

Women in Buddhism (Questions and Answers)

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Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc.

WOMEN IN BUDDHISM

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS



BY

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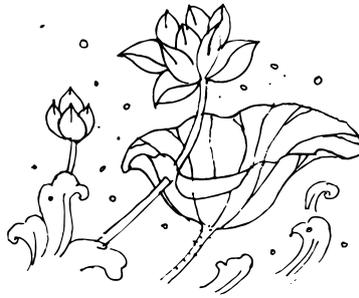
WOMEN IN BUDDHISM: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

ISBN: 974-572-607-9

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FIRST PUBLISHED 1998

ALSO AVAILABLE IN THAI



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FROM CHICAGO, U.S.A.**



**MAY THE BUDDHAS AND BODHISATTVAS BLESS THEM WITH
GOOD HEALTH, PROSPERITY, LONG LIFE AND HAPPINESS.**

WOMEN IN BUDDHISM
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS



by

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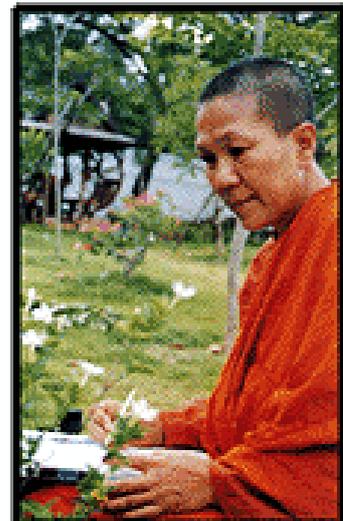
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Bangkok, 1997-8.

Ven. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh Ph.D.

Samaneri



Preface

In 1983 I was invited to attend an international conference on “Women, Religions, and Social Changes” at Harvard University, U.S.A. At this conference I was given a specific task to write a paper on “The Future of the Bhikkhuni Sangha in Thailand.” Even after years of involvement and commitment on the ordination issue for Buddhist women, still I had not envisioned that changes and channels would be open for women this soon.

To express my appreciation for the upcoming bhikkhuni ordination in Bodh Gaya, India, February 15–22, 1998, I am honoured to present to you this booklet. I hope it will provide you with some answers to questions often asked about women and the ordination issue and others.

I am grateful to Fo Kuang Shan for making this ordination possible. Significantly, the ordination will be given in Bodh Gaya, a place of enlightenment — enlightenment for both men and women.

Prof. Martin Perenchio offered valuable assistance to provide English improvement to the original manuscript. I am thankful to him and to everyone involved in the production of this booklet.

Chatsumarn Kabilsingh

Home of Peace and Love
December 5th, 1997

Contents

Preface	6
Question 1	11
When Queen Maha Pajapati asked the Buddha to allow her to join the Order, why did he hesitate but give permission later on?	
Question 2	14
What are the requirements for Bhikkhuni ordination?	
Question 3	16
Why do men have only two levels of ordination while women have to go through three levels of ordination?	
Question 4	17
Why do bhikkhunis follow more precepts (sikkhapada) than monks?	
Question 5	19
What is the reason for the androcentric nature of the Tripitaka?	
Question 6	20
Is it true that the Tripitaka suppresses women?	
Question 7	23
What do you think of the Eight Garudharmas?	
Question 8	27
The bhikkhus have three robes while the bhikkhunis have five robes. What are they?	

Question 9	29
Once the women joined the Sangha, how were they treated by the bhikkhus?	
Question 10	30
What was the attitude of the bhikkhus towards the Buddha's acceptance of women?	
Question 11	31
What was the status of the bhikkhunis during the Buddha's time?	
Question 12	32
Were there any enlightened bhikkhunis?	
Question 13	33
Why cannot a bhikkhu receive food offered by bhikkhuni?	
Question 14	34
In the Buddha's time what role did women play in Buddhism?	
Question 15	36
What is the lineage of the bhikkhuni Sangha in the history of Buddhism?	
Question 16	37
Are there bhikkhunis also in other countries?	
Question 17	39
Are there bhikkhunis in Theravada tradition?	
Question 18	40
Why is there no bhikkhuni Ordination in Thailand?	

Question 19	41
Is it possible to introduce bhikkhuni Sangha in Thailand?	
Question 20	44
Is it true that monks are not to touch women because women are impure?	
Question 21	45
It is commonly believed that women are unclean. How true is this belief?	
Question 22	46
Why are women seen as a commodity?	
Question 23	47
Why do some temples in the north not allow women to circumambulate the stupas?	
Question 24	49
It is often said that “women are enemy to the life of purity.” How do you explain this saying?	
Question 25	50
Is it true that once women were admitted to the Order, Buddhism will be shortened to 500 years?	
Question 26	52
Why cannot women become buddhas?	
Question 27	56
What is Buddhist attitude towards prostitution?	
Question 28	57
What is an attitude of a Buddhist towards abortion?	

Question 29	59
What is the historical development of mae jis? And what is their present status?	
Question 30	61
How can a mae ji share in social and religious development?	
Question 31	63
Why some families in the north sell their daughters so that they can give ordination to their sons?	
Question 32	65
Generally why people prefer to make offering to monks rather than mae jis?	
Question 33	66
Why do women go to the temple and make merit more than men?	
Question 34	68
In the role of female followers, what should Buddhist women do?	
Question 35	69
Is it true that if a person is enlightened, she must be ordained within 7 days?	
Question 36	70
What is the unique characteristic in American Buddhism which might interest a feminist?	



Question 1

When Queen Maha Pajapati asked the Buddha to allow her to join the Order, why did he hesitate but give permission later on?

For those who are interested in the ordination of women, this is one of the most puzzling questions, which needs a great deal of contextual understanding.

When King Suddhodana, the Buddha's royal father passed away, the duty of a wife to her husband was completed. It was the right time for Maha Pajapati to consider following the teaching and the practice of the Buddha seriously. But when she approached and asked for permission the Buddha simply said, "Please do not ask so." The **Tripitaka**, which is the most important primary source, did not provide any reason for not allowing women to join the Order.

Many interpretations were given in later commentaries trying to explain the situation. This led also to common belief that the Buddha did not want to allow women to lead a religious life. This is not without basis. According to Indian social mores, to lead a religious life is not the path for women. Manudharma Sastra was very clear to spell out that salvation for a woman is possible only through bhakti (devotion) to her husband.

But Maha Pajapati was unshaken in her decision. After the Buddha had gone, she, along with 500 Sakiyanis (Sakyan women) from the royal court shaved their heads and donned

the yellow robes. They followed him on foot until they arrived at Vesali where the Buddha resided. Upon arriving at the arama (residence) they did not ask to have an audience with the Buddha for fear of being rejected again. Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and personal attendant, found them at the entrance covered with dust, with torn robes and bleeding feet. Many of them were miserable and in tears of desperation. He learned from them of their request and on their behalf approached the Buddha. Again, the Buddha forbade Ananda in the same manner, "Ananda, please do not ask so."

There are various reasons to be taken in consideration in attempting to understand the possible difficulties or obstacles which presented themselves in the mind of the Buddha.

First of all Maha Pajapati was a queen who, along with 500 ladies of the court, knew only the life of comfort. To lead a reclusive life allowing them only to sleep under the tree, or in the cave, would be too hard for them. Out of compassion the Buddha wanted them to think it over.

Furthermore, accepting a large group of women to be ordained all at once would immediately involve teachers to provide them both instruction and training. The Buddha also could not make himself constantly accessible for them. The Sangha was not ready with competent teachers to handle a large crowd of women. This proved to be a reality later on when women were already accepted to the Sangha. Monks who could teach the nuns must be not only learned but also require an appropriate attitude to help uplift women spiritually.

The Buddha already received criticism from outsiders

for breaking up families by ordaining either the husbands or wives. When Maha Pajapati approached him with 500 Sakiyanis, definitely this would be a major cause of criticism. Particularly Sakyas did not marry people from other clans. By allowing 500 Sakiyanis to be ordained would definitely affect the social status quo. But it was revealed that these women's husbands had already joined the Order. Thus, the criticism that accepting these women would break up their families became groundless.

The fact that these women followed him on foot to Vesali is a proof of their genuine commitment to lead religious lives and removed the doubt that their request might be out of momentary impulse.

These could have been some of the reasons behind the Buddha's hesitation. The Buddha needed the time to examine both the pros and cons to their request.

Ananda also tried to understand the Buddha's refusal. Is it because women are not capable of achieving spiritual enlightenment? If that is so, then ordination, a spiritual path is open only to men. To this, the Buddha made it clear that both men and women have equal potentiality to achieve spiritual enlightenment.

We have to mark this statement, as this is the first time in the history of religion that a religious leader declared openly that men and women are equal on spiritual grounds. Previously in the Hindu context, the Vedas, the most sacred religious texts, were available only to men. Buddhism has transcended race, nation, caste and gender differences to

declare that the highest spiritual achievement transcends obstacles or discrimination of gender. With this important reason, the Buddha allowed women to join his Order.

Question 2

What are the requirements for Bhikkhuni ordination?

