

Dark Matter

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On the final morning of the First International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha (FICoBWRitS, pronounced to rhyme with 'Weet-O-Brits'), the representative of the Chancellor of Hamburg University read out her prepared speech. She developed the theme of change: how so many things within our understanding had changed so rapidly in recent years, and how this was ongoing. All those in academic circles had to get used to the idea that eternal verities might not be so, and to adapt to new ways of thinking. As an example she pointed to the recent introduction of the concept of 'dark matter' in physics. This is matter that is inert and unknowable, which cannot be directly measured and whose existence is only inferred from abstruse calculations concerning the rate of expansion of the Universe. Apparently, if only the normal, knowable matter existed, the Universe would expand at a far greater rate. But there must be a tremendous quantity of dark matter to hold back the Universe in such a way. In fact, said our speaker in a deliciously Freudian slip, physicists estimate that as much as 80% of the Universe is comprised of dark matter.

The general hilarity that ensued from this comment, to a largely academic audience, obscured the striking relevance to the situation regarding bhikkhuni ordination. All the Sangha members at the FICoBWRitS apparently support bhikkhuni ordination. Where then are the opponents? They surely exist, for we can infer their existence from the drag they exert on the expansion of the Sangha. But they are inert and unknowable and cannot be directly measured. It seems that not just the Universe (and the University), but the Sangha too consists of 80% dark matter.

The FICoBWRitS consisted of three uplifting days, with presentations from 65 monks, nuns, academics, and Buddhist laypeople, all offering unequivocal support for the prospects of bhikkhuni ordination. We delved into the origins of bhikkhunis; dissected the story of the first ordination; analyzed the garudhammas; told of the early development of Buddhism; described the situation for bhikkhunis throughout history in Sri Lanka, China, Tibet, Korea, Vietnam, and elsewhere; showed the situation and prospects for Buddhist renunciate women today in various cultures; explained how the bhikkhuni ordinations had reintroduced the bhikkhuni lineage into Sri Lanka and elsewhere; and evaluated in detail how the existing Vinayas provide adequate models for performing bhikkhuni ordination according to the Mūlasarvāstivādin tradition prevalent in Tibetan tradition. It was indeed, as Ayya Tathāloka's presentation emphasized, 'A Bright Vision'.

But such a bright vision in the end failed to prevail against the sheer mass of dark matter; indeed, it could be suggested that the very brightness – the optimistic attitude and intellectual acuity – of the visionaries disposes them to marginalize the power of dark matter. It is, perhaps, impolite, but I feel that to avoid similar disappointment future efforts would be well advised to focus more of their attention on the structures, persons, and attitudes that resist bhikkhuni ordination. We are optimists and idealists, and our nature is to ignore the Shadow...

As the FICoBWRitS went on, I became more drawn into the discussions concerning the final day's presentation. The sticking point was just this: how to get HH Dalai Lama to finally announce a concrete decision to hold bhikkhuni ordination in the Tibetan tradition. Up until now, the Dalai Lama has consistently supported bhikkhuni ordination, and has given his permission for women to seek ordination in the East Asian tradition, then to keep practicing within the Tibetan tradition. So far, this invitation has been taken up by a significant handful of women, most of them Western. However, there are also a few Tibetans, a least one Bhutanese, and some Taiwanese and other East Asian women who have followed a similar path, so it is perhaps best to refer to this as a loose international movement. Some of these women have now been in robes for over twenty years and are acting as teachers and leaders of their own communities. The goal is to have the ordination accepted within the Tibetan tradition itself, so the Tibetan Sangha can directly perform bhikkhuni ordination. The Dalai Lama has consistently stated that he cannot make a decision on this on his own; at the conference he said that those who call for him to act unilaterally do not know the Vinaya (which requires consensus, and which does not give any special precedence to any monk, however exalted). He said that what they can do is to set up educational opportunities and support for the nuns, and this has been done. To enable the Sangha as a whole to act in a unified and informed way, he has called for research and

support from the international community, including Sangha from other Buddhist traditions. The FICoBWRitS is the culmination of this process.

