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Bad Nun: Thullanandā in Pāli Canonical and Commentarial Sources

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Bad Nun: Thullanandā in Pāli Canonical and Commentarial Sources

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Abstract

In Pāli literature, Thullanandā is well known for being a “bad nun”—a nun whose persistent bad behavior is directly responsible for the promulgation of more rules of the *Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha* than any other individually named nun. Yet these very same sources also describe Thullanandā in significantly more positive terms—as a highly learned nun, an excellent preacher, and one who enjoys significant support among the laity. In this article, I analyze the Pāli traditions surrounding Thullanandā. I argue that her portrayal is quite complex in nature and often extends beyond herself as an individual to suggest larger implications for the nature of monastic life and monastic discipline. In addition, once Thullanandā is labeled as a “bad nun,” she becomes a useful symbolic resource for giving voice to various issues that concerned the early *sangha*. In both ways, Thullanandā reveals herself to be far more than just a “bad nun.”

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In Pāli canonical and commentarial literature, the woman Thullanandā (whose name might be literally translated as “Fat Joy”) is well known for being a “bad nun”—a nun whose persistent bad behavior is directly responsible for the promulgation of a large number of rules in the *Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha*, the list of disciplinary rules incumbent upon all Buddhist nuns. In a pattern found over and over again throughout the *Bhikkhunī Vibhaṅga*—that portion of the *Vinaya Piṭaka* that provides the origin-stories for each rule of the *Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha*—Thullanandā engages in some type of inappropriate behavior, somebody is offended by the behavior (often the other nuns, but sometimes a monk or a householder), and this eventually leads the Buddha to set forth a rule forbidding that behavior to nuns and specifying the appropriate penalty. Thullanandā features more frequently in the origin-stories of the *Bhikkhunī Vibhaṅga* than any other individually named nun; altogether, by my count, it is her misbehavior that is directly responsible for the promulgation of two Pārājika rules, four Saṅghādisesa rules, seven Nissaggiya-Pācittiya rules, and twenty-four Pācittiya rules.² This constitutes a fairly impressive 12% of all the rules incumbent upon nuns, and an even more impressive 28% of those rules unique to nuns (i.e., not shared in common with monks)—which are the only rules provided with origin-stories in the *Bhikkhunī Vibhaṅga*. As Wijayaratna has wryly noted, it is not so much the Buddha who establishes the precepts of the *Bhikkhu-* and *Bhikkhunī-Pātimokkhas*, as it is Thullanandā and other misbehaving monastics of her ilk (41). We might think of Thullanandā, then, as a prototypical “bad nun”—a simple embodiment of all the qualities that a Buddhist nun should *not* have.

² These include: Pārājikas 2 and 3; Saṅghādisesas 1, 2, 4, and 10; Nissaggiya-Pācittiyas 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 11, and 12; and Pācittiyas 1, 14, 16, 23, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 33, 34, 35, 45, 46, 47, 48, 53, 68, 70, 77, 78, 79, 80, and 81 (Horner 3, 156-426). The list provided by Talim (53) is similar, but is missing Pārājika 2 and Pācittiya 53, which are both clearly brought about by Thullanandā’s behavior, and includes Saṅghādisesa 9, which is brought about by Thullanandā’s followers rather than Thullanandā herself.

Conversely, we might also note that while Thullanandā's bad behavior receives plenty of attention in Pāli sources, there is no attention paid at all to her spiritual progress on the Buddhist path. No Pāli text gives us any indication that Thullanandā ever attained arhatship—she is not, for example, included among the esteemed nuns of the *Therīgāthā*—or any level of spiritual progress at all. In fact, a *sutta* in the *Samyutta Nikāya* tells us that she eventually “fell away from the religious life” (SN ii, 222), while the (non-Pāli) *Mahāvastu* claims that she fell down dead after an unpleasant encounter with Mahākāśyapa and was immediately reborn in one of the hells (Jones 3, 56). This, too, would suggest that she is a prototypical “bad nun”—one for whom the religious life had no positive effect whatsoever.

Before we dismiss Thullanandā as simply a “bad nun,” however, we should also note that these very same sources repeatedly describe her in a significantly more positive manner. Several times throughout the *Bhikkhunī Vibhaṅga*, for example, we are told that “the nun Thullanandā was very learned, she was an experienced preacher, and she was skilled at speaking of *Dhamma*”³—all highly valued qualities in the Buddhist tradition and qualities not often attributed to nuns. According to the origin-story for Nissaggiya 10, it was due to these very qualities that “many people attended to the nun Thullanandā” (Vin iv, 254). So skilled is she at speaking of *Dhamma*, in fact, that on two separate occasions, Thullanandā is even depicted preaching the *Dhamma* to King Pasenadi of Kosala himself, whereupon the king—“instructed, roused, excited, and gladdened with talk on *Dhamma* by the nun Thullanandā”—rewards her with expensive gifts (Vin iv, 255, 256). Moreover, Thullanandā's success seems to extend well beyond her mastery of *Dhamma* to encompass the area of *Vinaya* or monastic discipline, as well: The origin-stories for

³ This passage appears, for example, in the origin-stories for Nissaggiyas 10, 11, and 12, and Pācittiyas 28, 33, 35, and 46 (Vin iv, 254-256, 285, 290, 292, 302). In two of these cases (Pācittiyas 28 and 46), Thullanandā bribes other people to say these things about her, but in all of the other cases, the text itself ascribes these qualities to her.

various rules suggest that she has the seniority and requisite knowledge to act as a preceptor, ordain her own disciples, and settle legal questions within the Order—granted, in every such case, she does something wrong that leads to the promulgation of a rule, but her seniority and qualifications themselves do not seem to be questioned.⁴ In the origin-story for Saṅghādisesa 4, in fact, she displays her ample knowledge of the technical vocabulary of monastic discipline, criticizing certain other nuns for not knowing “what a formal act is, or the defect in a formal act, or the failure of a formal act, or the success of a formal act”⁵—and contrasting this ignorance with her own expertise. In consonance with her mastery of both *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*, other passages make it clear that Thullanandā has her own pupils and followers,⁶ that she has no trouble receiving ample alms from householders,⁷ and that certain lay families are specifically dedicated to her support.⁸ This level of learning, seniority, preaching ability, and eminence in the eyes of the public is attributed to very few other nuns.

All of this would seem to suggest that Thullanandā’s character is more complex than it first appears. If she were merely being used as the

⁴ For example, Thullanandā acts as a preceptor and ordains (or at least promises to ordain) disciples in the origin-stories for Saṅghādisesa 2, and Pācittiya 68, 70, 77, 78, 79, 80, and 81. She promises to settle a legal question in the origin-story for Pācittiya 45 (though she never fulfills her promise), and she presides over the restoration of her suspended friend Caṇḍakālī (another “bad nun”) in the origin-stories for Saṅghādisesa 4 and Pācittiya 53.

⁵ *kammaṃ vā kammadosaṃ vā kammavipattiṃ vā kammāsaṃpattiṃ vā* (Vin iv, 231). The same statement also appears in the origin-story for Pācittiya 53 (Vin iv, 310).

⁶ For example, the origin-stories for the monks’ Pārājika 2 and the nuns’ Pācittiya 27 both specifically mention nuns who were Thullanandā’s pupils (*antevāsinī bhikkhunī*) (Vin iii, 66; iv, 284), and many other rules imply the same.

⁷ For example, in the origin-story for Nissaggiya 4, a layman brings her ghee when she is sick; in the origin-story for Nissaggiya 5, a layman deposits money with a shopkeeper for her use; and in the origin-story for Nissaggiya 10, a group of householders takes up a collection to repair her worn-out cell.

⁸ For example, one of the addendums to the origin-story for the monks’ Pārājika 2, as well as the origin-stories for the nuns’ Pācittiyas 26 and 29, all mention “the family that supported the nun Thullanandā” (*thullanandāya bhikkhuniyā upaṭṭhākakulam*) (Vin iii, 66; iv, 283; iv, 286); similarly, the origin-story for the monks’ Pācittiya 29 tells us that “the nun Thullanandā relied upon a certain family for alms and was a regular diner among them” (*thullanandā bhikkhunī aññatarassa kulassa kulūpikā hoti niccabhattikā*) (Vin iv, 66).

perfect image of the “bad nun,” then why would she be given so many positive qualities and depicted with so many signs of success? In fact, Thullanandā’s contradictory qualities have even led Talim to conclude that “one will not be wrong in presuming that there may have been two persons answering the same name,” since “one person could not be a bundle of such contradictory and altogether different characteristics” (53). Talim even goes so far as to divide Thullanandā’s offenses into two different lists, attributing one list of offenses to an intelligent yet crafty and cunning nun, and another list of offenses to a lazy, stupid, and fairly unimportant nun—with both nuns sharing the same name.⁹ I do not find Talim’s analysis to be convincing, nor do I think that our first recourse should be to posit more than one “Thullanandā.”

In this article, I take a closer look at the character of Thullanandā and the contexts in which she is invoked. My discussion is thematic in nature and seeks to advance several arguments: First, instead of dismissing Thullanandā as an all-around “bad nun,” I argue that she is “bad” in very specific ways—in other words, her character is used to address certain specific concerns, and the Pāli tradition is fairly consistent in its treatment of her negative qualities. Second, the depiction of Thullanandā’s “bad” qualities is quite complex, often extending beyond those qualities themselves to suggest some larger implication for the nature of monastic life or the nature of monastic discipline. In other words, it is often possible to read Thullanandā’s faults at a “higher” or second-order level and not simply as individual faults. Third, it seems to me that once Thullanandā has been labeled as a “bad nun,” she becomes a convenient figure to help delineate the fault lines of various disputes within the early Buddhist community. In other words, she can be associated with certain characters—suggesting that those characters are also “bad”—and opposed to certain other characters—suggesting that those characters are “good.” In

⁹ See Talim (53-64) for the complete discussion of Thullanandā.

this way, Thullanandā's character extends beyond herself as an individual and becomes a marker for some of the larger tensions and fault lines characteristic of the early Buddhist community. Fourth, and finally, some of my interpretations regarding Thullanandā's complexity require us to read certain passages "against the grain" to recover an "alternative reading" of Thullanandā. I do not mean to suggest by this that Thullanandā was a historical figure and that I am uncovering some "real" Thullanandā who actually existed in history. Instead, I am suggesting that even as a purely textual figure Thullanandā has a complex personality, and it is sometimes possible—through the texts themselves—to glimpse a "different" Thullanandā than the one who first appears. I hope that these several arguments, taken together, will not only illuminate the character of Thullanandā as a single, cohesive figure who is far more than just a "bad nun," but also illustrate, more generally, some of the advantages of considering characters in Buddhist literature as complex, composite wholes—well-crafted, and with specific purposes in mind.