Bhikkhuni ordination requires a minimum of 5 bhikkhunis. On the same day, after having been admitted by the bhikkhuni Sangha, that woman must be admitted also by a minimum of 5 monks. The pavattini or bhikkhuni preceptor must have at least 12 years standing as a bhikkhuni who is well versed both in dharma and vinaya, and also must be appointed as preceptor by both Sanghas.

After having been admitted women to the Order, it became very popular for women to join the Order, resulting in a lack of residential provision. Each Pavattini, then was allowed to give ordination only every other year. The preceptor is to provide for both teaching and training for nuns under her guidance, including taking care of them if they should become ill.

There are three forms of ordination for monks. First Ehi bhikkhu Upasampada, an ordination given directly by the Buddha in the early period with literally no formal ritual. The Buddha simply allowed “Do become a monk,” which was considered a complete ordination.

Next came ordination by accepting the Triple Gem, namely Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, as refuge. This was the form of ordination by which teachers in the early period accepted their disciples to become monks.

Later when the number of applications became much higher, a more formal type of ordination was given. It is called natticatuthakammavaca, with a preceptor with two trainers and minimum chapter of 10 monks to witness the ordination. This is an ordination given by a sangha, and is the prevalent type of ordination available in the present day.

There is yet another type of ordination provided for bhikkhunis. There was a case of a woman who had completed the ordination procedure by the bhikkhuni sangha but could not reach the bhikkhu sangha in another village in the same day as prescribed by the ordination requirement. In this case, there were some thieves waiting on the way to abduct her. The Buddha allowed Dutenasampada, ordination through an appointed ambassador. That is another bhikkhuni was assigned by the bhikkhuni sangha on behalf of the bhikkhuni-to-be. This is also considered a rightful ordination.

A woman who requests bhikkhuni ordination must be at least 20 years of age, with permission from her parents, having no illness that would be an obstacle to leading an ordained life. She must have completed a 2-year training period as sikkhamana and be able to obtain the basic material requirements e.g. robes, bowl, etc.

Question 3

Why do men have only two levels of ordination while women have to go through three levels of ordination?

There are 5 different types of ordination, 2 for men and 3 for women. Samaneri (female novice) is a lower ordination (bappajja) with 10 precepts. One who is entitled to this ordination must be old enough to be able to drive away crows off the paddy field. Later on it was fixed at a minimal age of seven. Older men sometimes also receive only lower ordination.

One who can apply for higher ordination (upasampada) must meet the minimum age requirement of 20 and have a normal physical condition. A married woman may be ordained at the age of 12 with permission from her spouse.

For Sikkhamana, a training period was instituted later. There was a particular case of a married woman who asked for ordination without knowing that she had conceived. Her pregnancy came to light only after ordination. Hence a rule was laid down and women have to go through Sikkhamana training for two years. During this time a sikkhamana observes 6 anudharmas which are the first six precepts in the 10 precepts for novices. However, a sikkhamana is considered having a training level higher than novice even though the latter received only six precepts. This implies that a sikkhamana is in fact a person in a preparatory stage to receive higher ordination, and during the two years training, should she transgress any

one of the precepts she has to start all over again. It is required that she must meet the requirement of two continuous years of training without transgression.

Question 4

Why do bhikkhunis follow more precepts (sikkhapada) than monks?

In Theravada, monks follow 227 precepts and bhikkhunis follow 311 precepts. This difference often leads to misunderstanding that the Buddha in fact did not want women to join the Order, and so he set up rules as barrier to fence off women right at the start.

From a comparative study between the monks and nuns patimokkha (presented at an International Conference on Thai Studies, Chiangmai, Oct. 14–17, 1996) it is shown that counting by section, bhikkhus observe eight sections as compared to seven sections by nuns. One section exclusively for monks is called “Aniyata.” In this section, there are two rules introduced by Visakha, the leading female lay supporter in early Buddhism. One of them forbids the monks from staying alone with a female in a covered place and another one forbids monks from staying alone with a female in an open place beyond hearing of others.

In Parajika, the first section of the patimokkha which is concerned with the most severe offences, any monk or nun

who has transgressed any one of these rules is “defeated” at the moment of committing that act. There are four rules for monks and eight rules for nuns. The extra rules that nuns have to observe in this section may be found for monks also but are classified under Sanghadisesa, the second section which is less severe. Having transgressed it a monk will have to go through ‘manatta’ period, a temporary self-expulsion from the Sangha. It is worth noting that classification of the rules can easily be the work of a later period at the hands of the monks.

In Patidesaniya section, there are eight rules for bhikkhunis. Bhikkhus have the same content of the rules but they are counted as one and classified under Sekhiya, another section. This is one of the reasons responsible for the bloated number of rules for bhikkhunis.

In the Pacittiya section, bhikkhunis follow 166 rules as compared to 92 for bhikkhus. There are 70 common rules shared by both Sanghas. Then bhikkhus have another set of 22 exclusively for bhikkhus and bhikkhunis have another set of 76 rules exclusively for bhikkhunis. Within 76 rules exclusively for bhikkhunis, it is notable that there are many rules regarding ordination requirements which the bhikkhus also have to follow, but for bhikkhus they are not counted in the Patimokkha. This also results in a seemingly larger number of Patimokkha rules for bhikkhunis.

Due to the above reasons, the bhikkhunis carry a higher number of rules in the Patimokkha than the monks, but in reality they follow a similar set of rules.

Question 5

What is the reason for the androcentric nature of the Tripitaka?

I am focussing my answer only within the Theravada context which preserved the teachings in Pali. Theravadins believe that their teaching is most authentic from a historical point of view. We need to understand that the Tripitaka that we know of was not a written work from the Buddha's time. Religious knowledge was to be practised and handed down from teachers to chosen disciples. Hence no religious teaching was recorded. This applied also to the teaching of the Buddha. The Tripitaka was first recorded in Sri Lanka not before 450 B.E. (about 90 B.C.)

What was recorded was according to the understanding of the monk recorders. What they chose to record was subjective, hence it is understandable why the Tripitaka is androcentric. The Tripitaka was recorded by men who were ridden with Indian social values. They were men who by the vinaya, were expected to lead lives of purity. The most immediate obstacle to their chastity was the opposite gender. Many teachings as preserved by these men therefore projected women (embodiment of their obstacles) as evil, unclean, etc. This is a necessary barrier to fence themselves off from failing into the pit of the unchaste. While reading the Tripitaka one must remind oneself of this limitation in order to sift the essence from its social contextual limitations.

Looking at the teaching from the Paramattha level, one sees clearly that Buddhism is free from gender bias, Buddhism is the first religion in the world to recognise the equal spiritual potentiality of men and women. This provides a special place for Buddhism which started in India to lift up to the world spiritual level without boundary in race, caste, or gender.

Question 6

Is it true that the Tripitaka suppresses women?

The Tripitaka, a large body of a Buddhist canonical texts, consists of three major parts. The teaching was recorded and put into three baskets called pitakas. The first part, Vinaya, deals with monastic prohibitions and allowances for bhikkhus and bhikkhunis. Sutta, the second part deals with the teachings both of the Buddha and his major disciples. Some deal with the development of the mind free from social context while others are still cloaked with Indian social values. Some are Jatakas or the stories of the Buddha's previous births woven out of popular stories from the Indian soil. These two portions of the Tripitaka were recited at the first council which took place three months after the Great Passing Away of the Buddha. Abhidharma, the third part of the Tripitaka, is philosophical exposition of the mind and its function composed by later commentators. All three parts of

the Tripitaka were first recorded in written form not earlier than 450 B.E. (about 90 B.C.)

The materials found in the Tripitaka may be divided into two major portions : Lokuttara and Lokiya. Lokuttara deals with pure dharma aiming at mental freedom. By its nature, the mind has no gender difference. Lokuttara dharma is therefore beyond gender difference and bias.

The latter portion, namely lokiya, is the teaching within a social and historical context. Therefore its value is subjected to social and historical factors. This portion may further be divided under two categories. The first part is that taken from the Indian social context, hence carried on and reinforced by Indian social values. This is responsible for the large part of materials found in the Tripitaka which appear to be suppressing women if we read the Tripitaka without understanding its framework.