On the final day, the afternoon session consisted of a discussion panel, with about 16 representatives, 8 monks and 8 nuns from all traditions together with the Dalai Lama. It was here we wanted to convince the Dalai Lama to give his final commitment. Almost every panelist expressed their clear support for bhikkhuni ordination, and urged that this be undertaken immediately. Ven Heng Ching went so far as to say she would accept any decision made by the Dalai Lama, except: 'More research'. But we were to be disappointed; the Dalai Lama asked for 'More research'. We could not help but feel the rug pulled out from under us: the opinions had been asked for and given, the research has all been done; the scholars say there's nothing left to research!

I could not avoid noticing that the Tibetan geshees were for the most part absent from the presentations, which had ostensibly been made for their benefit, at the expense of countless thousands of hours of research and preparation time. Perhaps they read the papers privately, but in my conversations with them it seemed, while they had great knowledge of the issues, including awareness of the different traditions, they did not seem to be aware of all that had transpired at the conference. Nor were they forward in re-evaluating their traditional perspectives in light of some of the more challenging offerings, such as the evident fact that the Vinayas have been compiled over a long period of time and were not all spoken by the Buddha.

The Dalai Lama, in his speech that morning, had emphasized his embracing and support for the notions of women's rights and the abolition of discrimination against women especially within the Sangha. There is no doubting his sincerity in commitment to these ideals, and his steadfast belief that this should be embodied in the form of bhikkhuni ordination. His public and pro-active stance on these matters shines in stark contrast with the so-called leaders of my own Theravādin tradition, who have never said a public word in favor of bhikkhuni ordination, and whose understanding and attempts to address women's inequality within their own tradition are no more than a bad joke. But the sticking point is the question of lineage: how can a woman ordained in Dharmaguptaka lineage then ordain other women in Mūlasarvāstivāda lineage?

This question was addressed repeatedly in the conference. My own presentation showed that the origins of the three existing Vinaya lineages are in fact intimately linked, with no question of a formal schism dividing them. Others showed how through history, all lineages have adopted a flexible approach to ordination and have adapted the procedures to accord with historical circumstance. Yet other papers demonstrated that such a flexible attitude was in accord with the wording and the spirit of the Vinaya texts themselves.

Ven Thubten Chodren's paper showed how in fact one of the existing Tibetan lineages in fact descends from an ordination conducted by three Mūlasarvāstivādin bhikkhus with two Chinese bhikkhus, who she convincingly argues must have been Dharmaguptaka. Doubt was thrown on this by some of the Tibetan scholars, since it appears there is a commentary somewhere that asserts the two monks were Mūlasarvāstivādin; but this is in obvious contradiction with the evidence, and can only be an attempt by later tradition to normalize the ordination by presenting it as 'pure' Mūlasarvāstivādin.

This is an interesting point, and worth considering more carefully. We should not mistake the motives of those who present history in such a way. This is very far from being a deliberate lie, as it would be if we were to knowingly construct a false history. Mythic time is different from historical time; it moves in circles and hence always repeats itself. Thus we can know the past from our myths of the present. The essential mythic truth such a story is intended to establish is that the tradition at the time of writing is a pure and valid one. To establish this, the assumptions the Tibetan commentator would have worked under were these:

1. Tibetan Buddhism was established under a 'pure' Mūlasarvāstivādin lineage;
2. Commentaries state that ordination between different traditions is not permitted;
3. This commentarial notion is binding and authoritative and cannot be adjusted in time and place;
4. The great masters of the past would never have broken such a rule.

Hence it *must have been* the case that the two Chinese monks belonged to the Mūlasarvāstivādin tradition. This is a logical conclusion that stems from the assumptions brought to it, not a willful invention. In fact such logical truth is more pure and convincing than the mere empirical claims of the impossibility of there being Mūlasarvāstivādin monks from China. However, I would operate from a very different perspective, from which all the above assumptions can and should be abandoned.

