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Bhikkhunī Academy at Manelwatta Temple: A Case of Cross-Tradition Exchange

Cheng Wei-yi¹

Abstract

This article is the result of an investigation continued from an earlier article on an exchange between Buddhists in Taiwan and Sri Lanka (“A Cross-Tradition Exchange Between Taiwan and Sri Lanka,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, vol. 18, 2011). In that article, I investigated the exchange between a Mahāyāna Taiwanese nunnery and a Theravāda Sri Lankan missionary monk. After the initial exchange, described in the 2011 article, a more permanent institute for the education of Sri Lankan Buddhist nuns has been established. This article describes the cross-tradition exchange behind the founding of the educational institute and its implication for exchanges across different Buddhist traditions in Asia.

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Introduction

On November 13, 2011, fifty *bhikkhunīs* from different parts of Sri Lanka joined a three-month training program at Manwelwatta Temple near Kelaniya. It was the first of many training programs for Buddhist nuns to come. This article will use the case study of Buddhist nuns' training programs to examine the revival of the *bhikkhunī sangha* in Sri Lanka and the role of cross-tradition exchange among devotees of different Buddhist traditions in Asia. By "cross-tradition" I am referring to different Buddhist traditions such as, in this case, the Theravāda tradition in Sri Lanka and the Mahāyāna Chinese tradition in Taiwan. The term "cross-cultural" is avoided in order to highlight the issues of monastic lineage and orthodoxy² in this exchange.

I began my research for this article by re-reading Nami Kim's essay on global feminist theology. She points out that Asian women are often homogenized as a single category and that the difference between Asian women is frequently ignored in (Western) feminist discourse (Kim). Her essay inspired me while I was a graduate student in London, but somehow the inspiration seems to have been lost in the re-reading. It took me some time to realize that now, back in Asia, the difference is a reality and I do not need an academic discourse to notice it. I now want less to raise awareness about the differences between Asian women than to explore how to bridge the differences. In this article I discuss a case study about bridging such differences between Asian women, an educational project for Buddhist nuns that involves agencies from Taiwan and Sri Lanka.

The formal name of this project, as it appears on the nuns's certificate, is "Religious and Social Competencies Improvement Diploma

² For more, see Carbonnel, Laure, "On the Ambivalence of Female Monasticism in Theravāda Buddhism," *Asian Ethnology* 68.2 (2009), 265-282.

Course for Bhikkhunis, International Academy of Buddhist Studies.” However, Taiwanese volunteers involved in this project simply refer to it as the “Bhikkhunī Academy,” for it is hoped that a permanent, formal academy for *bhikkhunīs* will be eventually established on the temple ground. The term “*bhikkhunī*” rather than “Buddhist nun” is used to show the underlying intention of Taiwanese volunteers and donors who do not question the validity of re-establishing the *bhikkhunī* tradition in Sri Lanka. For convenience, I will also refer this project as the “Bhikkhunī Academy.”

Religious Women’s Agency

A. K. Sen defines “agency” as “what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important” (quoted in Ibrahim and Alkire 384). Anagol defines it as “conscious, goal-driven activities by [agents] that embrace the possibility of *change*; put more simply, it is purposeful action designed to have an impact” (615). In this article, the label “agency” is adopted for the actions taken by the three groups of actors in the founding of the Bhikkhunī Academy, because they share and take actions toward the common goal of enhancing educational opportunities for Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka.

Gender has a complicated history with agency. Men’s agency is usually assumed to be proactive and takes the central role in the process of change, while women’s agency is marginalized and/or valued for being submissive. R. C. Gardiner writes:

For women, however, agency was disabled and dispersed according to social roles The situation was clearly more complicated than one of active men oppressing passive women. There were passive men and active women,

anomalies that the dominant ideologies attempted to dislodge, in part, by assigning agency and passivity differential moral value according to gender: male activity was good and passivity bad; female passivity was good and activity bad, and deviations from this model were “perverse.” (3)

Although Gardiner may have had Western culture in mind when she wrote this, the same critique is applicable to the topic of this article. The proactive and feminist-oriented actions of the nuns of Daxingshan Nunnery represent the Taiwanese women’s agency mentioned in this article. Despite the fact they try to avoid fame (so much so that I label them “silent feminists”), their actions led to the founding of the Bhikkhunī Academy. The avoidance of fame might be attributed to the cultural bias in Taiwan that belittles the pro-activeness of women’s agency; women in are expected to be obedient and to fulfill the traditional wifely and maternal roles even when they are successful at work (Gallin 63).

