

Non-historicity of the Eight Garudhammas

On the Apparent Non-historicity of the Eight Garudhammas Story

As It Stands in the Pali-text Culavagga and Comparative Vinaya Scholarship

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A friend recently asked me about the Eight Garudhammas as a part of her research for her dissertation, as many other friends have asked before. The following is adapted from my letter in reply to her and offered for the reader's knowledge and understanding, as well as a scholarly contribution to the welfare of the Buddha's teaching and its right practice, that is, in its practical manifestation and embodiment in the modern world.

Introduction

I have not written about the eight garudhammas in anything published on the web before, but many times in answer to friends, both monastic and lay, in personal correspondence. Often spoken and written about negatively as the main means by which the Bhikkhuni Sangha is subordinated to the Bhikkhu Sangha (or occasionally positively as supports and protections for the Bhikkhuni Sangha as related to the Bhikkhu Sangha), the eight garudhammas have been and are a subject of substantial and frequent, ongoing concern to many modern Buddhists both Western and Asian, monastic and lay, related to the women's ordination in Buddhist monastic life.

Due to my Vinaya studies and Comparative Vinaya research I was asked to speak on the subject at the International Bhikkhuni Seminar hosted by Santi Forest Monastery in Australia in 2008, which initially elicited groans from the audience that later changed to keen interest. Video of that talk is available online here:

Ayya Tathaaloka's Garudhammas Talk at Santi Forest Monastery Bhikkhuni Seminar

If you follow this link, four video clips will appear. They can be watched and listened to in order. The talks assume basic knowledge, as I was speaking to bhikkhunis and women who were already at least somewhat familiar with the Vinaya and with the subject. You will need this basic knowledge to fully understand the videos. I will try to share with you this basic knowledge here below.

Impossible or Improbable?

All scholars that I know who have researched the subject have come to one conclusion or the other.

If you look at the relevant textual story in the Pali texts of the Vinaya's Culavagga with a discerning mind, you may be able to understand and clearly see and know for yourself why the eight garudhammas story is, as it stands, in full, historically impossible. Not only improbable; impossible. The Buddha did not found the Bhikkhuni Sangha and establish full bhikkhuni ordination for women contingent upon the receipt and upholding of these eight garudhammas. But you will need to look at the Bhikkhuni Patimokkha (pacittiya section) and specifically the concordant sections of the Bhikkhuni Vibhanga, as well as the Vinaya's Mahavagga and Culavagga texts, if you wish to see and know this for yourself.

I will explain.

Point 1: Garudhammas Are Pacittiyas Formed After Establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha

In the Bhikkhuni Vibhanga we find the origin stories for all of the bhikkhuni precepts. And here we find there are several pacittiya precepts that have been used to form the bhikkhuni garudhammas text, with the notable exception of Pali text garudhamma number one which is not present in the Pali text as a pacittiya precept, but appears there only in the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya text*. So, we see that most all of these garudhammas are pacittiya precepts, and that they have origin stories. The origin stories show that these precepts developed into their final form over time, on successive occasions, following the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. And this is consistent with the Buddha's stated modus operandi; that is, that he never establishes a precept until the circumstantial cause has arisen for it - that is, until a misdeed has been done.

Thus, to summarize, we understand that these pacittiya precepts that later became bhikkhuni garudhammas were formed and reformed over time after the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. It is historically impossible then, that they appear truly in their final form from the very beginning of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, that is, before it has been established, or at the time of its establishment.

Additionally, we understand that the garudhamma-like pacittiya precepts are pacittiyas (a class of precept offence for confession), not garudhammas (which

are sanghadisesas - a far more serious class of precept offence calling for suspension, probation and even potential expulsion from the monastic community).

Why do I say this? I will explain below.

(*) see endnotes

Point 2: Garudhammas = Sanghadisesas for Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis

In the Vinaya's Mahavagga, the garudhammas, for both bhikkhus as well as for bhikkhus & bhikkhunis equally, are synonymous with sanghadisesa offences. In fact, Pali Text Society scholars, as well as the Ven Thanissaro Bhikkhu and Ven Bhikkhu Bodhi have stated their theory that the garudhammas, as the term is used in the Vinaya's Mahavagga, may have been precursors to, or an early form of, the Sanghadisesa category of offences in the Vinaya. This would explain the garudhamma-like pacittiya precept mentioning "manatta" which relates to the procedure for bhikkhunis for righting sanghadisesa offences.

In the Mahavagga we thus find that garudhammas are treated as sanghadisesa-class offences, not pacittiyas. And that the garudhammas, at least from the perspective of the Mahavagga, appear to have originally belonged to the bhikkhus alone and then later, as Vinaya, for both the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis equally, as sanghadisesa offences. But this relates to actions that are sanghadisesas, not pacittiya offences. Just to be clear, pacittiyas are smaller offences for confession; sanghadisesas on the other hand are far more serious offences that call for serious warning, community meetings, and potentially suspension and/or even expulsion from a monastic community.