1. There is not, and has never been, such a thing as a 'pure' ordination lineage of any school. It is obvious that all schools of Indian Buddhism would have mixed and performed ordinations together. In any case, the very notion of schools and ordination lineages is absent from the Vinaya, as I emphasized in my presentation at the discussion panel. In social thought, there used to be the idea that there was such a thing as a 'pure' racial stock. But DNA analysis has proven that even those of us who might think we are 'pure' European or 'pure' Chinese or 'pure' African are in fact no such thing. We are all mongrels. Unfortunately, there is no DNA test to prove the inheritance of ordination lineages. If there was, some of us would be in for a big surprise...
2. Commentarial assertions that ordinations between schools are not allowable are, as a general rule, written at a time of conflict between different groups of Sangha. This might vary from normal competition to outright war; I have shown that this was the case in the Theravāda tradition in Sri Lankan history. Polemical statements uttered in the heat of such a dispute should be taken with a grain of salt. One thing is sure, however: the very existence of such a rule tells us that there were those who broke it, and that no ordination lineage can be known to be 'pure'.
3. Commentaries are the opinions of teachers of old. They should be respected, but can never be authoritative or binding in the same sense as the Buddha's words. The Dalai Lama himself emphasized that only a Buddha can change things, and he fervently wished that we had a living Buddha to re-establish the bhikkhuni order. (He duly ignored the inevitable cry from the audience: 'You are the living Buddha!'). But the Tibetan tradition in effect regards the commentaries, mainly derived from Guṇaprabha's Vinayasūtra, as binding and authoritative; this was explicitly stated at the conference. One of the results of this is that the actual canonical Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya is neglected. This is unfortunate, for this Vinaya, even more than other Vinayas, very much emphasizes the flexibility and contextuality of the Buddha's decision making process. Abstracting this from the historical/mythic context and presenting a bare summary of rules and procedures gives a highly misleading view of the nature of the Vinaya itself. It transforms the Vinaya into Abhivinaya, much as the Dhamma is transformed from the living personal Dhamma into the abstracted, formulaic Abhidhamma. If the bhikkhuni movement is really to be sunk on the rock of the opinions of commentators, perhaps the next conference should be more accurately titled: 'Congress on Guṇaprabha-ist Women's role in the Sangha'.
4. Great masters frequently show their very greatness in their understanding of when technicalities need to be put aside or adjusted. From Jesus to the Buddha to the Upaniṣadic sages to the Tantric adepts to the Zen masters, great wisdom is not trapped by conventions, but knows when a new reality requires a new approach to conventions.

On the final day of the conference, I was honored to share lunch with the Dalai Lama at a small table of about eight bhikkhus. I have no idea why I ended up at HH's table, I simply went into the room and there my name was. Bhikkhu Bodhi was also at this table, and I suspect there was a plan to well-represent the Theravādins, as HH has often said they must listen to the Theravādin perspective on Vinaya matters; also, perhaps, it was felt that the Western monks would be less reserved about presenting their opinions! The first thing that should be emphasized again and again is how amazing it is that this should even take place. It would be unthinkable for Theravādin leaders (if there in fact are any, an obscure matter of which I am still unsure...) to insist on the presence of Tibetan Vinaya masters in a discussion about bhikkhunis. But such a close encounter revealed some surprising attitudes.

It is well known that Theravāda is the Vinaya school *par excellence*. We are the sticklers for rules, unwilling to bend even the slightest procedure, maintaining our commitment to the original robes, original alms practice, and original code of discipline. Thus it is well known; although those with any familiarity with Theravādin culture will be aware that this myth is more honored in the breach than in the keeping. But at our little table, both Ven. Bodhi and myself (and the other Theravādin monks, although less forward in articulation, supported our stance) emphasized how Vinaya was contextual and had to be considered in time and place. Ven. Bodhi emphasized that the existing Vinayas could not have been composed in their entirety by the Buddha, and must be the product of centuries of evolution among the Sangha.