Before I begin, one final caveat: My discussion deals with the depiction of Thullanandā in Theravādin Pāli canonical and commentarial sources only (and even here, it is not exhaustive). Thullanandā—in her Sanskrit form as Sthūlanandā—has a rich and complex life in the writings (especially the *Vinayas*) of various other schools. In fact, she is much more expansively featured in some of the other *Vinayas*—especially the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*¹⁰—than she is in the Theravādin sources. But since these depictions often depart, in one way or another, from the Pāli depiction of Thullanandā,¹¹ and are worthy of separate, sustained

¹⁰ The role played by Sthūlanandā in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* is worthy of a detailed study. For some fragmentary discussions and representative episodes, see the following: Schopen (2007, 2008, 2009, 2010); Clarke; Finnegan.

¹¹ For example, both Schopen (2008) and Clarke have argued that Sthūlanandā in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* often serves as a comic figure and object of humor—and although there may be a hint of the same thing in Pāli sources, I do not think this is a prominent feature of the Pāli Thullanandā.

treatment, I limit myself to Pāli sources alone (though I do make an occasional comparative comment).

Thullanandā's Greed

In what specific ways is Thullanandā a “bad nun”? Perhaps the primary and most obvious fault that motivates many of her offenses is her excessive *greed*: Whether for alms-food, possessions, wealth, fame, or notoriety—for herself or for those she favors—Thullanandā's actions are often driven by a selfish greed. Her name itself—“Fat Joy”—already suggests that she takes pleasure in consuming more than her fair share, and this is borne out by many of her misdeeds.

Typical in this regard is the origin-story for Pācittiya 1, in which a generous layman offers to provide garlic to the Order of Nuns, instructing his field-keeper to give two or three bundles of garlic to each nun. This resource is forever ruined when Thullanandā, “knowing no moderation” (*na mattaṃ jānitvā*) (Vin iv, 258), helps herself to an excessive quantity of garlic. This leads the layman to criticize the nuns and eventually causes the Buddha to prohibit *all* nuns from eating garlic (a ruling which, it should be noted, utterly fails to address the problem). So emblematic of excessive greed is Thullanandā's behavior in this instance that the Buddha takes this opportunity to also relate one of Thullanandā's previous lives as a moral lesson to his monks—a story told in more detail in the *Suvaṇṇahaṃsa Jātaka* (No. 136) (Cowell 1, 292-294). The story goes as follows: In a previous lifetime, Thullanandā was the wife of a certain brahmin who died, leaving her and her three daughters in a state of poverty. The brahmin (a past life of the Buddha) was reborn as a goose with magnificent feathers made out of gold. Remembering his previous life, the goose came to his former wife and daughters out of affection and told them that he would give them one golden feather at a time so that they

could live in wealth and comfort. But the wife, “out of greed” (*mahicchātāya*) (Jā i, 476), was not satisfied with this, and one day, she grabbed the goose and plucked out all of his feathers at once. The feathers instantly turned into ordinary white feathers, the goose flew away and never returned, and the wife and her daughters thus lost this precious resource—all due to the wife’s excessive greed. After relating this story in the *Suvaṇṇahaṃsa Jātaka*, the Buddha concludes:

It’s not only now, Monks, that Thullanandā is greedy (*mahicchā*); she was also greedy in the past, and because of her greed, she was deprived of the gold. And now, because of her greed, she will be deprived of the garlic, and henceforth, she won’t be able to eat garlic. And what goes for Thullanandā also goes for the rest of the nuns, thanks to her. Therefore, even when you acquire a lot, you should still exercise moderation; and when you acquire a little, you should be satisfied with whatever you get and not long for more (Jā i, 476).

The “moral” of the story (the canonical verse) follows: “Be satisfied with whatever you get, for excessive greed (*atilobho*) is wicked. By taking hold of the king of the geese, one may lose the gold” (Jā i, 476).

Thullanandā’s greed is thus revealed to have long-standing karmic roots and is depicted by the Buddha as being emblematic of greedy behavior in general. The negative consequences of such greed for the monastic life are emphasized by the Buddha: “Monks,” he notes, “a greedy person is unpleasant and displeasing even to the mother who gave birth to her; she is not able to convert those who have no faith, or increase the faith of those who have faith, or bring about acquisitions that haven’t arisen, or solidify acquisitions that have arisen” (Jā i, 475). In this way, Thullanandā’s greed is revealed to be deleterious not only to herself, but also to the *sangha* as a whole. For the individual monk or nun, greed

stands opposed to the detachment and lack of desire called for by the Buddhist path; for the *sangha* as an institution, greed exploits the Order's dependence upon the laity and threatens to undermine their reciprocal relationship.

Thullanandā's greed leads to problems with the laity not only in the origin-story for Pācittiya 1, but in the origin-stories for several other rules, as well—where it is often exacerbated by the fickleness of her demands. Thus, in the origin-story for Nissaggiya 4, a layman offers to bring something to Thullanandā when she is sick. Thullanandā asks for ghee, but as soon as the layman has brought it, she changes her mind and wants oil. In the origin-story for Nissaggiya 5, in contrast, she asks the layman for oil, but later changes her mind and wants ghee. In the origin-story for Nissaggiya 10, it is an entire group of householders who are subjected to this treatment: After taking up a collection, at Thullanandā's request, to repair her dilapidated monastic cell, they discover that she has used the donated resources to acquire medicine instead. Such greedy and fickle demands are depicted as being offensive to the laity and as threatening the *sangha*'s dependence on the laity's good will. In other cases, it seems to be the exorbitant nature of Thullanandā's demands that is objectionable: In the origin-stories for Nissaggiyas 11 and 12, she directly asks King Pasenadi to give her the expensive garments right off his back—demands that lead the public to complain, “These nuns are greedy (*mahicchā*) and never satisfied!” (Vin iv, 255-256).

Greed causes problems not only for the relationship between the *sangha* and the laity, but also for the harmonious functioning of the *sangha* itself. One common theme found in multiple stories is the way in which Thullanandā's greed inevitably drives her to abuse monastic privileges and misuse monastic procedures—though without technically violating any already-established rule. Thus, in the origin-story for Saṅghādisesa 2, she inappropriately ordains a woman who is a thief out of

greed for the woman's possessions; in the origin-story for Nissaggiya 2, she inappropriately declares robe-material given at the wrong time (*akālacīvaram*) to be robe-material given at the right time (*kālacīvaram*) in order to steer it to her own followers (Vin iv, 245); in the origin-story for Pācittiya 27, she inappropriately delays the distribution of robe-material until her own disciples can be included among its recipients; in the origin-story for Pācittiya 29, she again delays the timely distribution of robe-material in greedy anticipation of a further gift that never arrives; and in the origin-story for Pācittiya 48, she refuses to give up her lodgings for re-assignment to somebody else, even though she is setting out on a journey. In each case, Thullanandā's behavior is clearly driven by greed—even though it does not violate any established rule—and the Buddha must set forth an additional precept to prohibit that specific behavior.

Here, we can begin to see the advantages of depicting Thullanandā as a nun who is well-versed in the complex categories of monastic discipline: The obvious *incongruity* between Thullanandā's mastery of monastic procedures, on the one hand, and the selfish greed that causes her to abuse them, on the other hand, effectively conveys the message that the outer forms and trappings of monastic discipline are meaningless unless one's adherence to it is motivated by the proper mental disposition. External adherence to the rules is valuable only insofar as it reflects an internal state of mind. Thullanandā may follow the *letter* of the monastic law, but she constantly violates its *spirit*—and in order to highlight the distinction between the two, she must be depicted as having mastery over the former. (A greedy nun who was ignorant of monastic discipline and unable to manipulate it to her own advantage would clearly not convey the same sentiment.)

What I am suggesting here of Thullanandā coheres with what several others have said of misbehaving monastics in general. Wijayaratna, speaking of both “bad monks” and “bad nuns” in the Pāli

Vinaya, observes that such figures “never transgress an established rule, but are crafty enough to commit another fault of the same type, all while respecting the established law” (40-41 n. 10)—thus combining unethical behavior with a technical adherence to the rules. Similarly, Schopen has observed of the notorious “Group of Six” monks that in spite of their obviously bad behavior, they are “almost always *technically* correct in their shenanigans” (2007: 205 n. 12). This craftiness is characteristic not only of the nun Thullanandā and the monks belonging to the “Group of Six” (along with their nun-counterparts), but also of the monk Udāyī, who is similar in nature to Thullanandā.¹² The ability of such monks and nuns to manipulate their detailed knowledge of monastic discipline in order to engage in unethical behavior—requiring the Buddha to promulgate one new rule after another, pertaining to ever-more-specific situations—seems to be a common theme of *Vinaya* literature. I would suggest that perhaps this was a way for *Vinaya* authors not only to illustrate the cleverness of misbehaving monastics, but also to acknowledge the limitations of their own ethical system—its failure to finally capture, through a maze of specific rules, what it means to lead an ethical life.¹³ In this sense, one might argue that “bad” but *Vinaya*-savvy monastics such as Thullanandā serve a dual function: On the one hand, they illustrate individual faults and bad qualities, such as greed; on the other hand, they provide a critical commentary on the limitations of the *Vinaya* project itself—a subtle acknowledgment that no list of rules, no matter how comprehensive, can ever wholly crystallize the ethical life. This feature of “bad” monastics is one that perhaps deserves more attention. Just as the *vidūṣaka* in a Sanskrit drama is a comic buffoon and “butt of ridicule” yet also fulfills a

¹² See Malalasekera, s.v. Chabbaggiyā and s.v. Udāyī. Ven. Anālayo (“Case of Sudinna,” 417) treats the recurrent mention of such characters as “a textual signifier to the audience that a story of bad conduct is about to be delivered.”

¹³ Along the same lines, Finnegan (92-93) has noted that “the vinaya’s ‘extremely detailed set of rules’ may actually reflect more a sense of *the inadequacy* of rules to cover the particularity of living situations, than it does any conviction in their final *codifiability*” (see 92-112 for her larger discussion of this issue).

significant moral function, often assuming “the role of a critic” and serving as the “conscience of the play” (Bhat 66, 139), so might ill-behaved monastics like Thullanandā serve a larger purpose than at first appears—yet without losing their basic character as “bad” monastics.