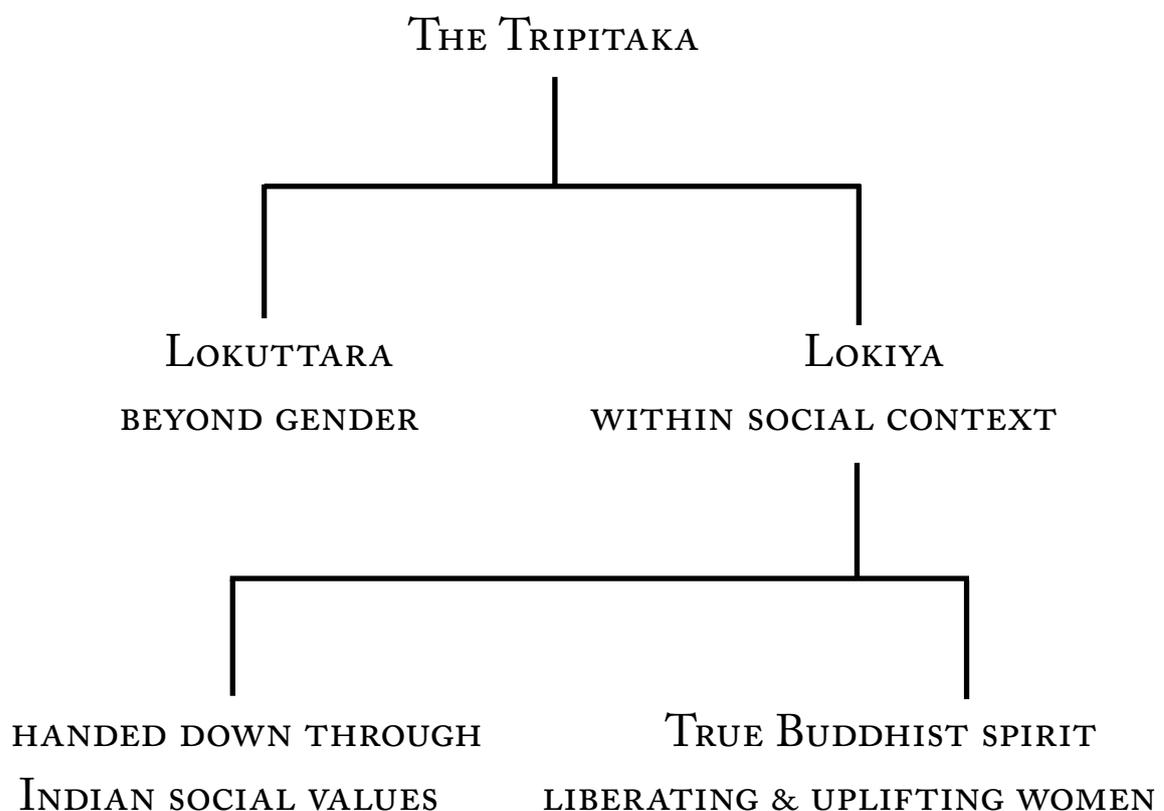
The other portion clearly presents an attitude of Buddhism trying to free itself from Indian social values, e.g. the caste system. The Buddha clearly denied the caste system which was a social measure to divide people into different castes. He, instead, emphasised that a brahmin is not one who is born from brahmin parents but becomes one through his righteous action.

Then he made his standpoint very clear to announce that men and women are equal in their potentiality to achieve spiritual enlightenment. A woman's spiritual achievement came from her own action, not through devotion to her husband. Once women were admitted to the Order, they

enjoyed equal opportunity to practice dharma. Many vinaya rules were laid down so that the bhikkhus will not take advantage of the bhikkhunis, e.g. monks are not to ask the bhikkhunis to wash their robes, rugs, etc.

In this portion of materials we find the Tripitaka supports and promotes women. We should take this as a true spirit of Buddhism. It is indeed social reform in an attempt to uplift women to share the responsibility as one of the four groups of Buddhists equally responsible for the growth or decline of Buddhism.

In conclusion, we can say that it is true that there are certain passages in the Tripitaka which are suppressing to women but that they do not represent the true spirit of Buddhism.



Question 7

What do you think of the Eight Garudharmas?

When the Buddha finally allowed women to join the Order, he gave the Eight Garudharmas for them to follow. The Queen Maha Pajapati took these upon herself as a garland decorating her head. Nevertheless these Eight Garudharmas have been much criticised, assuming after all the Buddha was not free from Indian social conditions.

We need to take a close look at the Eight Garudharmas:

1. A nun who has been ordained (even) for a century must greet respectfully, rise up from her seat, salute with joined palms, do proper homage to a monk ordained but that day.
2. A nun must not spend the rains in a residence where there is no monk.
3. Every half month a nun should desire two things from the Order of monks : the asking (as to the date) of the Observance day, and the coming for the exhortation (of a monk).
4. After the rains a nun must invite before both the Orders in respect of three matters; what was seen, what was heard and what was suspected.
5. A nun, offending against an important rule, must undergo manatta (discipline) for half a month before both the Orders.

6. When, as a probationers, she has been trained in the six rules for two years, she should seek ordination from both the Orders.
7. A monk must not be abused or reviled in any way by a nun.
8. From today admonition of monks by nuns is forbidden, admonition by monks is not forbidden. (Cv. X. SBE. XX p. 354)

The Buddha actually prescribed the Eight Garudharmas for the bhikkhunis to follow so that they function as a protection for themselves. Looking at them superficially one may think that they are measures to control women. To understand and appreciate Garudharma one needs to look at them within the given social and historical contexts. Indian society has always been patriarchal. Men are always at the central points of thoughts and interests. Women were brought up within a cultural and social setting which placed them as subordinates. They are under the care of their parents when young, under protection of their husbands when married, and under protection of their sons in their advanced age (Manudharmasastra). Women are taken as dependent beings.

They cannot be left alone so much so that women are not accustomed to making decisions on their own. Their lives completely depend on the guidance of male members of the families. Religious life is not to be mentioned. A woman can expect to have spiritual salvation only through devotion and

service to her husband. She may make offerings as the other half of her husband, but independently she cannot perform any ritual. She is neither allowed to recite nor to read the Vedas as she is unclean, and vice versa, she is unclean because she cannot study the Vedas.

Social and religious conditions permit the only salvation for her through devotion to her husband. It also linked to her obligation of bearing sons to her family. It is believed that the son must perform the final rite to allow the access to heaven for his parents. In case a woman cannot bring forth a son to her husband's family, her presence is indeed considered inauspicious.

Buddhism emerged from Indian soil full of these social values. One needs to be reminded that Buddhist monks in the early period were after all Indian men from different castes moulded with these social norms and values.

Women came to join the Order at least five years after the bhikkhu sangha was established. It is only natural and understandable that the Buddha would place the bhikkhuni Sangha in a subordinate position to the bhikkhu Sangha for the harmonious coexistence and for a functional purpose in order to establish a balanced foundation of administration. The bhikkhuni Sangha may be seen as a later arrival of younger sisters who must accept and pay respect to the bhikkhu Sangha, comparatively their elder brothers. The Buddha was well aware that with the admission of a large group of female followers he would need assistance from the bhikkhus to help him in the teaching and training of the

newly ordained bhikkhunis. The easiest way to make their path smooth is to make them subordinate to the bhikkhu Sangha for functional benefit.

But as the story unfolds itself, we find that the bhikkhus still expected the bhikkhunis to perform household chores for them just the way they were familiar with when they were still in their households. The difference was that now instead of serving men at home, the nuns serve them in a monastic setting. If we look at the Eight Garudharmas negatively we will find that they become measures to support and affirm such values.

Again, further study shows that we cannot take the Eight Garudharmas as final authority without flexibility. I can quote an example of the first Garudharma which says that “a nun even ordained for 100 years must pay respect to a monk ordained that day.” Later there was a case of six monks who playfully lifted up their robes showing their thighs to attract the bhikkhunis’ attention. In this case, the Buddha instructed the bhikkhunis not to pay respect to these monks. This shows that any rule laid down by the Buddha always has a certain requirement to it. One should not stick to the rule without understanding the spirit of it.

I should also mention that the 6th Garudharma mentions that “a sikkhamana having completed the 2-year training, is to ask for higher ordination” is a later requirement. When the Buddha allowed Queen Maha Pajapati to join the Order, She was ordained as a bhikkhuni. Sikkhamana was not in existence at that time. What may be drawn from this seeming

discrepancy is that the Garudharmas was introduced in a later period but placed at the conception of the bhikkhuni ordination to give emphasis to its authority as the recorder might have thought this to be a good measure for the bhikkhu sangha to control the bhikkhuni Sangha.

More over the Eight Garudharmas may be found already in the Patimokkha itself.

Question 8

The bhikkhus have three robes while the bhikkhunis have five robes. What are they?

The five robes prescribed for the bhikkhunis are as follows:

1. Sanghati, an extra robe often seen folded and placed on one shoulder. This robe has two main functions. One is to be spread and used as seat or bedding. Another purpose is to use it as an extra cover in winter.
2. Uttarasanga is the normal robe. It may be worn to cover both shoulders, or cover only one shoulder.
3. Antarasavaka is a lower robe to wrap around the lower part of the body and tie at the waist with a cotton belt specially made for monks and nuns. In Thai this is called “Rad pakot.” This is worn with folded pleats in front, neatly tugged under the belt. The lower edge must be even.

4. Udakasatika is a bath robe required for both bhikkhus and bhikkhunis. This robe is similar in shape to no.3 but without the edge. For bhikkhunis, while taking a bath, this is worn higher to cover from her breasts down to her knees.

Formerly the monks bathed naked. Visakha, the lay follower, suggested to the Buddha that it was not fitting for the monks to bathe nakedly. Since then it became a monastic requirement added to the first three robes.