As it happens, this point was bought out clearly in one of the issues raised at the FICoBWRitS itself. There is apparently a stricture in the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya that insists that formal acts of the Sangha must be recited by heart, and cannot be read out. It was noted that the Chinese tradition lacks such a rule and hence

their sanghakammas are frequently read out aloud. But the irony was not made conscious: we all know that the early Buddhist tradition was a purely oral one. The question of written sanghakammas could not have arisen in the time of the Buddha, and must be a product of a much later century. The lack of references to writing in the Pali Vinaya is in fact one of our evidences for the relative earliness of that Vinaya as compared to the Mūlasarvāstivāda. What this rule tells us is that at the time when writing became more widespread within the Buddhist tradition, there was an ambivalent attitude towards it. No doubt writing contributed to the preservation of the old texts and to new ways of expressing the Dhamma in new texts; but it also carried with it the very real danger that the Dhamma would become objectified, a matter for external analysis and not an affair of the heart. Some might argue that this fear has come true. So this rule was set up to maintain the oral tradition at least in certain crucial contexts, a tradition that is upheld until the present in the Theravāda as well.

But the Dalai Lama would have none of this. He gave the example of the traditional Buddhist belief in Mount Meru. This belief was represented by HH as 'Abhidharma', which probably means that it comes into the Tibetan tradition mainly from Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośa. The traditional view has it that the world is flat and at its center is a mountain 84 000 yojanas (say, 1 000 000 kilometers) high. But with our modern knowledge we can see for ourselves, said the Dalai Lama, that such a view is false. Hence in the realm of Abhidharma we must be prepared to adjust our beliefs to accord with the evidence. But, he said, the same does not apply in the case of Vinaya. This is established by the Buddha himself, and can never be altered in any way. So the Theravādins insisted that Vinaya is contextual, evolving, and flexible, while the Vajrayānists insisted it is fixed, unalterable, and absolute.

One nexus that this difference crystallized around was the role of intention. Ven. Bodhi repeated the point he had made in his very moving and articulate speech at the conference: that the procedures for ordination were simply the means used by the Buddha to accomplish his aim of setting up the bhikkhuni Sangha, and should not be used to obstruct the establishment of the bhikkhuni Sangha. This would be to insist on the letter while crippling the spirit. As Ven. Bodhi said so well in his speech, our approach to bhikkhuni ordination must be authentic to both the letter and the spirit of Vinaya, but above all the spirit.

The Dalai Lama's response to this, however, seemed to be based on a misunderstanding of Ven. Bodhi's point, which unfortunately we did not have time to clarify with the Dalai Lama at lunch time. (This was not, in case some of my gentle readers might suspect me of an uncharacteristic backwardness in expression, due to fear of criticizing such an august figure, as we had taken issue with several other points expressed by HH; merely a lack of time and difficulty in getting any coherent conversation happening over lunch.) While Ven. Bodhi's statement was referring to the Buddha's intention in setting up the bhikkhuni ordination, the Dalai Lama shifted the focus to the intention of the individual receiving ordination.

The Dalai Lama comes from a tradition that is generally held to emphasize more the inner, intentional aspects of Vinaya, while the Theravādins are in theory supposed to insist on the external details. But again he surprised me by insisting that Vinaya was primarily a matter of external acts of body and speech, with intention playing a secondary role. He noted that by far the majority of Vinaya rules deal solely with such external details, and that intention is only occasionally a relevant factor. For him, the role of intention in ethical life is emphasized more in the Bodhisattva precepts. This is not so say that he marginalizes the role of intention in the Vinaya, as he has made clear elsewhere. But in his context he clearly articulated that the letter of the procedure had to be correct.

This shift away from Ven. Bodhi's point tended to confound the *scope* of intention. In each of the individual rules themselves, intention regarding that particular act may or may not be mentioned. But the Vinaya as a whole is subsumed within the grand vision of the intention to escape from samsara and realize Nibbana. This is the overall purpose which governs the Buddha's actions in constructing the edifice of the Vinaya, but which is not necessarily expressed as intention regarding each rule. In this context, intention is clearly decisive, and the pure wish to realize Nibbana is what should be honored, while the details of procedure should be seen as the means by which this intention is actualized. It is perhaps worthless to dwell on the fact that the majority of bhikkhus today sadly have no such grand intention to realize Nibbana, but ordain from solely worldly reasons; in official recognition of this fact, reference to Nibbana has even been stricken from certain Thai ordination procedures. The mere fact that the entire purpose of ordination has been jettisoned is, strangely enough, not felt to invalidate such ordinations...