There are more complications with religious women’s agencies. Hollywood says it very well: “Submission of one’s own will to that of the divine was the precondition for women’s agency within the religious sphere . . .” (514). Since the divine may be disguised as patriarchal arrangement, religious women’s agency becomes frequently unrecognized by feminists (Mahmood). To better understand religious women’s agency, Bucar suggests the conceptualization of religious women’s agency as creative conformity:

Agency as creative conformity moves away from an idea of empowerment that depends on an autonomous place of perfect freedom. In contrast, creative conformity considers self-representation of women who still see themselves

as existing with the structure of other representations,
and as operating inside those lines. (682)

In this way, religious women's agency can no longer be simply seen as either active or passive; they are able to claim actions of change as their own rather than something betrothed to them by male agency and/or feminists. I will argue that the third form of agency discussed in this article, that of the Sri Lankan nuns, reflects Bucar's theory of creative conformity, for they attempt to improve their lives in an environment that is both economically and socially unfavorable to them.

The Theravāda Monk

The first agent in the exchange is inevitably the Sri Lankan monk who connected Taiwanese Buddhists to the Manelwatta Temple in Sri Lanka, Bodagama Chandima Thero³ (1957-; hereafter, Chandima Thero). The story of the Bhikkhunī Academy at Manelwatta Temple began with his arrival in Taiwan in 1990. It was a time when people in Taiwan, where the mainstream Buddhist culture is of the Mahāyāna Chinese tradition, began to form their first impressions of Theravāda Buddhism. 1990 was a good time for religious missionaries to come to Taiwan. The martial law that had restricted religious expression was lifted in 1987 and Taiwan had then witnessed a period of Buddhist renaissance (Jones 182-218). Buddhist groups with different agendas and of non-Chinese traditions emerged.

³ Information about B. Chandima Thero comes mostly from the website of the Samadhi Theravāda Education Association, <https://sites.google.com/site/samadhi21/founder>, accessed 29 June 2012.

Chandima Thero was born in Matara District in 1957. His early years as a monk resembled those of many other Sri Lankan Buddhist monks: *pirivena* (Buddhist monastic education) followed by university. In 1986, he had the chance to visit Malaysia, where he met the famous Sri Lankan missionary monk Ven. Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda Thero (1919-2006).⁴ From the interviews I had with Chandima Thero, I have the impression that he admired and was greatly inspired by Dhammananda Thero:

You see, he was such an old man, but for Dhamma propagation, he would give lecture at a university every Friday. Every Friday he [lectured] at a university. And you see, many senior monks would travel with disciples when they go abroad to give Dhamma talk. But not the Thero. He took one bag and then just went He was very child-like.⁵

Dhammananda Thero might have motivated Chandima Thero to pursue the career of a Theravāda missionary.

After a year in Malaysia, Chandima Thero went to Taiwan to study Mandarin Chinese in order to enhance his Theravāda missionary work among the Chinese population in Malaysia. He intended to stay for only one year, but it became long-term. As I mentioned earlier, Chandima Thero arrived in Taiwan at the time when Taiwanese were starting to enjoy religious freedom and were learning about Theravāda Buddhism. There is some debate about the emergence of Theravāda Buddhism in Taiwan; some suggest the translation of the Pāli *Nikāyas* in the 1970s was the beginning of Theravāda Buddhism in Taiwan, or perhaps that it was

⁴ For more, see the website “Late Ven. Dr. K Sri Dhammananda.” <<http://www.ksridhammananda.com/>> (accessed on 14 July 2013).