5. Samkacchika, a vest, is required only for the bhikkhunis. Formerly they wore exactly the same kind of robes as the monks but when they went for alms, the wind blew the robes against their bodies and their breasts were seen prominently under the robes. The local people made fun of them, so the Buddha prescribed the vest for them. It is to be worn tight to flatten their breasts.

Another requirement is the 'monthly robe.' which, though not included in the above five robes, is necessary for the bhikkhunis. This is used during the menstruation period. In the Buddha's time material was not easily available, this 'monthly robes' belonged to the Sangha. Any bhikkhuni may use them when needed. Then must wash them clean and return them for the common use of the bhikkhuni Sangha.

Another piece of clothing not allowable for a bhikkhuni is 'Sanghani.' This is a decorated piece worn around the hips as commonly practised by the laywomen.

Question 9

Once the women joined the Sangha, how were they treated by the bhikkhus?

There is no direct record on the subject, but from the study of the Vinaya one may find that after all the bhikkhus were men drawn from Indian society. Being used to the service offered by women, the bhikkhus treated the bhikkhunis like wives. The bhikkhunis had to spend time washing rugs, robes, etc. for the monks in a similar manner that women have to take care of their men folk in their household lives.

The bhikkhunis received this kind of treatment from the monks until the lay people took notice and brought it to the attention of the Buddha. The Buddha having listened to the complaint called the two parties involved. Both parties accepted that what was brought to the attention of the Buddha was correct. He then laid down vinaya for the monks not to ask the bhikkhunis to perform such service. One may see the Buddha's intention clearly that when he allowed women to join the Order, basically to allow them to study and practice his teaching, they would no more be householders, and thus no longer bound to household chores. Each ordained person is to take care of his or her own basic requirement and spend time to pursue one's spiritual goal, namely to strive for enlightenment.

Both bhikkhus and bhikkhunis have left their household lives behind aiming to seek for spiritual attainment. To

expect the bhikkhunis to serve the bhikkhus contradicts the underlying principle by which the Buddha allowed women to join the Order.

Question 10

What was the attitude of the bhikkhus towards the Buddha's acceptance of women?

Again there is no direct record from the Buddha's time, partly because when the Buddha allowed women to join the Order, it was the Queen Maha Pajapati who approached him. Because of their close relationship even if some monks may not have approved of the decision, no one made it known to be sufficient evident for recording.

But at the First Council only three months after the Buddha's passing away, with Maha Kassapa presiding over the council, discontentment was made known for admitting women to the Order by asking Ananda to confess that it was his offence for being an important mediator to approach the Buddha on behalf of women and finally got them admitted to the Order. Venerable Ananda clearly made his point that he did not see his intervention as an offence, but with respect to the Sangha he confessed.

An interesting incident to be mentioned in this connection is that Maha Kassapa who presided at this historic council, was not on good terms with the bhikkhunis. We found an incident recorded when he went to give teaching to the bhikkhuni

Sangha, he was ridiculed by them as the bhikkhunis expressed their doubts as to how could he know of any dharma with his brahministic background. Apart from that, the bhikkhunis also made clear their preference for Ananda's teaching. This caused Maha Kassapa to be much displeased and again Venerable Ananda had to intervene asking for forgiveness from Maha Kassapa on the behalf of the bhikkhunis. This background incident implies the already existing unpleasant feeling between Maha Kassapa and the bhikkhuni Sangha. What followed at the First Council is understandable.

Question 11

What was the status of the bhikkhunis during the Buddha's time?

When the Buddha allowed women to join the Order, a large number of women welcomed the opportunity given to women for the first time in Indian history. Some wanted to join the Order to escape the dreadful life of having to remain in the kitchen for most of their time, some wanted to escape from a meaningless life of widowhood, some were doing it as a fashion, or simply followed their close relatives. In the latter case, some of them proved to be trouble for the Sangha, but for most of the cases, these women were sincere in their spiritual search as it was the first time they enjoyed such freedom.

There were bhikkhunis who were recognised by the

Buddha as being foremost in the Vinaya, teaching dharma, etc. They were active in propagating the teaching of the Buddha in the same manner as the bhikkhus.

Some bhikkhunis were well known in preaching and were popular among ministers and noble families. Once a king asked a learned nun to explain certain dharma and later asked the same question to the Buddha. He was surprised to find that the bhikkhuni expounded the dharma topic the same way as the Buddha. He was happy and convinced that in fact the teaching of the Buddha had taken root properly.

Question 12

Were there any enlightened bhikkhunis?

The Tripitaka mentions 500 and more. There were 13 who were singled out and received praise from the Buddha with their different distinctions:

1. Maha Pajapati was praised for her long standing as the first bhikkhuni
2. Khema Theri, former queen of King Bimbisara was praised for her wisdom
3. Upalavanna Theri was praised for her achievement in performing miracles
4. Patacara Theri was praised for her good memory on the Vinaya

5. Dhammadinna Theri was praised for being capable in teaching
6. Nanda Theri was praised for meditation
7. Sona Theri was praised for her patience
8. Sakula Theri was praised for having divine sights
9. Kundalakesi Theri was praised for achieving sudden enlightenment
10. Bhadda Kapilani was praised for remembering past lives
11. Bhadda Kaccana (Princess Yasodhara) was praised for her Great Abhinna
12. Kisa Gotami was praised for wearing coarse robes
13. Sigalamata was praised for holding fast to faith.

Question 13

Why cannot a bhikkhu receive food offered by bhikkhuni?

In Patidesaniya, one section in the Patimokkha, we find such a prohibition. Checking in the Vibhanga, where we learn the historical context of the rule, we found an interesting story. An elder bhikkhuni of 120 years old went

for alms in the city at the distance of 4 to 5 kms. Upon her return a young monk was waiting with his empty bowl. Out of respect for monks as prescribed in the Garudharma, she reverently offered him her alms received for that day. The young monk got an idea of not having to go all the way for alms himself and received alms from the same nun on the following day also. On the third day, the bhikkhuni went for alms in the city. While roaming in the city a chariot passed near her path. She took a step aside, fell down and fainted. The millionaire who was riding that chariot came out to make inquiry and learned from her that she fainted out of hunger and tiredness, as she had not eaten for three days. Upon learning the reason the millionaire criticised the young monk and later brought this to the attention of the Buddha. From then on, to protect the nuns from being taken advantage of, the Buddha laid down the rule for the monks not to receive alms from bhikkhunis.

Question 14

In the Buddha's time what role did women play in Buddhism?

I have already given you the picture of what the bhikkhunis did in the previous pages. Here I would like to mention the role of Visakha as a case study reflecting on the positive role of women in Buddhism during the Buddha's time.

Visakha was born in a Buddhist family. As a child she used to follow her grandparents to listen to the teaching of the Buddha. She was married to an equally wealthy family. Not only was she herself interested in Buddhism, she was also successful to influence Singala, the millionaire who was her father-in-law to convert to Buddhism as well. Because of this, sometimes people addressed her as “Singalamata” or “mother of Singala” to honour her.

She had been so involved in Buddhist circle from childhood that she was known both to the Buddha and the Sanghas. Her role was not limited only to following the teaching of the Buddha but she also played a significant role of consultant as well as regular supporter. Furthermore, she was equally well versed both in the Dharma and Vinaya.

When she noticed that some monks were not behaving well she brought it to the Buddha’s attention and as a result rules were laid down at her request. Two Aniyata rules came into existence because of her suggestion. Bathrobes for the monks also became a monastic requirement as suggested by her.

In the role of a consultant to the Sangha, there was a case of pregnant bhikkhuni who was expelled by Ven Devadatta. But this bhikkhuni appealed to the Buddha and insisted upon her purity. The Buddha ordered the Sangha to reinvestigate and Visakha was invited to the newly appointed committee to give advice to the Sangha. Visakha came from a large family. She herself had many children and grand children, hence an experienced householder. Upon her investigation

she found out that the bhikkhuni was pregnant before being ordained. When the purity of this bhikkhuni came to light, the Buddha allowed her to remain without having to disrobe and the baby was later adopted by the royal family.

Visakha played a very significant role as a lay female disciple; she indeed met the requirement of an established Buddhist who was responsible for propagating and establishing Buddhism in the early period.

Question 15

What is the lineage of the bhikkhuni Sangha in the history of Buddhism?

The bhikkhuni Sangha prospered alongside the bhikkhu Sangha in India for more than 1,000 years. A passage found in the Vinaya Pitaka saying that by accepting women to the Order would shorten Buddhism only to 500 years proved to be invalid.

When King Asoka the Great came to the throne around 248 B.E., (about 290 B.C.) he made it clear his policy to support and propagate Buddhism by sending out missionaries at nine different directions. One particular mission was led by Mahinda Thera, the king's son, to establish Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Later Princess Anula, sister-in-law of King Devanampiya Tissa of Sri Lanka expressed her desire to be ordained as bhikkhuni. Ven Mahinda Thera suggested that

the King send an ambassador to King Asoka of India asking permission from him to invite Ven Bhikkhuni Sanghamitta Theri, his sister, and the bhikkhuni Sangha to come to establish the bhikkhuni Sangha in Sri Lanka.