There was one further confusing factor introduced into this already-potent mixture, a factor whose real nature and purpose remains obscure. For the past year, we had been working under the assumption that

there were three options for bhikkhuni ordination presented by the Tibetan Department of Religion and Culture. These were: ordination by Dharmaguptaka bhikkhus and bhikkhunis; by Mūlasarvāstivāda bhikkhus with Dharmaguptaka bhikkhunis; or by Mūlasarvāstivāda bhikkhus alone. But the week before the conference a new letter appeared from the Department giving two new options, without explanation. These new options appear to suggest performing ordination by either Mūlasarvāstivāda bhikkhus alone, or together with Dharmaguptaka bhikkhunis; but the ordination is to proceed according to the bhikkhu ordination procedure. This extremely confusing suggestion, which the Dalai Lama was apparently not informed of, caused no end of troubles, as many people simply could not comprehend why such a suggestion would be made. We had a great task to try to convince Janet Gyatso, the academic conducting the discussion on the second night, that these were in fact the options; and I witnessed at the lunch table an ongoing conversation of confusion between Geshe Tashi Tsering and Ven Wimalajothi as Geshe asked about this option and Ven Wimalajothi replied, yes, they had done it in this way in Sri Lanka, thinking of course that Geshe was referring to the bhikkhu's participation in the dual ordination, not that the ordination was done according to the bhikkhu's procedure. Why on earth was such a bizarre option introduced?

Ven Jampa Tsedroen, who explained this option to us, was also unclear what the purpose was, but suspected it was something like this. The Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, as was shown by Shayne Clark during the conference, contains a passage where the question is asked about what happens if a bhikkhuni is ordained according to the bhikkhu rites. The Buddha relieves that the ordination is valid, but the bhikkhus commit a minor offence. This discussion is part of a lengthy series of questions regarding possible issues with the ordination procedure. It is not meant to justify deliberately using such a procedure, but appears to be a hypothetical question to cover the case where a preceptor might make a mistake and do the procedure wrongly. This might happen, for example, if the Vinaya was imperfectly known, or if it was recited in an unfamiliar language. In such a case, as usual, the Vinaya takes an attitude of flexibility and does not invalidate the ordination simply due to a minor flaw in procedure. But now it seems that certain among the Tibetans wish to leverage this loophole for re-instating the bhikkhuni lineage. But why?

The answer seems to lie in an obscure doctrine found apparently in Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośa, the classic Sarvāstivāda/Sautrāntika Abhidharma compendium that has become one of the basic texts for the Tibetans. This says that when an ordination is conducted an *avijñapti rūpa* (non-manifest material phenomenon) arises in the heart of the new ordinand. This is an invisible but real physical entity that, as it were, stamps an irrevocable seal on the *citta* of the new bhikkhu or bhikkhuni. This seal is, as it were, indelibly labeled with the brand name of the particular lineage, whether Mūlasarvāstivāda or Dharmaguptaka. Once the ordination has been conducted, the lineage is thus physically transferred and cannot be changed. It took an abhidhamma expert of the caliber of Ven. Bodhi to figure out exactly what was going on here. The point is that it seems that when a bhikkhuni ordination is carried out as normal according to the bhikkhuni rites, then the *avijñapti rūpa* stamp arises from the bhikkhuni lineage, which in this case would be Dharmaguptaka. But if the ordination is carried out according to the bhikkhu rites, then the lineage of the bhikkhus arises in the heart of the new ordinand, and she rejoices in her brand new Mūlasarvāstivādin *avijñapti rūpa*!

The gentle reader may detect a subtle note of skepticism in my attitude here. This doctrine reeks of the substantialist tendencies of the Sarvāstivādins, who lost no time in assuming a new entity any time they wanted to explain something. (In much the same way, certain physicists invent a new particle every time they want to explain an aberrant experimental result. Strangely, such new particles are usually invisible until they have been 'discovered', but after that they are found all over the place...) The irony, as Ven. Bodhi lost no time in pointing out, is that the Tibetans are in theory followers of the Prasaṅgika Madhyamaka, the ultimate emptiness school, who believe that it is impossible to assert the ultimate existence of any entity, or indeed to maintain any concrete ontological assertions. Yet they are following the extreme substantialist theories of the Sarvāstivādins, who are scathingly criticized by Nāgārjuna and other Madhyamaka philosophers for holding exactly such views!