The fact that Thullanandā is well versed in *Dhamma* as well as *Vinaya*—being “very learned, an experienced preacher, and skilled at speaking of *Dhamma*”—perhaps suggests an additional point: Mere knowledge of the *Dhamma* is useless unless the qualities it advocates are taken up and internalized. Thullanandā may be skilled at *preaching* on the dangers of greed, but without taking her own sermons to heart, she derives no benefit from her own knowledge. She preaches the *Dhamma* without internalizing it, and she masters the *Vinaya* without sharing its underlying motivation. In her case, mastery of the external trappings of both *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* is not undergirded by the genuine internal transformation that both *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* are meant to achieve. The depiction of Thullanandā as having mastery over both *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* thus allows the persistence of her greed (and other bad qualities) to point toward a larger conclusion: In spite of the great benefit provided by the Buddha’s word, neither *Dhamma* nor *Vinaya* themselves finally embody the profound internal transformation he calls for. In the end, they are only external trappings. The Buddha provides human beings with precious resources that *can* lead one to the ultimate good—yet there is no guarantee that they will have their desired effect. In this sense, far more than just a “bad” and greedy nun, I would suggest that Thullanandā becomes an emblem of the limitations of *Buddhavacana* itself.

Thullanandā’s Favoritism and Partiality

Another fault displayed by Thullanandā that is closely related to her greed and again might be read on several different levels is the consistent

favoritism or *partiality* she displays toward some people over others. I have already mentioned the origin-stories for Nissaggiya 2 and Pācittiya 27, in which Thullanandā steers robe-material toward her own followers rather than the body of nuns as a whole. Just as Thullanandā is greedy on behalf of herself, she is also greedy on behalf of those she favors; both greed and favoritism stand opposed to renunciatory detachment and are manifestations of selfish desire. This favoritism or partiality is a consistent feature of Thullanandā’s character: In various stories, she shows favoritism for Devadatta and his fellow schismatics, for her sister Sundarīnandā, for her disciple Caṇḍakālī, and for the suspended monk Ariṭṭha.¹⁴ Such favoritism violates the basic idea that all members of the *sangha* are equal and interchangeable, and should be treated with equanimity, detachment, and impartiality, especially when it comes to monastic resources and procedures. Granted, the principle of seniority, the gender hierarchy between monks and nuns, and the special duties and obligations characteristic of certain formal relationships all dictate that different people within the monastery *should* be treated differently. Nevertheless, it is still the case that this differential treatment is governed by the basic *categories* that people fall into (such as “senior monk,” “preceptor,” “disciple,” and so forth), and should *not* be a matter of individual, idiosyncratic favoritism or affection—which is precisely what Thullanandā refuses to recognize. Thullanandā’s personal favoring of some people over others is shown to lead inevitably to all kinds of problematic behaviors, such as unfairly depriving well-behaved monks of alms-food, concealing other monastics’ offenses, and violating legal actions that have been taken by the *sangha*. Like greed, this favoritism is deleterious to both the individual monastic and the smooth functioning of the community as a whole.

¹⁴ For Devadatta, see monks’ Pācittiya 29 and nuns’ Pācittiya 81; for Sundarīnandā, see Pārājikā 2; for Caṇḍakālī, see Saṅghādisesa 4 and Pācittiya 53; for Ariṭṭha, see Pārājikā 3.

As a typical example of Thullanandā’s favoritism, we might cite the origin-story for the monks’ Pācittiya 29, in which a householder invites some senior monks for a lavish meal. Thullanandā insists on knowing which specific monks have been invited, and when she hears the list—which includes such notable figures as Sāriputta, Mahāmoggallāna, Upāli, Ānanda, and Rāhula—she asks the householder why he has invited “these miserable men who behave as if they were great heroes.”¹⁵ The householder asks—“And who, Lady, are great heroes for you?”—whereupon Thullanandā replies with her own list, which consists of Devadatta and his fellow schismatics.¹⁶ But when her words are suddenly interrupted by the invited monks entering within earshot, she quickly changes her tune and refers to *them* as “great heroes” instead. The householder is angered by her duplicity and promptly throws her out of his house. Here, it is clear that Thullanandā favors certain monks over others, and that this favoritism leads her to a multitude of sins—butting in on the householder’s business, depriving the intended monks of their meal, and uttering words that border on the abusive.¹⁷ The fact that she *knows* her behavior is wrong is indicated by her suddenly changing her words, with the commentary explaining to us that she did so after “looking furtively, seeing the senior monks entering, and realizing that they could hear her.”¹⁸ Favoritism, in this instance, is clearly inappropriate and results in Thullanandā’s obvious display of guilt.

The flipside of favoring certain people, of course, is the disfavoring of certain others, and this, too, is characteristic of

¹⁵ *mahānāge tiṭṭhamāne ceṭake* (Vin iv, 66).

¹⁶ That is, Kokālika, Kaṭamodakatissaka, the son of the Lady Khaṇḍa, and Samuddadatta (Vin iv, 66).

¹⁷ Interestingly, though, it is Devadatta rather than Thullanandā who is rebuked in this situation—leading the Buddha to lay down a Pācittiya rule for monks rather than nuns: “For that monk who knowingly consumes alms-food brought about by a nun, there is an offense of expiation” (Vin iv, 67).

¹⁸ *addhacchikena olokayamānā there pavisante disvā tehi sutabhāvaṃ ñatvā evam āha* (Vin-a iv, 808-809).

Thullanandā. Among the nuns, she is particularly hostile toward Bhaddā Kāpilānī because of the greater esteem that Bhaddā enjoys among the public, such that “people would attend to Bhaddā Kāpilānī first, and only later would they attend to the nun Thullanandā” (Vin iv, 290, 292). Thullanandā is described as being “overcome by envy” (*issāpakatā*) (Vin iv, 290) toward Bhaddā, and as a result, she harasses Bhaddā and makes her uncomfortable in the origin-story for Pācittiya 33, and throws Bhaddā out of her assigned lodgings in the origin-story for Pācittiya 35. Her hostility toward Bhaddā is also motivated, perhaps, by the fact that Bhaddā is the former wife of the monk Mahākassapa—yet another person Thullanandā dislikes intensely. By favoring certain people and disfavoring others, often for the pettiest of reasons, Thullanandā insists on seeing other monastics as individual personalities—violating the basic idea that one should always have respect for the “yellow robe” and what it signifies, regardless of the qualities of the one who wears it.

In some instances, however, it also seems possible to read Thullanandā’s favoritism in a slightly different manner—“against the grain,” as it were—as a subtle challenge to the kind of renunciatory detachment advocated by the monastic path. For in some cases, we cannot help but recognize the warm human affection and sense of loyalty that underlie her partiality toward certain others. In the origin-story for Saṅghādiseṣa 4, for example, the nun Caṇḍakālī—who is Thullanandā’s own disciple¹⁹—is described as one who constantly “causes quarrels, fights, disputes, arguments, and legal questions to come up within the *sangha*” (Vin iv, 230)—yet whenever the other nuns try to punish her, they are obstructed by Thullanandā. One day, when Thullanandā goes to a village on some business, the other nuns take the opportunity to suspend Caṇḍakālī from the Order. When Thullanandā returns and finds out what has happened, she castigates the other nuns and quickly convenes her own

¹⁹In the origin-story for Pācittiya 79, Thullanandā acts as the preceptor in Caṇḍakālī’s ordination.

Order to restore Caṇḍakāḷī to full status—leading the Buddha to prohibit such behavior.

Clearly, Thullanandā’s behavior is wrong. Though a monastic teacher does have certain special obligations toward her own disciple, these obligations do not include shielding such a disciple from disciplinary procedures that are fully warranted. By taking matters into her own hands and essentially *un-doing* a legal procedure that others had carried out “in accordance with the *Dhamma*, the *Vinaya*, and the Teacher’s instruction” (Vin iv, 231), Thullanandā threatens the integrity of monastic procedure and the fragile harmony of the *sangha*. And yet, one cannot help but notice the emotional elements of the story that make us sympathetic toward Thullanandā’s actions. First of all, we can discern some duplicity in the other nuns’ decision to wait until Thullanandā is far away before suspending Caṇḍakāḷī from the Order. When Thullanandā returns to the nunnery, Caṇḍakāḷī cries out to her that she is “without a protector” (*anātha*). Thullanandā seems bewildered by this—asking “But why, Lady, are you without a protector?”—whereupon Caṇḍakāḷī sadly informs her that “these nuns, Lady, knowing that I was without a protector, was not renowned, and had no one to speak up for me, suspended me for not acknowledging an offense” (Vin iv, 231). Thullanandā’s rash and angry response to the situation becomes somewhat intelligible as a manifestation of maternal protectiveness and warm affection directed toward one particular other—her own pupil. Thullanandā goes far beyond the bounds of the formal teacher/disciple relationship, but she does so in a way that is understandable. In cases such as this one, Thullanandā almost seems to represent a kind of emotional worldliness that might be inappropriate to the realm of the monastery, yet remains highly sympathetic, relatable, and compelling.

Even more amenable to this interpretation are the origin-stories attached to Pārājikas 1 and 2, which involve the nun Sundarīnandā, who is

Thullanandā’s own sister. In the origin-story for Pārājika 1, we are first told that four sisters from the same family had become nuns together—Nandā, Nandavatī, Sundarīnandā, and Thullanandā—and that, “among these, Sundarīnandā, who had gone forth as a young woman, was beautiful, attractive, and lovely; she was wise, experienced, and intelligent; skillful and energetic; full of consideration in every way; good at doing things; good at managing things” (Vin iv, 211). Because of these many fine qualities, Sundarīnandā is appointed as the “overseer of construction” (*navakammika*) (Vin iv, 211) for a monastery that is being built by the layman Sālha for the Order of Nuns. Eventually, this leads to inappropriate sexual contact (short of intercourse) between Sālha and Sundarīnandā—sexual contact that is prohibited by the Buddha in Pārājika 1. In the subsequent story for Pārājika 2, Sundarīnandā becomes pregnant by the layman Sālha and ends up leaving the Order to give birth. When the other nuns wonder aloud whether Sundarīnandā engaged in sexual intercourse and became pregnant while she was still a nun, Thullanandā informs them that she did. The other nuns castigate Thullanandā for concealing her sister’s offense, and this eventually leads the Buddha to set forth Pārājika 2: If a nun knowingly conceals another nun’s Pārājika offense, this concealment itself also constitutes a Pārājika offense.