The Bhikkhuni Sanghamitta arrived in Sri Lanka along with a group of bhikkhunis and also brought with her a sapling of the Bodhi tree as a token of respect to King Devanampiya Tissa. Princess Anula and her large retinue received ordination and became the first group of Sri Lankan bhikkhunis. Princess Sanghamitta Theri remained in Sri Lanka until her last day.

In China, Ching Chien was the first Chinese woman to request ordination, and received ordination from only the bhikkhu Sangha. Later in 972 B.E., (about 430 A.D.) the Bhikkhuni Devasara from Sri Lanka was invited along with a group of 10 bhikkhunis who arrived in Nanking and gave ordination to 300 Chinese women.

The ordination of the bhikkhunis in China branched out to establish the bhikkhuni Sangha in Korea and East Asia, which has survived until the present day.

Question 16

Are there bhikkhunis also in other countries?

A part from bhikkhunis in Asian countries, in the past 2 to 3 decades Buddhism has spread westward.

An important wave of Buddhists going west is the Tibetan lineage, since H.H. the Dalai Lama escaped from Tibet in 1959. Many Tibetan monks and teachers followed suit. The success of Buddhism in the U.S.A. is mainly the Tibetan lineage. Women ordained in the Tibetan lineage are mainly female novices as is available in the Tibetan lineage.

Later when more and more western women joined the Tibetan lineage, H.H. the Dalai Lama suggested that they could receive higher ordination from the existing Chinese lineage in Taiwan and Hong Kong. As a result there are some leading bhikkhunis in the Tibetan lineage now.

Hsi Lai Temple, a branch from Fo Kuang Shan in Taiwan, also plays an important role in offering ordination for women since 1988.

As the number of Western bhikkhunis in the Tibetan lineage grew, there was a training course on vinaya offered for them in Bodh Gaya (1996) where more than 100 bhikkhunis and female novices attended.

In December 1996, an ordination for 10 Sri Lankan women was offered and organised by the Korean bhikkhu Sangha in Sarnath, India. Fo Kuang Shan is also planning to host an ordination for bhikkhunis in Bodh Gaya, India scheduled for February 15–23, 1998. The need for women to enjoy and lead a religious life is felt worldwide and we now see helping hands extending from the Chinese and Korean Sanghas to help support and establish the bhikkhuni Sangha in countries where ordination of women is still not available.

Question 17

Are there bhikkhunis in Theravada tradition?

This question cannot be answered in a simple “yes” or “no.” We need to understand that when the Buddha established four groups of Buddhists, namely bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, laymen and laywomen, there was no distinction between Theravada and Mahayana. In fact the differentiation came into existence many hundred years afterwards.

The bhikkhunis who went to plant the seed of ordination in China belonged to Theravada, and even the vinaya which the Chinese Sangha follow is Dhammagupta, subset from Theravada.

During King Asoka’s period in the 3rd century B.E. there were at least 32 schools but with clear record and separate set of teachings only 18 schools were established, twelve sprang from the early branch and eight emerged from the Mahasanghika which could be roughly said to be the forerunner of Mahayana.

The basic reason for Theravada not to accept bhikkhuni Sangha tracing their lineage from Mahayana lineage is unfounded. The ordination lineage followed by Mahayana derived from early Buddhism.

Next question is how does Mahayana differ from Theravada? Generally speaking Mahayana differs from Theravada in its philosophical exposition of Dharma. However, the highly complex way of explaining dharma all took root from the early

teaching of Buddhism which branched out and blossomed in Mahayana.

Question 18

Why is there no bhikkhuni Ordination in Thailand?

Bhikkhuni Ordination as mentioned earlier requires dual ordinations, that is, a woman is first ordained by the bhikkhuni Sangha then bhikkhu Sangha. Because the bhikkhuni Sangha never came to Thailand hence there is neither bhikkhuni ordination nor bhikkhuni Sangha.

The Sukhothai period, 12th to 13th century, has been considered the golden age of Buddhism. Both men and women were seen practising Buddhism, observing precepts. The king not only practised Buddhism himself but was learned enough to give preaching on every full moon day. During the 417 years of Ayudhya, the following period, where the Thai capital shifted south to Ayudhya, Thailand went through difficult time. There was constant warfare both with invaders and among the mighty powers within the country. The disturbing social context was not an ideal seat for either Buddhist learning or practice.

There were fewer people interested to study Buddhism. The immediate concern of leading day-to-day life took its precedence. It is unthinkable that women would have ample time to think of practising Buddhism enough to commit themselves to ordained life.

From a comparative study we find one common factor responsible for the ordination of women: it is that women are committed to Buddhism deeply enough to inspire them to think of leading an ordained life. This is true in Sri Lanka, China, Korea, and Japan, but in Thailand, Thai women do not yet have that opportunity.

Question 19

Is it possible to introduce bhikkhuni Sangha in Thailand?

The story of a struggle for the revival of bhikkhuni ordination dates as far back as 1927 when Narin Klueng had his two daughters, Sara and Chongdi, ordained as bhikkhunis. They were denied from both levels — the Sangha and the royal family. However, there is a complicated issue which needs a critical look. Mr Narin Bhasit or commonly called by local people as Narin Khlueng, was a politician who was outspokenly critical of the laxity of the Sangha. He tried to create a group of liberal minded people around him. Apparently he was quite an advanced social critic of his time. He challenged both the Sangha and absolute Monarchy. As a result he was an object of suspicion both from the Sangha and Royal members.

He promoted the bhikkhuni Sangha so much so that

he offered two of his daughters to begin by ordaining as samaneris (female novices) then later on as bhikkhunis. The idea may be right but it was shrouded by his other political motives resulting in both the Sangha and the royal family's denial of his attempt to revive the bhikkhuni Sangha in Thailand.

His two daughters, along with some other 7 to 8 bhikkhunis who stayed at Wat Nariwong, on a piece of land donated for religious activities by Narin Klueng himself, were ordered to disrobe. His two daughters resisted and were arrested, then put in jail and the robes were literally removed from them. From this incident, the committee of the elders passed an order forbidding any bhikkhus to give bhikkhuni, samaneri, or sikkhamana ordination to women (1928) This order has not been lifted.

Technically both Sara and Chongdi received ordination only from bhikkhus, hence not acceptable according to the Thai Sangha. But under the said circumstance, had their ordination been valid from dual ordination, they would still have been rejected under other pretexts because they were Narin Klueng's daughters.

Some 30 years later Mrs Voramai Kabilsingh, a lady of more or less the same age as Sara and Chongdi tried to look for a means to be ordained so as to lead a proper religious lifestyle. But all the Thai monks she approached confirmed that it is not possible. She found a Chinese monk (Ven YenKiat) who translated for her the bhikkhuni Patimokkha of the Dharmagupta school and suggested that

she can still receive bhikkhuni ordination from the Chinese Sangha in Taiwan. In 1971 she went to receive bhikkhuni ordination from Tao An Fa Tzu at Sung San Temple in Taiwan. Hence, she is the first Thai bhikkhuni with full ordination. Upon her return to Thailand she continued her involvement both in propagating Buddhism and social commitment e.g. printing press, orphanage, publication of dharma magazines, etc.

Looking at this particular issue globally, Thai Buddhist women cannot remain isolated any longer but have to open themselves up to the development of Buddhist women around the world. In the past two to three decades Buddhist women internationally have been moving in unison towards seeking bhikkhuni ordination, seeking a lifestyle that would make themselves more beneficial to society. Thailand also is affected by this positive move of Buddhist women internationally.

In Thailand, the revival of the bhikkhuni Sangha is an ideal laying ahead of us, but the more immediate concern is to build a foundation of Buddhist education and training both at an individual level as well as at the government level, so that we could genuinely look forward to a time when Buddhists, both men and women, can work side by side to support Buddhism in their full potential.

The bhikkhuni lifestyle needs very committed people which will be small in number, but the opportunity should still be open for those few who would like to devote themselves to study and practice and to be spiritual role models for women folk.

Question 20

Is it true that monks are not to touch women because women are impure?

One of the practiced customs is that women are not to come into direct contact with monks applies only in Thailand. There is no such prohibition found in the Vinaya. In the Tripitaka when Ananda asks how a monk should behave towards women, the Buddha was made to say “Stay away from them,” and if they should confront women “they are not to look at them.” If this instruction is true we have to take it with a grain of salt. It is possible that this instruction is meant only for Ananda. As we know he was a good looking monk and had a charming personality. At one certain instant he almost lost himself to a seductive woman but the Buddha intervened and saved him. The teaching might also be taken, as general instruction when we understand that most monks are still not enlightened beings. Should they be allowed close connection with women, they can easily become confused. To avoid being side-tracked, monks should keep clear from women. But not having direct contact with women does not imply impurity an inherent negative quality in women.

The Buddha himself never had to avoid women. He received them at every appropriate time because he was enlightened having transcended any sexual inclination. There is also more positive passage in which he recommended

monks to treat women the same age as their mothers the way they would treat their mothers, etc.