Point 3: Garudhammas are not Consistent in Comparative Vinaya

We have various renditions of the original Vinaya that have been recorded in various languages: Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan... When we compare these Vinaya texts, we find that they do not all contain the same eight garudhammas for bhikkhunis. There is variety. The Mahasanghika Vinaya does not contain the bhikkhuni garudhamma-like precepts. If we look at the other texts' garudhamma-like pacittiya precepts, we also find variety amongst them. They do not all contain the same relevant pacittiya precepts. And counting the precepts in the texts, not a single one equals eight! There is no inter-textual agreement about *what the eight bhikkhuni garudhammas are*. Additionally, the various Vinaya texts add in the eight garudhammas story in different places. The Dharmaguptaka Vinaya adds the story at the very end of its Khandhaka. This would tend to show that the eight garudhammas story was added onto this Vinaya late, towards the very end of its composition. And we know that the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya's composition did not close until at least after the

making of the first Buddha images, imported from Greek statuary culture, several hundred years (generally said to be around 500 years) after the Buddha's Parinibbana. The earliest known written rendition of the Pali-text Vinaya is recorded as from the Sri Lankan Alu Vihara in the last century BCE. Amongst all of the renditions of the Vinaya, the Pali text Vinaya and the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya appear to be most similar and most closely related.

Thus for this reason, and for additional reasons, we understand the bhikkhuni's eight garudhammas story may have been added into various Vinaya texts comparatively late, perhaps as much as, or even more than 500 years after the Parinibbana of the Buddha, and that the eight garudhammas ordination story may not have been a part of the shared core of the earlier Vinaya.

Point 4: Garudhammas Are Not Part of Bhikkhuni Ordination Procedure

Additionally, in surveying the full extent of the Pali text Vinaya, we discover that the eight bhikkhuni garudhammas are not part of the Bhikkhuni Upasampada Kammavaca; that is, they are not part of the Pali text bhikkhuni ordination procedure. The Pali texts contain no procedure for the bhikkhunis to undertake the garudhammas as part of their ordination. This is a startling and glaring absence if bhikkhunis were ever supposed to be ordained by accepting the eight garudhammas, unless this procedure was phased out very early on, or was only for Mahapajapati Theri (as some scholars have theorized), if ever in the Buddha's lifetime.

Point 5: Ananda Has Not Yet Joined the Sangha

Although the non-factuality, that is, the non-historicity of the bhikkhuni eight garudhammas story as it currently stands is already beyond doubt, there are further points of historical concern.

These points include consideration of the time frames in the placement of key characters in the story. Ananda Thera is one such character. Buddhist history places Mahapajapati Gotami and her 500 women's going forth at between five and six years after the Buddha's enlightenment, although this is difficult to substantiate with other than the Theri Apadana. However, according to Theravada tradition, Ananda, who in the Culavagga story requests that women be allowed to "go forth," did not become a monk until substantially later and was not the Buddha's faithful attendant until twenty years after the enlightenment. Thus, if the Theravadan traditional history is correct, Ananda's key placement as a monk and as the Buddha's attendant in this story must be mistaken in some way. Either that or the Pali texts might have to acquiesce that Ananda was actually the same age as the Buddha and became a monk earlier early on, as some traditions do relate. However, all the traditions concur in Ananda's only becoming the Buddha's personal attendant later in the Buddha's lifetime.

Point 6: The Preexistence of "Ehi" Bhikkhunis

Additionally, the Theravada Pali texts cite in two places the category of bhikkhunis known as "ehi bhikkhunis". Ehi bhikkhunis are bhikkhunis ordained by the Buddha himself, by his simply saying "come," and are the female equivalent of ehi bhikkhus. The ehi ordination is the oldest, original form of Buddhist monastic ordination - ordination simply and directly from the welcoming of the Buddha himself. In the Therigatha of the Khuddhaka Nikaya we find the enlightenment verses of Bhadda Kundalakesi Theri, according to the Anguttara Nikaya, the Buddha's Etadagga Bhikkhuni Savaka or Preeminent Bhikkhuni Disciple foremost in speed to gain Nibbana. Bhadda Kundalakesi, in the Therigatha (which is thought to belong to the oldest strata of Buddhist texts) is recorded as ordained by the Buddha himself by the "ehi" ordination. This is confirmed by her story in the "Sacred Biographies of the Women Elders" - the Theri Apadana, also from the Khuddhaka Nikaya. Additionally, in the Bhikkhuni Vibhanga Vinaya text, within the explication of the very first Parajika, we find verification of the existence and validity of ehi bhikkhunis as well.