At lunch, Ven Bodhi began a passionate exposition of this problem; he had just built up to the *avijñapti rūpa* and was about to reach his climax when two Korean bhikkhunis bustled in, ignored his protests, and proceeded to hand over their cards to the Dalai Lama and ask him when he was going to come to visit Korea... The moment was lost, and the climax never reached. Afterwards, Ven Bodhi told me he was about to suggest that we all do a meditation on emptiness to dissolve the *avijñapti rūpas* in our hearts and get rid of the problem once and for all.

Once again we were in the ironical position where the Theravādins, who are in theory committed to an ontological positivism that asserts the ultimate existence of entities in their own nature (*svabhāva*), were

trying to dissuade the Tibetans, who are in theory committed to the ontological emptiness of all phenomena, from the hyper-realism of Sarvāstivādin ontology. I wonder which is more bizarre: the fact of such sectarian confusion, or the fact that the fate of the bhikkhunis rests on such abstruse considerations.

After two days of relentless academic presentations, the pent-up emotions of the gathering found expression on the second evening, when we heard from the Tibetan nuns. They expressed, gently and with respect, how they felt disappointed that they were under-represented at the conference. There was only one Tibetan nun presenting during the two days, and she was at one of the less-attended side forums. The whole conference was meant to be about them, they said, and while they were deeply grateful that so many people wished to support them, they expressed reservations about whether they even wanted to become bhikkhunis. For many of them, life was much more basic, a matter of securing their living requisites and doing their Dhamma studies. They would have liked to have seen a more focused event that addressed their own actual concerns. Several of the nuns expressed quite forcefully that this is not a feminist issue, not a question of equal rights, but about ensuring the best way to practice and realize the Dhamma.

The main organizer, Ven. Jampa Tsedroen, was by now feeling the pressure. She has devoted much of the past 25 years to helping this cause, and by now she needed to have her say. She said passionately, first in fluent Tibetan then in English, that all the nuns had been invited to attend, but had not responded. Similarly they had been invited to give presentations, but had not responded nor given abstracts, as had all the other speakers. Further, in making an international conference drawing on scholars and monastics from all traditions she was following the explicit instructions of the Dalai Lama himself, who insisted that the Tibetans could not act alone. As for the question of equal rights, the Dalai Lama made it quite clear in his speech the next day that he did indeed see women's rights as an important issue, and regarded one aspect of bhikkhuni ordination as addressing this.

A number of others responded to the Tibetan nun's input. One lay woman simply and passionately said: 'Don't throw it away!' Other senior monastics spoke to the nuns, who were fairly young, expressing how, while bhikkhuni ordination might not be the foremost thing in their minds right now, as they develop in their practice they may well see the benefit of it. Only when seeing the spiritual growth of those who have taken the step from samaneri to bhikkhuni status can we realize the power such a step brings.

This discussion highlighted the difference in the Tibetan community between the Western and Tibetan nuns. Language gets tricky here, as not all of the bhikkhunis are Western, nor are all the Tibetan nuns 'Tibetan'. Some of the bhikkhunis are East Asian, and a few Tibetan and Bhutanese; while the 'Tibetan' nuns are increasingly born in India, or come from other Himalayan areas such as Nepal. Perhaps we should speak of 'International' and 'Indo-Tibetan' communities. But leaving the labeling difficulty aside, the difference is clearly one of scope: a local versus an international perspective.

The same is true for women in the Theravādin communities. Nuns from Thailand, Burma, and to some degree Sri Lanka often express contentment with their roles, and fear that bhikkhuni ordination is a western imposition that will disrupt their humble but familiar lives. There is no doubt some truth to this, and no doubt that for many women the existing renunciate forms will continue to be the preferred option. Bhikkhuni advocates do not deny this, but merely point out that bhikkhuni ordination should be available for those who wish to choose it.