How can the four groups of Buddhists work together as foundation for Buddhism when women as half of the population are always excluded? If women are weakened in supporting the Sanghas, Buddhism also becomes meaningless as it is used as a tool for liberating only the other half of the population. Both women and men must come together as established by the Buddha in supporting and promoting Buddhism.

Question 21

It is commonly believed that women are unclean.

How true is this belief?

Many temples do not allow women to circumambulate around the stupas. There is clear evidence of it particularly in the north of Thailand. This practice cannot find any support in the actual Buddhist teaching but is commonly believed and handed down as custom.

This belief in fact found its root in Hinduism where women are seen as religiously unclean because of their menstruation. Taking an opposite standpoint, one could say that women possess natural power. They are capable of nullifying sacred mantras long practised by Hindu men and priests. Because of this, Brahmin priests had to keep women outside their sacred sanctuary. Men, with their superior position in society, must

control women who possess the natural power and declare them unclean during the menstruation period. This practice and belief is carried into Thai custom unknowingly. Just to give an example, while fermenting rice, menstruating women are not allowed near the area or the rice will be spoiled. They believe that menstruation holds secret power that can actually overcome magical spell. This is all Hindu belief and practice carried over into Thai culture and most Thais would think that prohibiting menstruating women is correct Buddhist practice, but is far from it.

From a Buddhist point of view, menstruation is a natural physical excretion that women have to go through on a monthly basis, nothing more or less. During this time women tend to have weaker emotional balance. They would need religious support more than any other time. But in practice, ironically, they are kept out of the temple and branded as unclean.

Question 22

Why are women seen as a commodity?

Women as 'commodity' is clearly expressed in Manu-dharmasastra, a religious and social text upheld by the Hindus. Accordingly women are seen as a weaker sex, cannot make a decision on their own, and they are dependent beings. As commodity, they must be taken care of by their parents when young, by their husbands when married, by their sons

when they are old. Such a view of women is definitely non-Buddhistic. Buddhist teaching provides space for both men and women to grow spiritually, and they are equal for their spiritual potentiality to achieve enlightenment.

Question 23

Why do some temples in the north not allow women to circumambulate the stupas?

Many temples in Thailand, seen particularly often in the north, do not allow women to circumambulate the stupas. The monks usually explain that the relics of the Buddha are placed in the centre of the stupas at the time they built it. If women are allowed to circumambulate the stupa, they would be walking at the level higher than the relics and hence might desacralise them.

By saying so, it logically implies that women are so powerful that they could actually desacralise the power of the Buddha's relics, which is, of course, not the case.

The belief that women are unclean is not limited only to Indian society. Older and primitive societies, particularly tribal peoples also held such beliefs. This results from their inability to explain the myth of menstruation.

All practices following the Vedas, particularly the Atharvaveda which are full of black magic, somehow warn the practitioners to keep away from coming in direct contact

with menstruating women as menstruation nullifies the magical power. As a result all monks and men who have been following the Vedas set rules prohibiting women from entering sacred space. In Buddhist temples it is not practical to limit only menstruating women, hence the rules extend to limit all women.

During the Ayudhya period, Buddhist monks and magic masters were forced out of necessity to learn various art of magical power to help their disciples to go through the frequent warfare of the period. They also followed this prohibition of women in order to strengthen their magical practices. Buddhist monks were inseparable from Hindu beliefs and practices, resulting in a denial of the true spirit of Buddhism and the loss of Buddhist teachings and practices. In this manner, we often find many Hindu practices accepted under the name of Buddhism.

It may be concluded that the beliefs and practices as carried out by Buddhist monks are not necessarily Buddhist. Buddhists must be aware of this blend which took place in our historical context and must be able to distinguish what is Buddhism and follow its teaching with a critical mind.

From the above case we see that local beliefs uncritically handed over through tradition sometimes could form into negative social values which become effective tool to suppress women. Merely external changes in establishing legal rights does not always guarantee a change in attitude and social values. We need to be firm in our study of Buddhist texts as they provide us a strong basis to bring about a new insight

with spiritual strength that is necessary and important to lead us towards a more positive attitude towards women and in the long run for an improvement of Buddhist society.

Question 24

It is often said that “women are enemy to the life of purity.” How do you explain this saying?

This is the Buddha’s instruction to the monks as found in the Tripitaka. The Buddha warned them to be careful of women. As a result, in Thailand, it is a custom when a woman wants to make offering to a monk, the monk always has to lay a piece of cloth to receive it. Women tend to feel themselves lowly and not worthy, some would even see themselves as obstacles to the purity of monks.

We have to take this teaching in a new light. This is one of the examples showing how the teaching is androcentric by nature, giving the teaching from the standpoint and interest of monks.

Newly ordained monks with little mental training might easily be led by defilements through contact with women. It is not the fault of women, but rather the weakness of the monks, so they have to be mindful when they come in contact with the opposite sex. Even without women in front of them, some monks still face problems from “Women” in their own imagination and thoughts. Women cannot be held

responsible for any failure on the monks' side. The monks themselves have to train and uplift themselves from sexual desire. Those who are already enlightened have transcended gender differences. The Buddha never had to avoid women, as they no more appeared to him as sex objects. He was well balanced and master of all desires.

In the conversation with Ananda, the Buddha instructed him not to look at women, and not to linger while talking to them. "There is no stronger bonding for men than women". At the same time he also warned women "there is no stronger bonding for women than men," and "men are also enemy to the purity of women." But the latter teaching is not applicable to monks, and as we have only monks giving teaching in Thailand we hear only a one sided teaching for men. As a result society tends to blame women as if women are the only source of impurity.

Question 25

Is it true that once women were admitted to the Order, Buddhism will be shortened to 500 years?

After women were accepted to join the Order it is recorded in the Vinaya that the Buddha prophesied that Buddhism would be shortened to 500 years.

Luckily we are now some 2,000 years from the time the teaching of the Buddha was recorded and we are in a position

to judge clearly that such a saying was purely with bias against women and not in conformity with the spirit of Buddhism.

We have studied the historical context to see how both the bhikkhu and bhikkhuni Sanghas prospered in India alongside each other. During King Asoka's reign (c. 3rd Century B.C.) Sanghamitta Theri, the King's daughter was invited along with a group of bhikkhunis to establish the bhikkhuni Sangha in Sri Lanka and they received full royal support and prospered for more than a thousand years.

In India, both historical and archaeological findings proved that the bhikkhuni Sangha existed through 10-11th century A.D. e.g. a stone inscription found at Bodh Gaya mentioned that Kuranji bhikkhuni, former wife of King Indramitra became enlightened; an inscription from Kusana mentioned the Buddhamitta bhikkhuni, disciple of the monk Bala was recognized as "Tripitaka" one who was well versed in the Tripitaka. These evidences are weighty enough to say that both Sanghas existed side by side until the Turk Muslims attacked India.

In Sri Lanka after the arrival of Sanghamitta Theri and the bhikkhunis from India, they gave ordination to Princess Anula, King Devanampiya Tissa's sister-in-law along with a large number of women from the royal court. An inscription from the 16th Century found at Kukurumahandamana mentioned Mahindarama Hospital situated in front of the bhikkhuni Arama in Anuradhapura. It seems that bhikkhunis at that time were also involved in the social welfare of the people. Both the Mahavamsa and Culavarnsa referred to

activities of the bhikkhuni Sangha. Only after 1050 A.D., after the invasion of a South Indian King, both the bhikkhu and bhikkhuni Sanghas disappeared from Sri Lanka. Later on Thai monks came to Sri Lanka on royal invitation and re-established the bhikkhu Sangha which continues its existence up to present day. There was no mention of the bhikkhuni Sangha.

During the time the bhikkhuni Sangha prospered in Sri Lanka, a group of them went to China on invitation and established the bhikkhuni Sangha there in 434 A.D. this lineage spread to the neighbouring countries like Korea and Vietnam.

Two points need to be mentioned in this connection. First, it is to be noted that Buddhism still prospers in the present era (B.E. 2540/1997 A.D.) not only in the East but it also travelled to the far West and begins to take root there.

Second, we need to mention that the disappearance of both the Sanghas they were always together. These historical facts and evidences disqualify the common belief that by accepting women to the Order Buddhism will be shortened only to 500 years.

Question 26

Why cannot women become buddhas?

Buddhist academics explain that in the formation of the Tripitaka some parts are older than the others. The oldest

is the Patimokkha, which is the monastic code for both monks and nuns. In Theravada there are 227 rules for monks and 311 for bhikkhunis.

We found that the part of the Tripitaka where were the passage referring to women's inability to become buddhas happened at least 500 years after the Buddha's passing away when Mahayana already had come into existence. At that time there already developed the ideal that the Buddha was not ordinary being but had a supernatural existence. Buddhists began to prescribe to the Buddha the 32 Mahapurisa characteristics as believed to be the qualities of great monarch. One of these characteristics prescribed that the Buddha must have his penis in a sheath that is covered, meaning that the Buddha has transcended sexual desire. Later on this requirement is emphasised only 'having the penis,' hence ending up with the understanding that women cannot become buddhas. This belief continued on for a thousand years.