Although the Pali texts mention only this one specific case of "ehi bhikkhuni" ordination in two places, in addition to the mention of the category in the Vinaya, the Sanskrit Theravada texts called Avadanas specifically mention seventeen such instances of ehi bhikkhuni ordination.

This is another point that sheds doubt upon another element of the eight garudhammas ordination of Mahapajapati story.

Point 7: The Validity of Ordination by Bhikkhus Alone

Although there are even more points that could be made, this will be my last for now, in this writing.

If we return again to the Pali-text Vinaya, in the Bhikkhuni Vibhanga, within the definitions of a bhikkhuni under precept number one, in addition to the ehi bhikkhunis mentioned above, we find the existence of bhikkhunis ordained by the Bhikkhu Sangha alone, aka "one-sided bhikkhunis". The bhikkhunis ordained by bhikkhus alone are defined as real bhikkhunis in the Vinaya. And not only in this one place. Additionally, the Vinaya records the Buddha's specific allowance to the Bhikkhu Sangha: "Bhikkhus, I allow you to ordain bhikkhunis". This allowance has never been revoked. Furthermore, in a third section of Vinaya we find the definition of those who are rightly/effectively ordained as bhikkhunis and those who are wrongly/ineffectively ordained as bhikkhunis. Women who are one-sided ordained by the Bhikkhu Sangha alone are

completely fully ordained. According to Vinaya, the bhikkhus have the right and the power to ordain women as bhikkhunis directly from the Buddha himself, at his direction, and this power has never been revoked.

And this too stands in contradistinction to the eight garudhammas founding of the Bhikkhuni Sangha story, as the Buddha is recorded as giving this allowance and directive to the bhikkhus for their ordination of the 500 women accompanying Mahapajapati, directly after he himself ordained her.

How could the Blessed One have done this if he had just made and instituted one garudhamma precept that the women must first be sikkhamanas for two vassas and a second garudhamma precept that they must be ordained by the Bhikkhuni Sangha first? But, to return to point one, as pacittiyas, both of these garudhammas mentioned directly above have origin stories that place their formulation and repeated reformulation later on in the development of the Bhikkhuni Sasana, not at the time of the ordination of the great Theri Mahapajapati Gotami. In their histories, the only garudhamma-like pacittiya precept that is related to Mahapajapati Gotami in its formation is garudhamma one, which is a bhikkhuni precept in the Dharmaguptaka rendition of the Vinaya alone, not in the Pali texts.

Although other points can and have been made, I will end here for now. Dr. Ute Husken gave an excellent presentation on the subject at the First International Congress on Buddhist Women in Hamburg, Germany in 2007. You may be able to read her presentation in the book soon to be offered by Wisdom Publication that has emerged from the Congress: *Dignity and Discipline*. In addition, Ven Bhikkhu Sujato has treated the subject with an entire chapter, "Principles to be Respected," in his new book *Bhikkhuni Vinaya Studies*, available freely online.

Conclusion

What these points above clearly illustrate is that, undeniably, the Eight Garudhammas Story of the Foundation of the Bhikkhuni Sangha in its current rendition in the Culavagga, is greatly flawed and cannot be considered historical, at least and with certainty not in its aspect of the eight garudhammas, and perhaps not in other aspects as well. What is also clear is that the pacittiya precepts that are now listed as garudhammas in this story arose over time subsequent to the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha.

What is not clear is exactly when these pacittiyas became precepts, whether in the Buddha's lifetime, or in later centuries. What is even more unclear is when and under what circumstances these pacittiya precepts were gathered into a grouping of eight bhikkhuni garudhammas, backdated, and inserted into the composite Story of the Foundation of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. It is only clear, from

our modern perspective, that this has been done; not why, or by whom. There are several tentative theories about this ranging from Ven Bhikkhu Sujato's related to the Second Council, to around the 4th century CE between nine hundred and one thousand years after the Buddha's Parinibbana, when the social, multi-religious and multi-cultural tides of the world began, in mass, to turn away from what appears to have been the earlier egalitarianism of the Buddhist Sangha.

But all these -- the when, why and how of it -- are still tentative, yet to be discovered.

Some scholars such as the Venerable Analayo, in his Letter on Gender Discrimination in the Pali Canon, promise to give us further clues, if not conclusions.

Endnotes

* This is especially important as garudhamma one, in the Culavagga, is the garudhamma that specifically calls for even a hundred year old bhikkhuni to rise and pay respects to even the most newly ordained bhikkhu, which has been interpreted by many as designating the bhikkhunis a junior to senior status related to the bhikkhus in the Sangha. This garudhamma is not a pacittiya precept in the Pali text Bhikkhuni Patimokkha, and the garudhammas are not a part of the Pali text bhikkhuni ordination procedure. Thus, those bhikkhunis of the Theravada traditions referent and beholden to the Pali texts and training in its precepts, do not have this garudhamma as a Bhikkhuni Patimokkha training precept or rule.

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