⁵ Interviewed on 10 February, 2010.

the visit of the well-known Sri Lankan monk Walpola Rahula in 1965. In any case, it was not until the late 1980s that Theravāda Buddhism began to gain attention among Buddhists in Taiwan. A noticeable number of Theravāda meditation books were translated and published in 1989. The well-known meditation teacher, S. N. Goenka (1924-2013), led his first meditation retreat in 1995 (Chen 162-165; Lin). But when Chandima Thero came to Taiwan in 1990, Theravāda Buddhism was still relatively unknown

It has been noted that Buddhism in the West has been romanticized in order to meet the psychological and spiritual needs of modern life (Thanissaro). In much the same way, Theravāda Buddhism in Taiwan has also been romanticized. It has been presented to Taiwanese Buddhists as the authentic teachings of the Buddha and as a tradition that is devoid of rituals, that maintains a strict observance of the *Vinaya*, and that promotes the diligent practice of meditation. Chialuen Chen asserts that Theravāda Buddhism was introduced to Taiwan by (educated) Buddhist elites who adapted and transformed Theravāda Buddhist expressions in Taiwan (189-190). In fact, many earlier Theravāda books published in Taiwan were translated not directly from South and South-east Asian languages but from English and were books that had been popular in the West and filtered through “the dharma gate of Western psychology” (Thanissaro). For these who are familiar with popular Theravāda culture in Sri Lanka, the image of Theravāda Buddhism in Taiwan would seem foreign.

Amid this positive and romanticized image of Theravāda Buddhism, a favorable climate was created for Chandima Thero to establish himself in Taiwan; he claimed to have experienced few obstacles or objections from Mahāyāna establishments in Taiwan.⁶ In line with the

⁶ Interviewed on 10 February 2010.

romanticized Theravāda image, he began his religious career in Taiwan by offering meditation classes. This proved to be a successful strategy; many who attended his early meditation classes have remained his devotees to this day. It is interesting to note that in Chandima Thero's teachings in Taiwan, he emphasized the *Metta Sutta* and *mettā* (loving-kindness) meditation. The idea of loving-kindness can be a good ideological basis for charity works, which have been an integral part of Chandima Thero's religious career in Taiwan.⁷ He preached the need to help the poor and raised funds from Taiwan to fund various charity projects in Sri Lanka. The charity works eventually connected him with the second agent in the founding of Bhikkhunī Academy: "silent feminists."

Silent Feminists

There is currently a movement in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition to establish full ordination for nuns. Michelle Hannah has criticized the non-Tibetan activists, Western and Taiwanese, in this movement. She points out that non-Tibetan activists often lack the understanding about the local situation that ethnic Tibetan Buddhist women face and that ethnic Tibetan Buddhist women may even be barred from speaking for themselves in international platforms. She criticizes Western and Taiwanese Buddhist women for being self-righteous and neglecting local concerns in the higher ordination movement:

Perhaps sensing [ethnic Tibetan nuns'] resistance, the most senior Taiwanese nun (in her sixties) began forcefully lecturing the younger Tibetan and Himalayan nuns (in their mid to late thirties), telling them about the nature of

⁷ For more, see the website Theravāda Samadhi Education Association, <https://sites.google.com/site/samadhi21/charity>, accessed on 16 July 2013.

the discrimination and disadvantage they experience.
(339)

While I cannot speak for Western activists, her criticism of Taiwanese involvement in the higher ordination movement seems reasonably true. On the other hand, I also must stress that there are differences among Taiwanese Buddhist women. The Taiwanese nuns whom Hannah criticizes in her article are likely to be feminists and academics and they are among the minority in Taiwan's female Buddhist clergy. Most Taiwanese nuns whom I personally know prefer to remain anonymous in their activities. After all, modesty is expected of women in Chinese culture (Irving 64). One example of Taiwanese Buddhist nuns who actively engage in benefiting and empowering Buddhist women and yet prefer to remain unknown is the second agency in the founding of the Bhikkhuni Academy—the *bhikkhuni sangha* of Jiuhuashan Daxingshansi, or, following Li Yu-chen's usage, Daxingshan Nunnery.

Nuns of Daxingshan Nunnery do not appear to be as vocal and feminist-oriented as the Taiwanese nuns described by Hannah. On the contrary, they try to remain as inconspicuous as possible, and my request for an interview with them was denied. Unlike many Buddhist establishments in Taiwan, Daxingshan Nunnery has no website or publications to promote itself. Nevertheless, its fame has spread far and wide; all of my Taiwanese Buddhist friends have heard of Daxingshan Nunnery. The fame probably arises from the rumored miraculous healing power of its founding nun, Fuhui (1930?-1985).