Teachers in the later time had difficulty explaining this limitation on gender and developed the teachings to accommodate women by saying that if a woman achieved a higher standard of spiritual development she may be transformed into a male.

Some of the Mahayana Sutras e.g. Sukhavati Vyuha Sutra mentions Amitabha Buddha who presides over the Western Paradise. Within this realm (Buddhaksetra), women who have strong faith in him will be born as men. Such belief is based, not on the dislike of women, or that women cannot practise

dharma, but out of compassion that women have to go through the physical suffering of child birth, etc. This is true as in the olden days medical care was far behind. Hence sometimes we hear a comparison between a woman having to go through child birth to a man going to war. With this understanding and out of compassion, Amitabha Buddha allows women with faith in him to be born in his realm as men.

Another sutra not much known among the Thais is that of Aksobhaya Buddha who presides over in the Eastern Paradise. This realm is different from that of Amitabha Buddha, a woman born in this realm retains her womanhood, and should she desire to have a child, a child is born without conception, without having to go through the suffering of child birth, etc, and eliminates completely the involvement of the male counterpart. This may be seen as compassion expressed by Aksobhaya Buddha, one step more advanced than Sukhavati in the sense that it recognises womanhood and motherhood.

Again the Saddharmapundarika Sutra, a major text for Mahayana of all schools, mentions in one of its chapters, a daughter of a naga (divine serpent) who was as young as 8 years old but well versed in dharma. She offered a jewel to Sariputra. As Sariputra received the offering she stated that she can change into male form faster than the time Sariputra received the offering from her. In this context, this particular message means that one becomes enlightened, then transforms the gender. In other words one has to transcend gender in order to be enlightened. To be enlightened is to

be free from all bindings and limitations including gender. Once enlightened, male or female retains no difference.

Another important Mahayana Sutra, the Vimalakirti Nidesa Sutra, mentions an encounter between Sariputra and a goddess who resides in Vimalakirti's residence. After having a long dharma talk with her, he was impressed at her knowledge of dharma in spite of the fact that she was only a female. As if realizing a higher level of dharma belongs only to male, he asked her why she still retains female gender. The goddess replied that since she had been there for 12 years, she had examined her mind and was not able to hold on to anything female. As this was the case, she was not able to change her gender. While discussing, with her miraculous power, she transformed herself into Sariputra and vice versa. The goddess who was now in Sariputra's form asked Sariputra who was now in the goddess' form if he could change back to his own form. Sariputra said that having examined himself (which was then herself) he could not find the essence of being female. The goddess again reversed her miraculous power and returned Sariputra to his former self, and she to her former self. Then she explained that in the practice of highest dharma there is no essence of being male or female. Thus how can one hold on to being male or female? In the practice of dharma one should not hold on to any particular form, neither male nor female. An enlightened mind is beyond clinging e.g. clinging to male or female, good or bad. Lokuttara dharma is non-duality; enlightenment is a state of mind which is free from the realm of the conventional.

Question 27

What is Buddhist attitude towards prostitution?

Every time when I attended an international conference abroad I was asked: why does Thailand with its population of 60 millions and 94% of which are Buddhists still have so many prostitutes? Even women travelling outside the country often are mistreated, being taken to have the same profession.

As Buddhists, we have to understand that Buddhism does not blame women who have to work as prostitutes for their living. But prostitution promotes unwholesome acts both on the parts of the men and prostitutes themselves. In a research by Dr Thepanom Muangmaen, he reported a girl who had to provide sexual service to 30 men a night during Chinese New Year. It is understandable from the prostitute's point of view that she was forced to do it out of poverty and need for survival, but what about the 30 men buying service from her? What necessity do they have apart from the answer to their lustful desire?

The Buddha did not look down upon prostitutes. On the contrary he provided opportunity for them to enter the rightful path in the same manner as other. Once he accepted an invitation from Ambapali, a courtesan, for lunch on the next day. After that the Licchavi princes came and offered him an invitation again. He declined as he already accepted an invitation from Ambapali. This courtesan was the same

person who later offered him and the Sangha a mango grove for the monks' residence.

Jivaka, the famous physician who attended personally to the Buddha and the Sangha was also born of a prostitute. He was never frowned upon for his birth.

Being a prostitute is not an obstacle to enlightenment if she is willing and diligently practises dharma. In fact, the experience of a prostitute could help her towards enlightenment sooner than otherwise.

Buddhism does not support prostitutes. On the contrary it points out that prostitution is an unwholesome act.

Buddhists do not look down upon prostitutes. If they choose to practice dharma, they have an equal, if not better chance to become enlightened.

Question 28

What is an attitude of a Buddhist towards abortion?

Among western feminists, abortion is one of the most discussed social issues. One argues that a woman should have right over her body because it is hers. Buddhism does not argue on this point but takes a clear stand that abortion is killing. One who chooses abortion transgresses the first precept. But whether the government should pass a bill to legalize abortion or not is an issue which

needs consideration from various related fields e.g. social, economic, cultural, etc.

To the argument which raises a question whether abortion is killing “life” or not, Buddhism supplies a detailed explanation of conception and its various stage of formation. This explains the coming together of sperm and egg, then through 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th week to a stage called ‘Pancasakha’ or “5 branches” namely head, arms, legs, “Life” is present through all these stages since conception.

To complete killing there are at least 5 factors:

1. that it has life,
2. knowing that it has life,
3. willingness to kill,
4. try to kill,
5. that life is destroyed.

If one has completed these five factors, killing is completed bearing fruit of action (Vipakkarma).

As a Buddhist woman, one may be forced to choose abortion but must be willing to receive the fruit of her action without trying to explain away the teaching to suits one’s choice.

That a man should bear equal responsibility of pregnancy is true but entirely a separate issue to consider.

Question 29

What is the historical development of mae jis? And what is their present status?

The oldest historical evidence on mae jis is found in a record written by a Christian missionary who visited Thailand during mid Ayudhya period (around 17th century A.D.) giving an image of an elderly woman wearing white residing in the monastery compound.

The word 'ji' is still arguable. Some mae jis think that it derives from 'Jina', meaning "a conqueror," but this word is usually used for the Buddha, it is doubtful then if mae ji would use the word in the same sense. In the Buddha's time, there was parivrajika, which means ascetics, but again they belong to a non-Buddhistic sect. There is yet another group known as 'Ajivika' also non-Buddhists. In old Thai literature, there is mentioning of 'ji pluey' to denote the naked ascetics belonging to the Jain religion. The word 'ji' means simply 'ordained one' and could apply to both genders. The prefix 'mae' literally means 'mother', but actually only denotes female gender. Hence 'mae ji' should mean 'ordained woman'.

Legally there is no regulation applicable to mae jis. Generally it implies Buddhist women with shaved head, wearing white, observing 5–8 precepts. They could reside in the temple compound or at home. The Department of Religious Affairs does not consider them "ordained" resulting in the uneven treatment mae jis get from various

related ministries. The Ministry of communication does not consider them ‘ordained’ hence they cannot apply for special half fare on train service. The Ministry of Interior considers them ‘ordained’ hence they lose their right to vote when it comes to election time. The monks generally would group them together with upasika, laywomen. According to classical Buddhist grouping, there are monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen. Mae jis really do not fit in any one of these categories.

Grouping of Buddhist communities

Bhikkhus (monks)	Bhikkhunis (nuns)
Laymen	Laywomen

They are not lay women as they observe a more committed religious lifestyle, yet they are not nuns (bhikkhuni) as the bhikkhunis observe 311 precepts and go through ordination procedure where as mae jis have only 8 precepts with no formal ordination.

The Institute of Mae jis under Her Majesty’s Royal Patronage has made a frequent attempt to deal with begging mae jis, considering their action to destroy the image of mae jis in general but the problem still lingers on. As long as there is no definite policy for action, as long as the Department of Religious Affairs has not taken into consideration to clarify the status of mae jis, organizing the registration and issuing

I.D. cards for mae jis so that each one may be checked and rightly placed, parasites cannot be weeded out.

Generally mae jis are poor and lack proper education. The general public do not see mae jis as a representation of women trying to lead a religious life. Society, therefore, neither shares the problems that mae jis face nor have any sympathy for them. They become a minority to wade through obstacles on their own without clear direction.

In the past decade, few women from upper strata of society with education, social and financial back-up have become mae jis. They positively help to promote social welfare and improve the image of mae jis. Mae jis themselves become more aware that they need improvement in education even with economic limitations.

Question 30

How can a mae ji share in social and religious development?

The condition which mae jis have in reality is different from that which society expect from them. Society considers mae jis as human resource available for social and religious development. Therefore society expects to see mae jis commit themselves in social welfare works, e.g. taking care of orphans, aged citizen etc.

In reality in the whole country the number of mae jis do not exceed 10,000. Out of this 80% have completed only

grade 4–6 of formal education. The same percentage came from a farmers' background, having no financial support, no social recognition. They have to fend for themselves in a “hand to mouth” manner, some with minimal support from their families. The idea to help others or be involved in social welfare is too far-fetched for them. As a result some of them have to beg on the street to meet their monthly expenses.

