a term used generally for *bhikkhunīs*. In that sense, she claims a status equal to *bhikkhunīs*. Thus when encountering the tension of the monastic hierarchy, *dasasilmātās* claim their own monastic space, which is still controversial.

## Shifting Identities

As we have seen, both *dasasilmātās* and *bhikkhunīs* have identity problems. Such identity problems have created tension among renunciants, especially among the young ones and particularly in situations where they need to decide their monastic status as *dasasilmātās* or *bhikkhunīs*. Young renunciants now face numerous difficulties in deciding their monastic path.

Meanwhile, I found that some of the renunciants who changed their monastic status had returned to their old monastic status. For instance, Nandasīlā *silmātā*, who was ordained as a *dasasilmātā* in 2001, was then ordained as a *sāmaṇerī* in 2007 with the ambition of becoming a *bhikkhunī*. But she remained a *sāmaṇerī* only for a few months. She encountered difficulties in adapting to the new environment into which she was ordained. After wandering in several places she went back to her *guru māṇiyō* (preceptor-*dasasilmātā*). It could be that she was simply uncomfortable with the new environment. Thus renunciants who decide to change their monastic status may face numerous troubles in doing so. They may be shocked by an unfamiliar setting -- staying with new inmates, new rituals, new way of daily living. If they fail to cope, there is no mechanism for taking care of them. They may become vulnerable and risk becoming destitute.

Uppalavaṇṇā *silmātā* explained that some renunciants who were ordained as *bhikkhunīs* came back within a few months to get ordained as *dasasilmātās*. In such instances, if local *dasasilmātās* are not in a position to solve these problems, higher level organizations of *dasasilmātās* (district or national) can assist. Most of the time, these renunciants were admitted after receiving strict advice. She added,

Although they are motivated by the outward appearance of *bhikkhunīs*, soon they understand that, there is no such difference. They understand the “freedom of the religious life” we lead very well. Actually, they create problems by changing their monastic status. Sometimes we tell them not to rejoin the *dasasil* order.

Although she wishes to emphasize that there is no difference between the two monastic statuses, even though one could discern this in outward appearance, by saying “freedom of religious life” she unconsciously adds more value to the *bhikkhunī* vocation in indicating the effort one should make to stay as a *bhikkhunī*. However, *dasasilmātā* organizations are becoming stricter about shifting monastic status. Uppalavaṇṇā *silmātā* told me that these shifting



identities are going to be regulated in the near future. Undoubtedly, this will add more complexity to the practices of female renunciation.

Changing monastic status is not easy. It is a hard decision that can be influenced by societal pressures. Rather than thinking about spiritual development, some of these renunciants have to waste their time worrying about the certainty of the monastic vocation they follow. This makes even *bhikkhunīs* (who re-converted to revert to *dasasilmātā*) feel guilty. Their shifting identity makes them more vulnerable to being stigmatized as attention can be focused on them. Therefore both *dasasilmātās* who convert to *bhikkhunīs* and *bhikkhunīs* who convert to *dasasilmātās* face enormous challenges including ill-treatment, being stigmatized, etc. Thus shifting one's identity reflects the inner complexities and dilemmas taking place in the present female renunciant status. Finally, the above argument challenges the common assumption that conversion takes place in one direction only, while at the same time demonstrating how (re)conversion takes place.

## Conclusion

The present status of Buddhist female monasticism in Sri Lanka is undergoing dramatic changes because of the newly emerged *bhikkhunī* movement. This article has attempted to look into the vicissitudes of identities of female renunciants who have been severely affected by the above conditions. While the *bhikkhunī* movement is a transnational project which values the liberal notion of homogeneity, it has created new issues relating to female renunciation.

In the Sri Lankan context, it appears that identity and the *bhikkhunī* robe are crucial issues. Although sometimes *dasasilmātās* are critical of the impact the new *bhikkhunīs* have on their day-to-day lives, they also seem to have adapted quite well to the renunciant everyday issues related to the robe. In terms of hierarchy, both *dasasilmātās* and *bhikkhunīs* have their own explanations and interpretations. The final discussion regarding shifting identities challenges the common assumption that conversion takes place in one direction only (*dasasilmātās* become *bhikkhunīs*), demonstrating how (re)conversion in the opposite direction also takes place.

This study concludes that *dasasilmātās* have not simply accepted the changes brought about by the newly ordained *bhikkhunīs*. A homogeneous ideal of the *bhikkhunī* would not work everywhere, as outsiders assume or expect. We have seen that *dasasilmātās* are not a muted group and their agency is a crucial factor in this conversation.

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