Again, it is clear that Thullanandā’s behavior in this instance is wrong—and yet, one cannot help but notice how sympathetically she is portrayed. We know, first of all, that Thullanandā and Sundarīnandā are sisters who left the world to become nuns together. We also know from the *Suvaṇṇahaṃsa Jātaka* that Thullanandā was the *mother* of her three sisters in her previous life as the brahmin widow who stripped the goose of its golden feathers.²⁰ Thus, just as her drive to keep herself and her daughters out of poverty in a previous life led to her greedily stripping the

²⁰ At the end of the *Suvaṇṇahaṃsa Jātaka*, the Buddha says: “Thullanandā was the brahmin woman of that time; [the brahmin woman’s] three daughters are now [Thullanandā’s] three sisters; and I was the royal golden goose” (Jā i, 477).

goose of its feathers, so her drive to protect her sister in the present life has led to the concealment of her sister's offenses. Yes, Thullanandā behaves in greedy and deceptive ways—but she does so out of motherly and sisterly affection. Perhaps most compelling of all is Thullanandā's own explanation of her behavior. When the other nuns ask her—"But, Lady, knowing that another nun had become guilty of a Pārājika offense, why didn't you rebuke her yourself or tell others about it?"—Thullanandā responds with a statement of complete identification between herself and her sister:

Whatever is a fault (*avaṇṇo*) for her is also a fault for me;
 whatever is infamy (*akitti*) for her is also infamy for me;
 whatever is disgrace (*ayasa*) for her is also disgrace for me;
 whatever is loss (*alābho*) for her is also loss for me. Why,
 Ladies, would I tell others about my own fault, infamy,
 disgrace, and loss? (Vin iv, 216)

Though one *could* read this statement as suggesting, self-servingly, that Thullanandā simply doesn't want to be "tainted" by her familial association with a guilty sister, I prefer to read it otherwise: as a highly emotional plea in defense of the sisterly bond—monastic regulations be damned. The ties of loyalty Thullanandā feels toward specific others such as her sister always outweigh the imperatives posed by monastic regulations intended for the generic "all." Once again, Thullanandā becomes a highly relatable figure who stakes a claim for the importance of worldly and familial emotions, even as her behavior comes to define a serious monastic offense.

Thus, just as we saw above that Thullanandā illustrates the limitations of the external trappings of a renunciatory life, here we see that she also makes a case for the values of life within the world. Again, I would compare her to the figure of the *vidūṣaka* in a Sanskrit drama: Bhat notes, in his study of the *vidūṣaka*, that despite being an object of mockery

and ridicule, “the *vidūṣaka* often becomes the mouthpiece of sound common-sense,” and his ridiculous statements often have “the quality of wisdom inspired by...knowledge of the world” (167, 99). The “foolish” pronouncements of the *vidūṣaka* legitimately challenge the predominant values of the play—and those values are thereby ultimately strengthened. Similarly, the Buddhist values enshrined in the *Vinaya*—such as detachment and impartiality—are reinforced through being resisted by a sometimes-sympathetic-and-often-compelling depiction of Thullanandā. “Bad” monastics such as Thullanandā thus serve a more complex moral purpose than merely representing “bad” behavior.

Thullanandā and the Blurring of Roles

In addition to greed and favoritism, there are several other faults characteristic of Thullanandā, such as her tendency to make promises but fail to fulfill them,²¹ her inappropriate behavior with men (and encouragement of her followers to engage in the same),²² and her constant

²¹ For example, in the origin-story for Pācittiya 23, she promises to sew another nun’s robe; in the origin-story for Pācittiya 45, she promises to settle a legal question for another nun; in the origin-story for Pācittiya 77, she promises to ordain a probationary nun in exchange for a robe; and in the origin-story for Pācittiya 78, she promises to ordain a probationary nun after the latter has attended upon her for two years—yet none of these promises are fulfilled.

²² For example, in the origin-story for Pācittiya 14, it is said that “the nun Thullanandā would stand and talk with a man, whisper in his ear, and dismiss the nun who was her companion, whether on a highway, in an alley, or at a crossroads” (Vin iv, 270). In the origin-story for Saṅghādisesa 9, Thullanandā’s pupils are said to “live in society” (*samsaṭṭhā viharanti*) (Vin iv, 239), and the commentary glosses “in society” as “engaging in sexual intercourse” (*missībhūtā*) (Vin-a iv, 915); moreover, in the subsequent origin-story for Saṅghādisesa 10, Thullanandā directly encourages this behavior, telling her pupils: “Ladies, go ahead and live in society! Do not live any differently!” (Vin iv, 240). In the origin-story for Pācittiya 79, Thullanandā’s pupil Caṇḍakālī “keeps the company of men and boys” (*purisasamsaṭṭham kumāraśamsaṭṭham*) and is a constant “source of grief” (*sokāvāsam*) (Vin iv, 333). The commentary explains the phrase “source of grief” as follows: “Having made an appointment but not showing up for it, she causes grief to enter into men; thus, she is a source of [their] grief... Alternatively, she herself, from not having sexual intercourse with men, enters into grief, just as a householder enters his house” (Vin-a iv, 943). In spite of these examples, however, sexual transgressions do not seem to be nearly as characteristic of Thullanandā in the Pāli *Vinaya* as in some of the other *Vinayas*, such as the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*—see, for example, Clarke for some examples of Sthūlanandā’s sexual transgressions in that text (including the highly farcical story of Sthūlanandā running out of a burning nunnery with a dildo still attached to her foot).

hankering after fame and public praise.²³ But rather than discussing such faults individually, I would like to turn now to a broader and more general point: If it is true that Thullanandā demonstrates the limitations of the outward trappings of a monastic life and the compelling case for a life in the world, then we might surmise that she is also a figure who challenges the householder/renunciator distinction itself by constantly blurring the two categories. While this is not so characteristic of Thullanandā in the Pāli *Vinaya*, it does appear to be an identifiable theme in several other monastic codes.

Finnegan's study of nuns in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* (hereafter *MSV*) has the most to say about this issue. Finnegan first points our attention to the fact that when the Buddha allows women to become nuns, he essentially creates a new role for women with little precedent or history behind it. Many of the stories about nuns found in the *MSV* are thus concerned with educating people about what a nun is and how she differs from an ordinary, non-renunciatory woman. In the process of outlining this distinction, Finnegan observes (327),

we can especially count on Sthūlanandā to push the edges of what it means to be a nun, as opposed to a laywoman. Thanks largely to her, with Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī taking the lead at times in drawing the lines, [the] Buddha creates injunction after injunction that map out a careful distancing of the place of bhikṣuṇīs from that of lay women.

Thus, as a result of the actions of Sthūlanandā and other misbehaving nuns, nuns are forbidden from wearing laywomen's jewelry, fragrances, clothing, and so forth, so that the visual (and olfactory) distinction

²³ For example, in the origin-stories for Pācittiya 28 and Pācittiya 46, she bribes actors, dancers, and other entertainers to loudly praise her in public; and in the origin-story for Pācittiya 33, she makes an ostentatious display of renunciatory behavior out of jealousy for the greater public esteem enjoyed by her rival, Bhaddā Kāpilānī.

between nuns and other women remains obvious. Also pertinent to this distinction are the activities that women engage in. Finnegan notes (329):

In a series of narratives that are scattered across the *Bhikṣuṇīvibhaṅga* but when placed together form a distinctive pattern, a nun—most often Sthūlanandā—is requested or herself undertakes to engage in certain activities that other nuns are then asked to perform. Those other nuns—nearly always Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī—balk and firmly state that they consider this inappropriate for them to do, and [the] Buddha then steps in to forbid any bhikṣuṇī from engaging in that behavior.

As examples, she cites two narratives in which Sthūlanandā visits a household and engages in housework and childcare—the typical domestic activities of a wife and mother—in exchange for alms. When Mahāprajāpatī later comes to the same household and is expected to do likewise, she is horrified—and this leads the Buddha to prohibit such activities for nuns: Nuns are distinct from wives and mothers and should behave accordingly.

Important to note here is that just as Thullanandā is a skillful preacher and has mastery over both *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*, so too does she excel at the external functions of a wife and mother. The story involving childcare, for example, relates how she expertly bathes, dresses, and adorns a newborn baby, then feeds him fresh butter and honey, rocks him, and puts him to sleep. Throughout the *MSV*, in fact, she “projects an aura of extreme self-confidence and capability,” and at one point, she even poses the rhetorical question, “Is there any craft or art whatsoever about which I have no knowledge?” (Finnegan 334) But her mastery over the outer trappings of both renunciatory and non-renunciatory life only further underscores her utter failure to understand that each mode of life should be driven by the proper *internal* motivations. It is precisely the *lack* of this

understanding, in fact, that causes her to view *all* modes of life as “crafts” or “arts” that are equally available for her to profit from. Again, then, we see a kind of internal/external discourse forming around Thullanandā—with the suggestion that external competence and capability are completely distinct from what lies within. Thullanandā may have all the skills and talents of a good nun or a good mother—but these alone do not make her so.

Coming from a different perspective, Schopen has also noted the manner in which Sthūlanandā in the *MSV* improperly blurs the distinction between renunciatory and non-renunciatory women. Schopen’s main focus is the crowded urban location of Buddhist nunneries in India—which is illustrated, in part, by the many rules of the *MSV* concerned with keeping Buddhist nuns from encroaching upon other urban women’s functions, livelihoods, and roles. It is interesting to note that most of the origin-stories for these rules feature Sthūlanandā as the nun who oversteps these boundaries. Schopen relates three such stories, in which Sthūlanandā takes up the trades of a female soothsayer, a tavern-operator, and the proprietor of a brothel—in each case, being wildly profitable and successful, which soon leads to public criticism. Schopen notes (2009: 377):

In all three cases, of course, a rule is delivered forbidding the engagement of Buddhist nuns in such activities, but the issue here is not presented as a moral one... For the monks who redacted these accounts, and framed these rules, the problem is... that Sthūlanandā’s ventures are wildly successful and, as a consequence, create conflict with, and criticism by, other working women and the community at large. This, it seems, is what these rules were meant to avoid.