But there is more to it than this, more than simply a choice between equally valid options. There is an arrow in human history. Our evolution as a conscious species follows certain broad tendencies, and empirical research has established that there is no going back. Our spiritual/ethical evolution moves from being self-centered to being family/tribe/nation centered, to being globally centered. The bhikkhuni ordination platform is explicitly a global venture: it was in recognition of this that the Dalai Lama called for an international conference. Those of us who have developed, through study, reflection, and discussion, a global vision of Dhamma simply cannot revert to a nationalistic or purely local model: we just don't believe in it any more. For us, one of the greatneses of Buddhism is that from its outset it was transnational and non-ethnic. Later traditions have developed strongly ethnocentric or nationalistic models for the Dhamma, and while these may have had a certain use at some points in history, we cannot limit our Dhamma in this way. This is why we take such trouble to travel across the world and participate in an exhausting conference together with our brothers and sisters from all nations.

This international vision is not a western thing; clearly the Dalai Lama shares this vision, as do many of the monks and nuns who I have met, especially of the East Asian traditions. Conversely, some western monastics try to adopt a fiercely partisan vision of Dhamma, based on ethnic or sectarian preference. This

always seems to me to be disturbing and dysfunctional, as if such Venerables really know better, but are forced from certain insecurities or fears to insist on a certainty that they are aware deep down is unreal.

I have heard many nuns and monks speak in favor of the lesser ordination platforms, such as ten precept samaneri ordination. Invariably, the reasons they give appear as a diminution of the holy life, not an expansion of it. Often they are concerned that their day to day problems take up so much of their energy, they just don't have the time to take on the additional study and training that bhikkhuni ordination requires. Underlying this is a very real fear that their marginal acceptance by the bhikkhu Sangha will be jeopardized.

Will the deepest respect, I feel that such nuns do not fully realize just why the bhikkhu Sangha can accept them but has such troubles accepting bhikkunis. The samaneri precepts are for little girls. The monks effectively think of ten precept nuns in this light, however polite they may be to the nuns in person. Apart from a very few monks who have lived in communities with ten precept nuns for a long time, I have never met any monk who genuinely takes the ten precept ordination seriously. Be clear about this: this has precisely nothing to do with the personal spiritual development of the nuns. Monks are quite happy to accept that nuns, or even laywomen, have much better meditation than them – a fact too obvious to be denied. The question is not one of individual spiritual development, but of the cultural and social dimensions of the Dhamma. The bhikkhu Sangha cannot take the ten precept samaneri community seriously. This is why they are never invited to participate in any major decision making of the Sangha, and why they persist in such marginal niches; and why the male Sangha allows them, but not bhikkunis.

These reflections give us some hint as to the future direction of the Sangha. Already we perceive a division between the Sangha on local vs. international grounds. The local Sanghas, identifying themselves primarily through national or sectarian allegiance, remain powerful and effective within their own limited spheres, but have vanishingly little relevance outside them. But even this is deeply troubled, as the modern world inevitably imposes itself. If the Sangha remains exclusively local, how can they act as leaders and teachers to a lay community that is increasingly seeing itself as acting on a global stage? This is the cruel dilemma facing traditional Sanghas in many Buddhist countries today.

The international Sangha, on the other hand, lacks an established institutional focus and has not yet evolved a clear sense of self-identity. They consist of monks and nuns from all countries and traditions, who within themselves are extremely diverse in terms of practice, Dhamma theory, teachings, and so on. But they share a common feeling that they see themselves as humans first, Buddhists second, bhikkhus and bhikkunis third, and Thai/Tibetan/Mahāyāna or whatever a long distant fourth. When we meet and discuss, we share a common belief that the teachings and guidelines found within the original Buddhist Suttas and Vinaya offer us a more than adequate framework for establishing our future Buddhist Sangha. But we are united not so much by belief as by vision. While local Sanghas retreat from the future into a largely mythical past, we greet the future with hope.

In our late night discussion panel meeting, the leading Vietnamese monk, Ven. Thich Quang Ba (currently Chair of the Australian Sangha Association) suggested that the ordination would most appropriately be carried out by the bhikkunis who have already been practicing with Tibetan tradition for a long time. This had already been suggested by Ven. Heng Ching in her paper. All present at the meeting embraced his option enthusiastically. It seemed to us that these nuns had a dual identity: in terms of lineage they came from Dhamaguptaka, while in terms of practice they are Mūlasarvāstivāda. If you like, their genotype is Dharmaguptaka but their phenotype is Mūlasarvāstivāda. They are like someone who was, say, born in Vietnam but came out to Australia as a baby, then grew up and went to school, got a job, was married, and raised a family in Australia: are they Vietnamese or Australian? Since, for most of us, the practice of Dhamma is the crucial thing, rather than the lineage, it was felt that these nuns would provide the ideal mentorship and support for the new bhikkunis.

