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Editorial

Richard Gombrich

I find it noteworthy, but also sad, that very few people seem to expect that the academic study of Buddhism will discover anything significantly new about Buddhism – new enough, that is, to interest anyone but other academics. (Maybe this is why so few think the OCBS worthy of financial support.) This number of our journal, though slim, will confound their expectations.

I trust that none of our admirable past contributors will take offense if I declare that we are here publishing an article by the Ven. Anālayo which deserves to become famous as a landmark in the history of Theravāda Buddhism. For about a thousand years no nuns have been ordained in the Theravāda tradition. This is for a reason which the adherents of that tradition consider to be decisive and irremediable. They know that before the lineage of nuns became extinct, an ordinand had to go through a double ritual and be ordained both by a formal gathering of monks and by a similar formal gathering of fully ordained nuns. Once there were not enough such nuns to create a quorum, a new ordination thus became impossible.

We all know that in recent years religious Buddhist women in Theravāda countries have taken vows and adopted life styles which emulate those of nuns, but both by law and by universal acceptance they cannot be called or regarded as actual “nuns” (*bhikkhunīs*), let alone take part in ordaining others. Though the co-operation of some monks and nuns from the Mahāyāna world has made it possible to hold a few ordination ceremonies of international character for nuns, this has not sufficed (and cannot suffice) to create new lineages of nuns in the Theravāda countries. Whatever religious tastes and aspirations individual Buddhist women may hold, the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* is regarded as extinct and Theravāda Buddhism cannot offer that status to women. Obviously this cannot

but make Theravāda unattractive to women in the Western world, and it is a grave handicap to the missionising effort.

For some years the Ven Anālayo has been doing research into the origins and early history of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*, and last year he published a book, *The Foundation History of the Nuns' Order*. That book is now available on the internet for free downloading, and I give it a long and very laudatory review in this volume. While working on this book, he noticed that the first nuns were ordained by the Buddha and a gathering of monks, but not by any nuns, because their *Saṅgha* did not yet exist. But he also noticed that one can deduce from the texts that the Buddha must have envisaged that such a situation could recur, for he never rescinded the provision for ordination of a nun by monks alone, should this be necessary. This discovery removes the justification for refusing to ordain Theravāda nuns today. If the authorities, both clerical and secular, do not reverse their stance on this matter, they will be guilty of destroying (or rather: continuing to destroy) the Buddhism which they claim it is their right and duty to uphold.

This momentous article forms no part of *The Foundation History*, but that book is no less worth reading. It has always seemed mysterious that the Buddha, who held women to have the same spiritual and intellectual capacities as men, should have shown reluctance to found an Order for women and predicted dire consequences for Buddhism once it was founded. By meticulous scrutiny of the relevant texts, many of them preserved in ancient Chinese translations from Indian languages, Anālayo has shown how in far too many instances to enumerate in a single review the texts have been subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) altered in a misogynistic direction to distort and blacken the Buddha's views on matters concerning women.

Even though it would be a work of propaganda rather than scholarship, it would be well worth while for someone, while strictly adhering to what Anālayo has unearthed, to publish a rewritten version of what the Buddha seems to have had to say about Buddhist nuns, and about women in general, before the misogynists began tampering with the texts. Alas, misogyny is still so widespread in today's world that I can predict what a struggle it would be to persuade people to read it. Nevertheless, I think it would be worth a try.