While I agree with Schopen that avoiding public censure is perhaps the primary motivation of such rules, I do not wholly agree that “the issue

here is not presented as a moral one.” Instead, I believe these stories fit into a larger moral pattern—observable also in the Pāli *Vinaya*—in which Thullanandā highlights the distinction between outward behaviors and the internal ethical motivations that should properly lie behind them—and alone give them their significance.

The blurring of roles characteristic of Sthūlanandā in the *MSV* is less apparent in other monastic codes, but it is occasionally discernible. In the *Mahāsaṃghika Vinaya*, for example, there are a series of rules focusing on the visual distinction between nuns and laywomen and prohibiting nuns from wearing laywomen’s clothing, ornaments, and undergarments. In all three cases, it is Sthūlanandā who adorns herself inappropriately and first brings the rules about.²⁴ It is particularly interesting to note the laywomen’s reaction when they first see Sthūlanandā wearing an ornamented belt: “We are lustful people,” the women say, “we attract our husbands by binding our waists with belts. Oh Noble! For what are you going to use them?” (Hirakawa 386). The laywomen thus understand that an ornamented belt is an outward manifestation of the internal quality of lust, as well as signifying a particular social role as somebody’s legal wife. Sthūlanandā, in contrast, sees all outward trappings as equally available for her individual profit and pleasure. Likewise, in the Pāli *Vinaya*, Thullanandā blurs the householder/renunciant distinction in the *opposite* direction when she gives monastic requisites (such as alms-food and cloth for making monastic robes) to a group of dancers, actors, and other entertainers.²⁵ Again, Thullanandā blurs the visual and behavioral boundaries between householders and renunciants because she does not recognize that the true distinction between them lies within.

²⁴ Hirakawa 386-388. In the *Mahāsaṃghika Vinaya* (T. 1425), these rules do not appear in the *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa*, as they would in other *Vinayas*, but rather in a chapter called the *Bhikṣuṇī-prakīrṇaka*.

²⁵ This occurs in the origin-stories for Pācittiyas 28 and 46.

At this point, it may be useful to summarize the argument thus far. In brief, I have argued that Thullanandā clarifies the distinction between external behaviors and internal moral qualities, showing that neither is necessarily an accurate reflection of the other. In doing so, she also suggests the inherent limitations of *all* external manifestations of the Buddhist path—including both *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*—while at the same time presenting a compelling case for the values of a mundane, non-Buddhist world. The challenge she presents is further intensified by her constant pushing of the limits of the monastic role and her tendency to blur the distinction between monastics and householders—a distinction upon which the survival of Buddhism depends—as well as by the fact that she is intelligent, highly talented, and good at almost everything she does. Thullanandā reminds us that appearances are deceptive, that virtue may only be skin-deep, and that the project undertaken by Buddhist monasticism is constantly subject to compelling oppositional forces. Her ability to do so depends not only on her bad behavior but also on her many skills, talents, and relatable qualities. Instead of dismissing Thullanandā as merely a “bad nun,” then, perhaps we ought to see her as something like the “worthy opponent” that every serious vision of life must face—and that ultimately serves it as a source of benefit.

Thullanandā and Devadatta

I turn now to the role Thullanandā plays within the larger Buddhist community. Thullanandā’s status as a “bad nun” is pertinent not only to her own depiction as an individual, but also to the ways in which her character is used to help delineate certain disputes and tensions within the early Buddhist community. Through her close association with certain characters (and her opposition to certain others), Thullanandā becomes a useful symbolic marker for giving voice to some of the larger issues facing the early *sangha*. In this section, I focus on Thullanandā’s support of

Devadatta, and in the next section, on her support of Ānanda in opposition to Mahākassapa.

Thullanandā’s enthusiastic support of Devadatta is apparent in the origin-stories for several rules. I have already alluded above to the origin-story for the monks’ Pācittiya 29, in which Thullanandā describes Devadatta and his four fellow schismatics as “great heroes,” contrasts them with certain other monks (whom she describes as “miserable men”), and attempts to steer alms-food in their direction. A similar scenario occurs in the origin-story for the nuns’ Pācittiya 81. Here, Thullanandā first gathers together a group of senior monks to preside over the ordination of a probationary nun. But once she sees the abundant alms-food available on this occasion, she delays the ordination, dismisses the senior monks, and later gathers together Devadatta and his fellow schismatics so that *they* can ordain the nun and enjoy the food. Thullanandā is thus depicted as a passionate partisan of Devadatta and his followers.

Given the general character of Devadatta in Buddhist sources, this association, of course, makes a certain amount of sense. For just as Thullanandā is the prototypical “bad nun,” so is Devadatta the prototypical “bad monk”—arch-rival of the Buddha, in fact, famous for his repeated efforts to undermine the Buddha’s authority, his nefarious scheming with Prince Ajātasattu, his several attempts on the Buddha’s life, and his creation of a schism in the *sangha*—all of which ultimately result in his descent into the lowest hell.²⁶ Much more so than Thullanandā, in fact, Devadatta is depicted as the very embodiment of evil, hatred, and wrongdoing. Yet it is interesting to note that Devadatta’s portrayal is *not* wholly unambiguous; in fact, he shares with Thullanandā a contradictory treatment in both positive and negative terms. As Ray, for example, has

²⁶ For a convenient collection of Pāli passages relating to Devadatta (translated into English), see Ñāṇamoli 257-270. For a summary of these traditions, see Malalasekera, s.v. Devadatta.

pointed out, Devadatta is sometimes depicted as “an impeccable saint whose sanctity is acknowledged by other Buddhist saints”—such as when Sāriputta praises his “great psychic power” and “great majesty,” or when the Buddha includes him in a list of eleven mindful and awakened disciples, or when the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra* predicts his future Buddhahood and praises him for spiritually assisting the Buddha in a previous life (162-163). If Devadatta were merely a “bad monk,” what would account for such praise?

Fortunately, in Devadatta’s case, a plausible historical answer to this question has been provided by the careful work of scholars such as Mukherjee, Bareau (“Études” and “Devadatta”), Ray (162-173), and Sarao—all of whom are in general agreement concerning the significance of the Devadatta legend. In brief, these scholars focus on the specific way in which Devadatta foments a schism in the *sangha*—that is, by urging the Buddha to make five “austere practices” (*dhutaṅga*) mandatory for all monks, including forest-dwelling, begging for alms, wearing rag robes, lodging at the foot of a tree, and abstaining from meat and fish. The Buddha rejects the imposition of these practices—designating them as *optional* rather than required—whereupon Devadatta creates a schism in response. Textually speaking, this sequence of events—which is clearly indicative of a tension between more and less austere visions of the monastic life—appears to be the original core of the Devadatta legend, with the passages depicting Devadatta’s jealousy, ambition, extreme enmity toward the Buddha, and attempts on the Buddha’s life added only later. These scholars thus conclude that originally, Devadatta was simply an austere and rigorous “forest-saint,” and that stories expressing hostility toward him are not original or early. Such stories developed only later, and they resulted from the genuine differences between Devadatta and the Buddha—or, perhaps, between different factions of the early *sangha* represented by these characters—on the nature of the monastic life, with Devadatta being an advocate of austere forest asceticism, as opposed to

the more comfortable settled monasticism championed by the Buddha. Historically, then, perhaps Devadatta (or somebody like him) *did* advocate such austere practices and *did* enact or at least threaten a schism within the *sangha*,²⁷ and it was for this very reason that his character was increasingly maligned and criticized over time—yet without completely erasing the earlier, wholly positive depiction. As Ray concludes, “The original Devadatta... was simply a saint whom Buddhist tradition, over the course of time, came more and more to hate” (170)—as the tradition itself moved more and more in the direction of a comfortable, settled life.

In spite of the many differences between Mukherjee, Bareau, Ray, and Sarao, all of them agree on this basic scenario concerning Devadatta. But what implications might this have for the character of Thullanandā? Sarao suggests that just as Devadatta was originally a “good” monk who was later unfairly maligned, perhaps the same came to be true—by association—of his various friends and supporters. “After the death of the Buddha,” he speculates, “many members of the *sangha* seem to have become busy settling old scores against each other... In this kind of witch hunting, many associates of Devadatta including Kokālika and Thullanandā seem to have become innocent victims of slander just because they threw their loyalty behind Devadatta” (261). In this scenario, the “original” Thullanandā was presumably “good,” and it was only her support for the austere asceticism represented by the losing Devadatta-faction that caused the later tradition to malign her as “bad.”

²⁷ The question of whether or not Devadatta’s schism had any lasting success has given rise to diverse opinions. Ray (172) cites evidence that it did: Both Faxian (in the 5th century) and Xuanzang (in the 7th century), for example, report the existence in India of Buddhist monastic communities who are devoted to Devadatta rather than the Buddha. Ray concludes from this that a community of Devadatta’s followers existed continuously from the time of Devadatta himself up through the 7th-century travels of Xuanzang. Bareau likewise claims that “the school thus constituted did not rapidly disappear with the ignominious death of its founder but lasted for more than ten centuries” (“Devadatta,” 33). Deeg, on the other hand, after carefully reviewing all of the relevant evidence, concludes that Devadatta’s schism failed, and “there was no continuous tradition of *Devadatta*-followers after the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha”—but also that “such a group had developed in the time of the *Kuṣāna*-empire” (194), and it was this later group that both Faxian and Xuanzang referred to. See Tinti, however, for a view that discounts Xuanzang’s comments altogether as being mistaken.

I do not find Sarao's explanation convincing, for several reasons. First of all, whereas careful analysis has succeeded in identifying a "good" Devadatta whose textual depiction is historically *earlier* than that of the "bad" Devadatta, the same is not possible in the case of Thullanandā. In Thullanandā's textual depiction, we cannot identify two different chronological layers, each with its own distinctive character. (The attempt to do so, in fact, would be somewhat akin to Talim's unwarranted positing of two different nuns named "Thullanandā" in order to account for her contradictory features.) Therefore, we can only treat Thullanandā as a single, complex whole. Secondly, it seems to me that if Thullanandā were, in fact, a "good" nun who threw her support behind the Devadatta-faction, then we might expect to find at least *some* lingering evidence of her "ascetic" character or her support for austere and rigorous practices. The evidence, however, consistently points in the *opposite* direction, portraying Thullanandā as a worldly and rather sensual figure.