Interestingly enough, it was difficult to avoid having this decision, originally suggested by a Vietnamese and a Taiwanese and endorsed by an international group, being characterized as 'western'. The feeling was that it was time to recognize the courage and practice of the senior bhikkunis, who happen to be mostly western, and for them to take their rightful place as leaders of the new movement. It had nothing to do with any particularly 'western' ideas.

But it is, it seems, difficult for many of the Indo-Tibetan nuns to accept this. Their preference was for a single-Sangha ordination: by this they implied their evaluation of lineage over lifestyle; but more so, it

seems, their feeling that the Tibetan monks are their teachers. It will take time to get used to the idea of having women as teachers, and even more so women from a very different cultural background. But they should take heart: many of the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, myself included, have spent many years in alien cultures, learning foreign languages, and taking as teachers monks with a very different set of cultural values. If the heart is set on Dhamma, all these obstacles can be surmounted.

But for the time being, I think we need to accept with grace that such differences exist, and will not simply disappear overnight. There should be no doubt from this essay where my sympathies lie. My vocation is to work with the international Sangha for the establishment of the four-fold community worldwide. I think we need to accept that this is where the future lies. It's difficult to say it without coming across as patronizing, but I think most people can recognize it as the simple truth. Accepting this inevitability, we should not be fearful or aggressive when we become frustrated by the limitations of the conventional Sangha.

The disappointing outcome of this conference is a stern reminder of how limited even a great leader like the Dalai Lama is when he must deal the 'dark matter', which he referred to as 'narrow-minded monks'. I think the international Sangha should take courage, and should not allow themselves to be tied to such conventions. Proceed gracefully in the knowledge that the future is ours, and get on with the work of doing what needs to be done.

Performance of bhikkhuni ordination is our duty, the duty of those who wish to set up the four-fold community for the benefit of the world. Legally, permission is not required from the Sangha as a whole: the Vinaya merely requires that the Sangha within one monastery agree in consensus to the ordination. Indeed, the Sangha as a whole has not made any decisions since the Second Council, a mere century after the Buddha's parinibbana. This was one of the great sticking points of the conference. I told the Dalai Lama that, although he had asked for a decision by the Sangha as a whole, we were unclear how such a decision could be reached. He replied that he, too, was unclear. There is no prospect of this unclarity being resolved, and no suggestion for how a universally acceptable decision could be reached by all the Sanghas. While we respect the work performed by the institutions of the local Sanghas in protecting and developing the Sangha within their own context, the international Sangha will never accept any locally constituted body to usurp the authority of the Vinaya. If the local Sangha bodies do not endorse bhikkhuni ordination, it is unreasonable to expect the aspirations of women who wish to follow Dhamma-Vinaya to be postponed indefinitely.

Agreement from the wider Sangha will come gradually, as they see the earnest practice of the bhikkhunis. This much seemed to be implied in the Dalai Lama's suggestion that, failing to make a decision to actually do ordination, the existing bhikkhunis should come to Dharamsala and there perform the regular *saṅghakammas*: *uposatha* (fortnightly recitation of the monastic code), *vassa* (rains retreat), and *paṅvāraṇā* (invitation for admonishment at the end of the *vassa*). The idea seemed to be that the Tibetan monks would thereby get used to the idea of a functioning bhikkhuni community. However, while the Vinaya requires that these procedures be co-ordinated between the bhikkhu and bhikkhuni communities, the intention here seemed to be for them to be done separately. Nevertheless, while falling short of the near-universally expressed wish of the conference, perhaps such a move will shine a little light within the Tibetan monastic community. Although current prospects seem dim indeed, we can only hope that this light will spread East as well as West, and that the leaders of the Theravādin Sangha will take note of these developments.