Again there are a number of mae jis who choose to become mae jis after having been turned off from worldly life. As they fled from society, to expect them to return to get involved in social development contradicts their original intention.

It is true that mae jis can be an effective human resource to benefit society but a step is needed before that is to improve mae jis themselves by providing them education and training so that they can first help themselves and not pose as a social burden. Then they can guide others both in words and action.

To help improve mae jis in a more concrete manner is to start a college to provide for them Buddhist and general education so that mae jis can move with the flow of society, to understand social problems and at the same time be equipped with dharma knowledge to guide society towards a better Buddhist community.

The Department of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Education, is a government unit responsible directly for the well being of the mae jis. It is proposed that they should urgently find a measure to register the mae jis to lessen the opportunity for outsiders to exploit the position of mae jis. At the same time they should consider promoting mae jis in

a process to fortify mae jis as another effective religious unit to help establish and propagate Buddhism.

Question 31

Why some families in the north sell their daughters so that they can give ordination to their sons?

Thai people hold on to the value that to have their sons ordained is the highest form of merit making. In the village, when a son is 20 years of age, it is a popular practice to arrange for ordination with 3 days celebration prior to the actual ritual of ordination. The 'calling kwan' ceremony could last through the night by hiring the best vocalist to narrate the story of how the mother had to endure suffering of childbirth. Therefore, the merit for ordaining a son is believed to go directly to the mother. Then the family has to pay for the parade, taking the would-be monk to the monastery with various kinds of offerings handed by pairs of young girls. The procession could be so elaborate that it takes up half a kilometre long. Then there are offerings for the preceptor, and a pair of teachers responsible for the teaching and training of the would-be monk. A chapter of a minimum of 10 monks is required. Each one of them is expected to receive an offering. These are the expenses that well-to-do families are willing to go through at an ordination. Other families with less income always try to live up to this standard of having elaborate

celebration. Ordination, a simple ritual of a person to let go of defilement, turns into a social function for a family to show off their wealth. When the original purpose shifted, some families without their own means to meet such expense are willing to sell their daughters, the only valuable property, in order to provide an elaborate ordination for their sons.

The eldest daughters of the family are usually requested by their parents to 'sacrifice' for their younger siblings and to be 'grateful' to do this favour for their parents. The parents receive 'advance money' from agents from Bangkok so that their daughters can go to 'work in Bangkok' which could include working as sex-workers.

The emphasis on the value of ordaining a son is a very highly recognised social value particularly in the village. Ordination is the only time that the mother is given highest honour as she actually is allowed to lead the procession, a place of honour to walk in front of the would-be monk holding the robe in her hands. Normally it is the men who would take the lead in all rituals in connection with the monks and the temples.

A related custom still practised is to ordain a son before he gets married, with the belief that all the merit would go directly to the parents. But if the son is already married, the mother might have to share the merit with the daughter-in-law.

Such belief, though common, is not the real Buddhist understanding. Buddhism allows women to be ordained themselves.

Spiritual salvation is completely her own achievement, not based on devotion through her husbands as held in Hinduism.

Women do not have to wait for the sons to perform the final rites to allow her to enter heaven.

The fear of a daughter-in-law sharing the merit with the mother is also based on insecurity. Merit may be compared to candle light, by lighting other candles, the light from the original candle does not minimise in any way. On the contrary, the more one lights other candles, the more one brings light into the world.

An important point that Thai women put much emphasis on ordination of their sons is because they themselves have no opportunity to be ordained, so they depend totally on their sons to bring them this highest form of merit. If women have opportunity to be ordained, daughters can equally bring the highest form of merit to the parents. Instead of being asked to 'sacrifice' to have younger brothers ordained, they themselves can bring about that highest form of merit by being ordained themselves. Then she no longer has to play the 'second fiddle' and can equally express her gratitude towards her parents directly through her own commitment and action.

Question 32

Generally why people prefer to make offering to monks rather than mae jis?

Monks are a "field of merit" as they lead a chaste life, and are propagators of the teaching of Buddhism.

Having left household life they study and follow the path of the Buddha. Hence they are worthy recipients of the offering. Offering food to monks in the morning not only provides them food for their well-being but also supports them as propagators of Buddhism. Thus people believe that offering to monks will bring them multiple merit.

Mae jis who observe the precepts well and follow the path of the Buddha should be considered equal recipients. But because the image that they project to the people is rather negative resulting in the understanding that making offerings to mae jis does not incur equal merit as mae jis are not 'ordained', they are not propagators of Buddhism. Besides there are laywomen who exploit the form of mae jis to make their living. These are some of the reasons responsible for the lack of faith from society.

Question 33

Why do women go to the temple and make merit more than men?

This is correctly observed, even though there has not yet been any official statistic to prove the claim. On the street we observe that 85% of people who offer food to the monks are women. On Wan Pra (Buddhist day) 90% of people who come to attend the service, observe precepts and listen to the teaching are women. But this should not lead to a conclusion

that women have more faith than men. There are many other variant factors to consider.

In Thai society most men go to work while women are housewives or take care of private business. This allows women to attend the temple service on 'Wan Pra' more easily than men.

Thai society has trained women to be good followers, to go to the temple, to observe precepts and to listen to a sermon given by monks. One may notice that most elderly people who listen to sermon do not primarily try to understand the message in the teaching but 'listening to a sermon' is a merit making act. Whether one understands the message is secondary, and to apply the teaching to their practice is not the immediate concern.

Another social value prevalent among the Thais is the belief that to be born a male is better than a female, primarily because a man can receive ordination, the highest form of merit making. As women (in Thailand) do not have this spiritual access, women have to make more merit to make up for their shortcoming.

Generally, religious activities are completely the domain of men. Even those who serve the monks in the temple mostly had been monks at certain time in life. The Buddhist world is then men's world. Woman can do their best by providing various forms of material support and service to gain merit. With this understanding more women are found visiting temples to ensure themselves of a better future both in this life and the next.

Question 34

In the role of female followers, what should Buddhist women do?

Buddhism will prosper or decline depending on the establishment of the four groups of Buddhists: monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen. However, when we see some shortcomings in our society, we are accustomed to pointing our fingers towards the monks holding responsibility for the problems. In fact the monks are only one of the four groups in Buddhist community. All of us, laymen and laywomen, hold equal responsibility for the problems.

When the Buddha established the four groups of Buddhists, he wanted to make sure that this establishment will be solid foundation. Each one shares equal responsibility towards the development of Buddhism. Three important factors are involved in this establishment i.e. they have studied and understood the teaching, they put the teaching into practice and they are able to defend and explain the teaching correctly. As female followers of the Buddha, Buddhist women must be aware to fulfil each one's duty and responsibility towards this establishment.

Generally Thai Buddhists tend to hold on to an attitude "If it is bad, its up to the nuns, if it is good, it is up to the monks," that is if the monks or nuns should do anything bad, its their business, we as laypeople should not interfere. This attitude is harmful for the establishment of Buddhism.

If we see one of the four members of the groups do wrong yet we remain silent, our silence, our non-interference, actually promotes wrongdoing and further harms the growth of Buddhism. It is therefore important that each one of the Buddhist groups must bear equal responsibility and see themselves as one united community. If one is doing something harmful, it's going to harm the rest of the community and with the age of globalisation the negative acts result in a domino effect.

Question 35

Is it true that if a person is enlightened, she must be ordained within 7 days?

In the Pali Tripitaka there was a case of a man who was enlightened but could not find the robes and the bowl as required for ordination within 7 days. He died of an accident.

In Thailand, even if we have no women ordained as bhikkhunis, mae jis are considered leading a celibate life and hence should be included. It is explained that the enlightened mind is too subtle to remain in a coarse physical body of a layperson; hence ordination is required to prepare the body to help maintain the subtlety of the mind.

Question 36

What is the unique characteristic in American Buddhism which might interest a feminist?

Americans came across Buddhism during the Second World War through the work of Ven. D.T. Suzuki, a Japanese priest. The unique characteristic of Zen Buddhism fit in well with the spiritual vacuum in the USA at that time while many Americans were critical of the conservative institutionalised church and found satisfactorily the same matching spirit in Zen Buddhism.

Later there were many other forms of Buddhism i.e. Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Tibetan. Among the Theravadin propagators, Sri Lankan and Burmese monks gained the upper-hand being equipped with better access to English. American Buddhists became aware of the need to sift the essential teaching from various cultural cloaks.

An Important factor one may find in Buddhism is the Indian cultural baggage which tends to suppress women. Critical American Buddhists became more aware of the need to do away with unnecessary cultural burdens and by so doing they have, to a great extent freed Buddhist women from suppressing elements. A unique characteristic of Buddhism in the US is the strong participation of women in Buddhism.

In Asia, women have limited opportunity both in their role and responsibility toward Buddhism. This not only bars women's participation in Buddhism but also prevents the natural growth of Buddhism as a whole.