Therefore, rather than arguing, as Sarao does, that the gradual maligning of Devadatta led also to the gradual maligning of Thullanandā, I would prefer to emphasize, more generally, the way in which each character helpfully reinforces the other. The "bad" nun Thullanandā *must* be bad if she supports the evil schismatic Devadatta; likewise, Devadatta *must* be bad if he is supported by the miscreant Thullanandā. In fact, Thullanandā's character as a worldly woman who is attracted to fame, praise, and success almost seems to cast a shadow of suspicion on Devadatta's sincere commitment to austere asceticism—by mere virtue of the fact of their association. In this way, we can see that within the world of Buddhist narrative, individual characters who are richly depicted in their own right are further enhanced through their location within a complex web of relationships with other characters.

The "bad nun" Thullanandā thus functions not merely as an individual, but also as a convenient symbolic resource that can be used to

give voice to much larger historical issues within the early life of the *sangha*—in this case, competing visions of the monastic life that must have been in significant tension with one another shortly after the death of the Buddha. The refusal to make an austere ascetic lifestyle mandatory for all Buddhist monastics, and the mainstream acceptance of a more comfortable settled life within monasteries, are both conveyed through the legend of Devadatta—and our proper evaluation of Devadatta is aided by his association with the “bad” nun Thullanandā.

Thullanandā, Ānanda, and Mahākassapa

We can see Thullanandā playing a similar kind of role in her relationships with two other famous disciples of the Buddha—Ānanda and Mahākassapa. Thullanandā’s favoritism for Ānanda and intense dislike of Mahākassapa are related in the *Cīvara Sutta* of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, one of thirteen *suttas* focusing on Mahākassapa and gathered together into a single chapter of this collection (Bodhi 2000: 1, 676-679). At the beginning of this discourse, Ānanda goes on a tour through the countryside during which he loses thirty of his young monastic disciples when they revert back to the household life. When he arrives in Rājagaha, he greets Mahākassapa, only to have the latter roundly abuse him:

Why, Brother Ānanda, do you wander around with these inexperienced monks, whose sense-faculties are unguarded, who are immoderate in eating, and not devoted to vigilance? It’s as if you were wandering around destroying the crops! It’s as if you were wandering around harming families! Brother Ānanda, your assembly is falling apart.

Your young followers, Brother, are falling away. And yet,
this boy is too big for his britches!²⁸

When Ānanda objects to being called a “boy” (*kumārako*) when “there are gray hairs growing on my head” (SN ii, 218), Mahākassapa simply repeats his insult again—with the commentary explaining that he refers to Ānanda as a “boy” because he thinks that “one who wanders around with [such] boys deserves to be called a ‘boy’ himself” (SN-a ii, 179).

When Thullanandā hears about this insult, she is livid and castigates Mahākassapa: “How can the noble Mahākassapa, who was formerly the adherent of another sect (*aññatitthiyapubbo*), think that the noble Ānanda, the sage from Videha, ought to be disparaged by being called a ‘boy’?” (SN ii, 219) Thullanandā’s reference to Mahākassapa belonging to another sect is an obvious insult, for according to Buddhist tradition Mahākassapa never belonged to another sect, but went forth on his own before being ordained directly by the Buddha.²⁹ Nevertheless, as the commentary explains, “because the elder [Mahākassapa] was not known to have either a preceptor or an instructor within this teaching, but went forth by taking up the robes on his own, therefore, she speaks out of displeasure, accusing him of having formerly been the adherent of another sect” (SN-a ii, 179). Thullanandā’s intention to insult Mahākassapa is also evident in the commentary’s observation that “she acts with passion and delusion, she acts out of haste, and she says this under the power of hateful behavior.”³⁰ Thullanandā’s insult then causes Mahākassapa to launch into a lengthy and rather boastful account of his renunciation of the world, his first encounter with the Buddha, his unusual ordination “by means of a triple exhortation” (*tīhi ovādehi*)³¹ given by the Buddha, and his exchange

²⁸ SN ii, 218. “This boy is too big for his britches” is a loose translation of the Pāli *na vāyaṃ kumārako mattam aññāsīti*, which literally means “this boy does not know his measure.”

²⁹ For a thorough summary of the life of Mahākassapa according to Pāli sources, see Nyanaponika and Hecker 107-136.

³⁰ *rāgamohacāro pi sahasācāro / idaṃ pana dosacāravasena vuttaṃ* (SN-a ii, 179).

³¹ SN-a ii, 200. (This phrase appears in the commentary on the *sutta* rather than the *sutta* itself.)

of robes with the Buddha—all of which prove beyond doubt that he is “the Blessed One’s own legitimate son, born from his mouth, born from the *Dhamma*, produced by the *Dhamma*, an heir to the *Dhamma*.”³² By relating all of this, “the elder [Mahākassapa] purifies his going-forth”—according to the commentary—and implicitly says to his audience: “Look how ill-spoken the words of the nun Thullanandā were!”³³ At the end of the discourse, we are told that as a result of this encounter, “the nun Thullanandā fell away from the religious life” (SN ii, 222). The Sanskrit version of this discourse found in the *Mahāvastu* is more elaborate, telling us that Mahākāśyapa gazed upon Sthūlanandā, “hoping that he could reconcile her heart,” but she remained intransigent. “And as she had hardened her heart against the venerable Mahākāśyapa,” it concludes, “she was reborn in one of the great hells” (Jones 3, 56).

It is clear from this account that Thullanandā dislikes Mahākassapa and greatly favors Ānanda, whom she refers to elaborately—in the *Mahāvastu* version—as “the venerable Ānanda, the sage of Videha, the Exalted One’s servitor, the Exalted One’s attendant, the recipient of the right rules direct from the Exalted One’s mouth” (Jones 3, 48). It is well-known, of course, that Ānanda was a favorite among many nuns of the early *sangha*—not just Thullanandā—because of the crucial role he played in persuading the Buddha to institute an Order of Nuns. In this case, however, Thullanandā’s favoring of Ānanda is accompanied by her hostility against Mahākassapa. Moreover, the *Cīvara Sutta* is not the only context in which a nun shows favoritism for Ānanda combined with hostility for Mahākassapa, for exactly the same thing happens in the immediately preceding *sutta* within the *Samyutta Nikāya*, the *Upassaya Sutta* (Bodhi 2000: 1, 674-676). Here, Ānanda asks Mahākassapa to accompany him to the nuns’ quarters and preach a discourse to the nuns.

³² *bhagavato putto oraso mukhato jāto dhammajo dhammanimmito dhammadāyādo* (SN ii, 221).

³³ *therena pabbajjā parisodhitā hoti...passa yāva dubbhāsitaṃ vacanaṃ thullanandāya bhikkhuniyā ti* (SN-a ii, 200).

Mahākassapa is reluctant to do so and must be requested two more times before he finally agrees. After he goes to the nuns' quarters and preaches a discourse to them, the nun Thullatissā—who is mentioned nowhere else in the Pāli Canon and might be seen as a sort of double of Thullanandā (especially given the similarity of their names)—is said to be “displeased” (*anattamanā*). She showers Mahākassapa with abuse: “How can the venerable Mahākassapa think of speaking of *Dhamma* in the presence of the venerable Ānanda, the sage of Videha? ... This is just as if a needle-seller were to think of selling a needle to a needle-maker!” (SN ii, 215-216) Though Ānanda asks Mahākassapa to “be patient” with Thullatissā—for “women are foolish”³⁴—Mahākassapa is angered by the nun's remark and rebukes Ānanda rather sharply for his excessive sympathy for the nuns. Once again, in this instance, we have a nun who passionately favors Ānanda and dislikes Mahākassapa. In this case, however, there is also some indication of *why* this might be the case, for Ānanda shows sympathy for the nuns, whereas Mahākassapa shows only impatience.

Several scholars (including von Hinüber, Singh, and Tilakaratne) have connected these two discourses from the *Samyutta Nikāya* with the Pāli *Vinaya*'s account of the First Council, where there is once again tension between Ānanda and Mahākassapa that is somehow related to the nuns. In this account (from the *Cullavagga*) (Horner 5, 393-405), it is Mahākassapa who takes the lead directly after the Buddha's death and puts forth the idea of convening a Council to codify both *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*. He invites 499 senior monks to participate in the Council, but he does not include Ānanda until he is asked to do so by the other monks—this, in spite of the fact that Ānanda is an obvious choice and will play a central role in the Council as the reciter of the *Dhamma*. There is thus an underlying sense of hostility displayed by Mahākassapa toward Ānanda. In the Tibetan *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, in fact, this hostility becomes

³⁴ *khama bhante kassapa bālo mātugāmoti* (SN ii, 216).

explicit when Mahākāśyapa assigns Ānanda to the degrading position of fetching water for the other monks during the Council, and Ānanda is forced to accept (Singh). During the course of the Council, moreover, Ānanda is rebuked by the assembled monks for five “offenses” he has committed during his life as a monk—the fifth and most significant of which is the role he played in persuading the Buddha to institute an Order of Nuns.³⁵ Though Ānanda is rebuked by the monks in general rather than by Mahākassapa alone, it is clear that Mahākassapa is the leader of the Council and the rebuking happens under his authority. Ānanda reacts to these accusations with a subtle form of defiance, for in each of the five cases, he protests that he does not consider this an offense, but confesses to it anyway, “out of faith in the venerable ones” (*āyasmantānaṃ saddhāya*) (Vin ii, 289).

Overall, then, the account of the First Council again suggests that Mahākassapa is hostile toward Ānanda, and this hostility is somehow related to Ānanda’s support for the nuns. We can further connect this account of the First Council to the two *suttas* from the *Samyutta Nikāya* by noting that the commentaries on both *suttas* suggest that the episodes they relate took place *shortly after the death of the Buddha*; in fact, the commentary on the *Cīvara Sutta* suggests that Ānanda was *on his way to the First Council* when the episode involving Thullanandā took place.³⁶

³⁵ In brief, the first four “offenses” are: (1) not asking the Buddha which “lesser and minor” rules of training could be abolished; (2) stepping on the Buddha’s rainy-season robe while he was sewing it; (3) inviting women to honor the Buddha’s corpse first and allowing them to defile it with their tears; and (4) not requesting the Buddha to remain alive for an eon.

³⁶ The commentary reads: “After the Teacher had attained Parinibbāna, the elder Mahākassapa, seated in the midst of the company of monks who had gathered together for the Teacher’s Parinibbāna, selected five hundred monks, and said to them: ‘Brothers, we will spend the rainy season in Rājagaha and recite the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*. Before the rainy season begins, you should resolve any obstacles [that might keep you from being there] and then gather together in Rājagaha.’ And having said this, he went to Rājagaha himself. And the elder Ānanda, too, carrying the Blessed One’s bowl and robe, and having won over many people, left Sāvathī, set out from there, and wandered throughout the Southern District as he was traveling to Rājagaha. It is in reference to this [time period] that the *sutta* speaks” (SN-a ii, 177). The commentary on the *Upassaya Sutta* is a bit less explicit about the time period of its events—but when the *sutta* refers to Ānanda as “having many duties and many obligations” (*bahukicco... bahukaraṇīyo*) (SN ii, 215), the commentary explains: “Did [Mahākassapa] speak thus because the elder [Ānanda] was involved in making

Putting all of this evidence together, both von Hinüber and Singh are led to similar conclusions: The decision to admit women into the *sangha* was highly fraught and contested within the early monastic community. The anxiety surrounding this decision—whenever it may have occurred³⁷—seems to have come to a boiling point immediately after the death of the Buddha. This is represented in the texts by the post-Parinibbāna tension between Ānanda and Mahākassapa, as well as certain nuns’ favoring of the former and dislike of the latter. In von Hinüber’s words: “Ānanda stands for the pro-*bhikkhunī* faction, and Mahākassapa for his opponents” (235). The two figures “may be considered as the heads of two conflicting currents within the *sangha* of the monks. The ‘Ānanda faction’... was strong enough to prevail against their opponents and push through the acceptance of nuns, but not strong enough to prevent the ‘Mahākassapa faction’ from expressing their misgivings in the texts” (236). In other words, although women *were* ultimately admitted into the *sangha*, texts such as the *Cīvara Sutta*, *Upassaya Sutta*, and account of the First Council from the *Cullavagga* have the effect of elevating Mahākassapa and putting Ānanda in his place. Singh refers to this contentious dispute over the role of women as “the first unrecorded schism in the Buddhist order,” while von Hinüber describes it as “a deeply rooted dissension, perhaps as bad as the earlier conflict with Devadatta” (236).

repairs [to buildings] and so forth? No. But after the teacher attained Parinibbāna, the four assemblies would approach the elder Ānanda, crying and lamenting—‘Sir, now whose bowl and robe will you carry as you wander? Whose dwelling will you sweep? To whom will you give water for rinsing the mouth?’ And the elder [Ānanda] would console the assembly—‘[All] conditioned things are impermanent, and the King of Death shamelessly strikes down even those whose bodies are old! This is the nature of conditioned things, so do not grieve, do not lament.’ These were his ‘many duties,’ and it was in reference to this that the elder [Mahākassapa] spoke thus” (SN-a ii, 175). This, too, suggests that the events described in this *sutta* are taking place just after the death of the Buddha.

³⁷ According to Buddhist sources, the Order of Nuns was established during the lifetime of the Buddha, approximately five years after he attained enlightenment. Von Hinüber’s discussion of Ānanda and Mahākassapa, however, is part of a much larger, multi-step argument claiming that “the order of nuns was founded only after the death of the Buddha, when a group of non-Buddhist female ascetics joined the already existing community of monks” (222). The argument is intriguing, but has been refuted point-by-point by Anālayo (“Theories,” 110-126).

If we accept the basic scenario outlined above, what can we say about the role here played by Thullanandā? Clearly, if we surmise that the *Cīvara Sutta* is intended to elevate Mahākassapa and humiliate Ānanda then the “bad nun” Thullanandā once again becomes an important resource for doing so. By depicting Thullanandā’s passionate support of Ānanda and harsh abuse of Mahākassapa, the *Cīvara Sutta* subtly maligns the figure of Ānanda—and his pro-woman stance—through their close association with “bad” nuns like Thullanandā (and, in the *Upassaya Sutta*, Thullatissā). The humiliation of Ānanda is particularly clear in the *Mahāvastu*’s version of this discourse, where Ānanda is made to repeat three times: “Forgive me, O venerable Mahā-Kāśyapa, for I am foolish, womanish (*mātrgrāma*), witless, and lacking in common-sense (*akṣetrajñā*)” (Jones 3, 49). Ānanda’s description of himself as “womanish” might also suggest to us that what is really at stake here is *not* his losing of the thirty male disciples, but rather, his long-standing support for women and nuns. Thus, just as we saw above that Thullanandā serves to mark Devadatta as “bad,” so she also serves to mark Ānanda as “bad”—at least in this particular text. In both cases, Thullanandā’s character as a “bad nun” extends beyond herself as an individual and becomes a useful symbolic resource for dealing with a much larger historical issue—here, the role of women in Buddhism and the admission of nuns into the *sangha*.

There is, however, one possible difference between the use of Thullanandā in each of these two cases. Above, we saw that Thullanandā’s support for Devadatta is not accompanied by any genuine commitment to austere asceticism. In other words, her support for Devadatta does not seem to be based on any true ideological affinity between them, but is instead just another example of her tendency toward superficial favoritism. But is the same true of her support for Ānanda? Is there any evidence that Thullanandā shares Ānanda’s “pro-woman” stance or is committed to upholding the dignity of women and nuns? We already know that she is

aggressive, independent, and utterly confident in her own capabilities. Could she also be seen as a sort of proto-feminist?

It seems to me that there *are*, in fact, several stories that are amenable to such a reading—stories in which Thullanandā gets into trouble primarily for her insistence on sticking up for the rights of women and refusing to show the proper deference toward powerful men. One such story is the origin-story attached to Saṅghādisesa 1. Here, a faithful Buddhist layman donates a shed to the Order of Nuns. After he dies, his son—who is not a follower of the Buddha—decides that the shed belongs to him, forcibly repossesses it, and orders the nuns to vacate. Thullanandā immediately objects: “No, Sir,” she says to the son, “don’t say that, [this shed] was given to the Order of Nuns by your father!” The dispute is brought before the ministers of justice, who seem uninterested in dealing with it. “Ladies,” they say to the nuns, “who knows whether or not [this shed] was given to the Order of Nuns?” Again, Thullanandā objects, reminding them of the legal transfer of the shed: “But, Sirs, didn’t you yourselves see, hear, and arrange witnesses for the gift of the shed?” The ministers of justice, realizing that “the lady has spoken truly,” award the shed to the nuns. The son becomes angry, reviling the nuns as “shaven-headed whores” (*muṇḍā bandhakiniyo*) rather than genuine recluses. Thullanandā reports this abuse to the ministers of justice, which leads to the son being punished. Angered yet further, he then persuades a group of Ājīvaka ascetics to verbally harass the nuns; again, Thullanandā turns him in to the ministers of justice, and this time the son is locked up. This growing dispute soon leads to public criticism: “First, the nuns allowed this shed to be stolen away [from that son]; second, they had him punished; third, they had him locked up. Pretty soon, they will have him killed!” Eventually, the Buddha sets forth a rule prohibiting nuns from “speaking with envy” (*ussayavādika*) (Vin iv, 223-224).

At first glance, it is difficult to read this account without concluding that Thullanandā did nothing wrong and was wholly in the right—both legally and morally speaking. After all, the shed *did* belong to the Order of Nuns; the ministers of justice ruled *in the nuns' favor* (once they were pushed to pay attention to the case); the man *did* harass and abuse the nuns; and the ministers of justice rightfully punished him. The only “offense” committed by Thullanandā seems to be her persistence in defending the legal rights of the nuns in the face of a greedy male householder and some lazy legal officials. The resulting rule prohibiting nuns from “speaking with envy” seems to make little sense—since Thullanandā acted not out of envy but rather out of a sense of injustice. The intent of this rule is clarified, however, by the following commentarial gloss, which explains the phrase “speaking with envy” as meaning: “bringing about a lawsuit.” Perhaps, then, Thullanandā’s fault in this case—even if she was morally in the right—was to go as far as filing a lawsuit against the son. This violates the basic idea that monastics—whether male or female—have renounced the ordinary world and thus removed themselves from the legal constructs that govern it; therefore, they should not be filing lawsuits against others, whether or not they have been legally wronged.

How, then, could this story be read as depicting Thullanandā as a proto-feminist? I believe that the *gendered* framework of this tale—pitting the *nun* Thullanandā, speaking on behalf of other *nuns*, against a wealthy *male* householder and some *male* legal officials—still carries some significance. I would also argue that the full wording of the resultant rule perhaps clarifies its true intent: “If a nun speaks with envy *about a householder, a householder’s son, a slave, a servant, or even a recluse who has gone forth*, this nun has become guilty of an offense...” (Vin iv, 224). Each of the persons listed is *male* (with all of the nouns appearing in masculine form), while nothing at all is said about “speaking with envy” about any *woman*. Thus, it is not “speaking with envy” per se that is the

problem—or even bringing about a lawsuit—but rather, failing to show the proper deference toward men, even in the face of injustice.³⁸ And inasmuch as Thullanandā fails to show such deference—instead persisting in her dogged pursuit of justice on behalf of the nuns—we could see her, perhaps, as a proponent of the rights and dignity of women.³⁹

Similarly—albeit, with a bit more difficulty—the origin-story for Saṅghādiseṣa 2 could be read “against the grain” as suggesting that Thullanandā’s “offense” in that instance was to help an adulterous wife escape from a murderous husband by ordaining her into the *sangha*—even after the husband’s authority to kill his wife had been vouchsafed by a council of powerful men, and even though other nuns and female recluses had already refused to admit her. This reading is complicated, no doubt, by the story’s claim that Thullanandā did this in the hopes of acquiring the wife’s valuable possessions—thereby making this story yet another illustration of Thullanandā’s excessive *greed*. But if we merely subtract the detail of the wife’s possessions—which seems rather awkwardly inserted into the story⁴⁰—we are once again left with a possible reading of Thullanandā as a proponent and defender of women, willing to stand up for them in the face of powerful men. One further intriguing detail I might mention along these lines—though I lack the expertise to properly evaluate it—is the description of Thullanandā as “one who relies upon a certain family for alms” (*aññatarassa kulassa kulūpikā*) (Vin iv, 66). In a

³⁸ It is perhaps significant, too, that there is no similar rule for monks.

³⁹ Talim (54) offers a similar comment on this story, noting that Thullanandā here “may be considered as a woman capable of fighting for justice.”

⁴⁰ I say this because the beginning of the story makes it clear that the husband wishes to murder his wife *for the crime of adultery*, yet once he locates his wife among the nuns, he criticizes them for ordaining “a female thief” (presumably, because she took her valuable possessions with her?)—and this results in the Buddha setting forth a rule prohibiting nuns from ordaining female thieves. The awkwardness of the story causes Horner to feel it necessary to clarify (in a footnote to her translation): “The Licchavi [husband] appears to lose sight of his wife’s original sin in his effort to recover the property” (3, 183 n. 3). Although this is admittedly speculative, it seems to me that an original story about a wife committing adultery and Thullanandā ordaining her into the *Sangha* has been awkwardly transformed by the insertion of both the mention of the valuable possessions and the resulting rule concerning female thieves.

complex discussion of the categories of *kula* and *gotra* in ancient India, Sharad Patil connects the term *kulūpikā* with matrilineal clan structure and the powerful figure of the *kula-pā*, who was the female head and priestess of a matrilineal clan—specifically invoking Thullanandā as the distant memory of such a woman (48). Could Thullanandā’s “proto-feminist” character—as well as her aggressive trouble-making—possibly derive from the fact that she echoes a powerful female figure from the past?

Even leaving such speculations aside, it is nevertheless clear that the seemingly minor episode of Thullanandā’s defense of Ānanda and abuse of Mahākassapa is not just another example of her consistently “bad” behavior. Instead, it is one component within a much larger discourse pertaining to one of the most contentious and significant issues faced by early Buddhism—the role and status of women. When Thullanandā defends Ānanda’s dignity against the insults of Mahākassapa, she implicitly endorses a “pro-woman” and “pro-nun” stance. This stance is cast in a negative light, however, by Thullanandā’s status as a “bad nun.”

But perhaps there is yet another way of looking at this episode. If one brackets, for a moment, their attitudes toward women to consider the basic psychological dispositions of Ānanda and Mahākassapa, one cannot help but notice that these two important disciples of the Buddha are rather starkly different in character.⁴¹ Among the Buddha’s disciples, Mahākassapa is designated as the foremost among those who practice the *dhutaṅgas*—a set of austere ascetic practices that are voluntary rather than required for monks, such as begging for alms (rather than accepting invitations to meals) and wearing robes made out of rags (rather than robes

⁴¹ See the discussion of Tilakaratne, who argues that “the formation of Theravada tradition owes much to sharp personality differences and the resultant differences of the ways of living of the two elders Mahakassapa and Ananda” (231).

sewn from donated cloth).⁴² In line with this tendency toward voluntary strict asceticism, Mahākassapa—as Nyanaponika and Hecker describe him—is a “solitary elder” who leads “a disciplined and austere life devoted to meditation,” and who is renowned for his “strictness toward himself and his brother monks” and his “love of solitude and aloofness from the crowds” (109, 133). We can see Mahākassapa’s exacting standards and aloofness from others in several episodes recorded in Pāli literature. On three occasions in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, he refuses to exhort the monks even after being requested to by the Buddha because he finds the monks in question to be overly lax and unresponsive to his admonishment; on several more occasions, he refuses to accept alms from deities who are eager to give them (because there are others who are in greater need of the resulting merit);⁴³ and on two occasions—as we have already seen—he is harshly critical of Ānanda for not sufficiently guiding his young monastic disciples and for being too sympathetic toward the nuns. Throughout his depiction, Mahākassapa is solitary, aloof, and demanding—and because he holds himself to such high and austere standards, he sometimes becomes (as Ray describes him) “a sharp critic of those who are lax” and “a danger to those who do not properly acknowledge his sanctity” (106, 107). No doubt, Mahākassapa is impressive and worthy of reverence—but he is hardly warm and fuzzy.⁴⁴

Ānanda, on the other hand, is precisely the opposite—warm, likable, and highly relatable.⁴⁵ As Tilakaratne has noted, “If Maha Kassapa is the embodiment of austerity, solitude and aloofness from society, Ananda represents almost the total opposite: busy city life

⁴² See the famous list of disciples who are “foremost” (*aggam*) in this-or-that quality found in the *Etadaggavaggo* of the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* (Bodhi 2012: 109-113). For a detailed discussion of the *dhutaṅgas*, see Ray 293-323.

⁴³ On the theme of Mahākassapa as a “choosy” recipient of alms, see Wilson.

⁴⁴ See Anālayo (“Bakkula,” 14-19) for a similar discussion of Mahākassapa, as well as a comparison between Mahākassapa and Bakkula—whom Anālayo treats as an even more extreme example of ascetic austerity and reluctance to engage with others.

⁴⁵ For a thorough discussion of Ānanda in Pāli sources, see Nyanaponika and Hecker 139-182.

immersed in public relations and social engagements” (239). Far from being solitary or aloof, Ānanda serves as the Buddha’s personal attendant for twenty-five years. As such, he is highly devoted to the Buddha and intimately involved in his care, as well as serving as a constant intermediary between the Buddha and everyone else. In this highly social and relational position, Ānanda always exhibits (as Nyanaponika and Hecker put it) a “natural kindness and compassionate concern” and is “especially solicitous for the welfare of all four classes of disciples, not only monks and laymen, but also nuns and laywomen” (154). As the Buddha himself admiringly observes in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (DN ii, 145):

If, Monks, an assembly of monks comes to see Ānanda, they are delighted when they see him. And if he speaks of *Dhamma*, they are delighted by his speaking. And when he is silent, they are disappointed. And the same is true for an assembly of nuns, an assembly of laymen, and an assembly of laywomen. These, Monks, are the four wonderful and marvelous qualities of Ānanda.

Ānanda is also the most highly emotional of all the Buddha’s disciples, being plunged into grief when his good friend Sāriputta dies and when the Buddha’s own death is imminent—and needing, on both occasions, to be consoled by the Buddha. This emotional warmth of Ānanda does, of course, have certain spiritual costs: In a *sutta* from the *Majjhima Nikāya*, after finding Ānanda among a large gathering of monks, the Buddha admonishes him for his love of conviviality, which is depicted as a spiritual hindrance (MN iii, 110):

Ānanda, the monk who delights in society, takes pleasure in society, and is intent upon enjoying society; the monk who delights in crowds, takes pleasure in crowds, and enjoys crowds—such a monk does not shine. For such a

monk to obtain, without difficulty or trouble, the bliss of renunciation, the bliss of solitude, the bliss of tranquility, and the bliss of enlightenment—this is impossible.

We might also observe that Ānanda is the very last of the Buddha's senior disciples to attain arhatship. In fact, it seems to be precisely because of his very personal and emotional ties to the Buddha that his spiritual progress is stalled—and it is only *after* the Buddha has died that he finally succeeds in becoming an arhat.

If we consider Ānanda and Mahākassapa from this perspective, then perhaps what their characters stand for is not “pro-woman” versus “anti-woman” stances, but instead, two opposing emotional dispositions—the former of which is warm, affectionate, and forgiving, while the latter is austere, aloof, and exacting. From this perspective, the *Cīvara Sutta*—with its humiliation of Ānanda and exaltation of Mahākassapa—would be concerned with holding monks to a high standard of detached behavior and warning them of the dangers of excessive emotion. (This does, in fact, cohere with the basic events of the *sutta*, in which Mahākassapa rebukes Ānanda for being too forgiving of his young disciples, thereby causing them to go astray.) The danger posed to the *sangha* by monks who demonstrate excessive conviviality with others, lenience toward their bad behaviors, and a constant willingness to forgive them out of affection is conveyed by having Thullanandā—the “bad nun”—jump to Ānanda's defense. This interpretation, moreover, coincides nicely with one of the consistent aspects of Thullanandā's own character that I discussed above—the favoritism and partiality she shows in her relationships with others, and her tendency to place personal ties of loyalty and affection *above* the generic demands of Buddhist monasticism.

To some extent, of course, whether Thullanandā serves as a marker for a “pro-woman” stance or a “pro-emotion” stance perhaps boils down to much the same thing—for women, in the world of Indic discourse, often

stand for the realm of excessive emotions and particularistic attachments, and are opposed to a renunciatory detachment that is implicitly gendered as male. (Perhaps this is what Ānanda means when he describes himself as “womanish.”) This realm—the realm of women, warm emotions, ties of loyalty, and persisting worldliness—remains compelling and attractive, as we have seen. But at least within the *Cīvara Sutta*, its dangers are clearly condemned by being associated with the “bad nun” Thullanandā.

Conclusion

In spite of the many passages of Pāli literature that invoke the nun Thullanandā, she is never described in great detail, nor is she ever the subject of sustained discussion or interpretation. Her misbehaviors, abuse, and insults are generally described in brief, with little accompanying commentary to help us evaluate her deeds. Nevertheless, I hope that I have succeeded in demonstrating that even these brief passages do accumulate into a portrait that is amenable to a deeper reading. This reading suggests that Thullanandā’s status as a “bad nun” is far more complex than merely a collection of random faults and misdeeds. On an individual level, as we have seen, Thullanandā reminds us of the deceptive nature of all external trappings—including those of Buddhism itself—as well as presenting us with a compelling challenge to the values of a renunciatory, monastic life. On a communal level, Thullanandā’s relationships with male monastics like Devadatta, Ānanda, and Mahākassapa are used to critically reflect upon certain contentious yet foundational issues within the life of the early *sangha*—such as the proper place of austere asceticism, the role and status of women, or the dangers of excessive emotion. As we tease out such interpretations, moreover, it is sometimes possible to read certain accounts “against the grain” to recover alternative conceptions of Thullanandā herself. Perhaps other “minor” characters within the world of Buddhist

discourse—when subjected to a close reading—will reveal themselves to be equally complex.

Abbreviations

All Pāli canonical and commentarial sources are cited from the Tipiṭaka (and commentaries) established at the Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana or Sixth Buddhist Council held in Yangon, Myanmar, 1954-56, and available online at www.tipitaka.org. However, as is customary, the citations given are to the standard Pali Text Society editions, as noted below.

DN *Dīgha Nikāya*. Ed. Rhys Davids and Stede 1890-1911.

Jā *Jātaka* and *Jātaka Aṭṭhakathā*. Ed. Fausboll 1875-1897.

MN *Majjhima Nikāya*. Ed. Trenckner 1888-1925.

SN *Samyutta Nikāya*. Ed. Feer 1884-1904.

SN-a *Samyutta Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā (Sāratthappakāsinī)*. Ed. Woodward 1929-1937.

Vin *Vinaya Piṭaka*. Ed. Oldenberg 1879-1883.

Vin-a *Vinaya Piṭaka Aṭṭhakathā (Samantapāsādikā)*. Ed. Takakusu and Nagai 1924-1977.

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