Among Taiwanese Buddhists, the nun Fuhui is commonly known as “the nameless *bhikkhuni*” (*wuming biqiuni*). Very little is known about her. According to Li Yu-chen, Fuhui was born in Miaoli County of north Taiwan. Her natal family name was Chen and she might have been from an affluent family. She was probably born in 1930 or 1931 and probably attended high school. The exact details of her early life have not been

revealed to the public. It is rumored that she had an unhappy marriage and, after the death of her husband, left home to pursue spiritual practice. Her age and the year of her leaving home is unknown. She later reappeared in Miaoli County as a Buddhist nun with the monastic name Fuhui (Li 65-67). Upon her return, she began to perform healing miracles to those who sought them and gradually built up her fame. More than two decades after her death, the faithful still flood to her disciples to ask for the Great Compassion Water (*dabeishui*) said to be blessed by Fuhui from beyond and believed to hold miraculous healing power.⁸

After the death of Fuhui, her eleven disciples split into two groups. One moved to Sanyi township of Miaoli County and the other moved to Tongluo township of Miaoli County, both carrying the name Jiuhuashan Daxingshan Nunnery. The one that sponsors the Bhikkhunī Academy at Manelwatta Temple is from Sanyi township. It has been actively conducting overseas charity works for years. When the tsunami struck in 2004, Daxingshan Nunnery was one of the benefactors sought out by Chandima Thero to raise funds for his reconstruction project in Sri Lanka (Taiwan Samidhigama in Hambantota District). The relationship did not stop there. Chandima Thero and Daxingshan Nunnery went on to conduct other charity projects and Buddhist projects.

Relevant to this article is the *bhikkhunī dāna* ceremony sponsored by Daxingshan Nunnery on October 5, 2010. Chandima Thero's Taiwanese devotees understood it as the first-ever *dāna* ceremony intended for all Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs* in modern times. Invitations were sent out to district offices, which in turn distributed the invitations to Buddhist nuns in their areas. Although the nunnery had hoped to provide *dāna* for 5,000 Buddhist nuns (including *bhikkhunīs*, *sāmanerīs* and *dasa sil mātās*) from all over Sri Lanka, eventually only 2,200 confirmed the invitations.

⁸Fieldwork note, 11 May 2011.

Approximately 2,900 nuns of all three monastic statuses attended the *dāna* ceremony. All expenses, including the nuns's travel costs and gifts to the nuns, were paid by Daxingshan Nunnery (Cheng). According to my informants who are personally involved with the construction of the Bhikkhunī Academy as Buddhist nuns themselves, the nuns of Daxingshan Nunnery had wished to help their counter-parts. While conducting charity works in Theravāda countries, they had witnessed the destitute condition of Buddhist nuns. This made them wish to provide support for their Buddhist sisters; hence, they proposed to host a *dāna* ceremony for Theravāda Buddhist nuns. Because of their connection with Chandima Thero, Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs* became the first recipients (Cheng).

A crucial question is whether the nuns of Daxingshan Nunnery were aware of the international Buddhist feminist movement that has been gaining pace since the late 1980s (Tomalin). At first glance, the answer seems to be no. Visitors to Daxingshan Nunnery are generally impressed by the modesty of the nuns; they are poorly dressed and avoid publicity. They use Taiwanese dialect rather than the more commonly used Mandarin Chinese. Before the democratization in the late 1980s, Taiwanese dialect was associated with the uneducated and/or working class (C.-C. Chen). By using Taiwanese dialect as their language medium, the nuns of Daxingshan Nunnery create an image of being humble and perhaps uneducated.

However, I was informed by a volunteer who has worked with the nuns that they are, in fact, aware of the Buddhist feminist movement worldwide and even read books on Buddhist feminism. It also appears that they are aware of the international *bhikkhunī* movement even though they stay away from Buddhist feminist gatherings. Hence, I label them "silent feminists." While the nuns of Daxingshan nunnery work to benefit and empower Buddhist women, they seek no publicity. Given the

choice, they would prefer to remain anonymous. However, their sponsoring of the *bhikkhunī dāna* ceremonies and then the founding of the Bhikkhunī Academy in Sri Lanka is a conscious decision to empower Buddhist nuns. They are feminist but not as vocal and aggressive as the Taiwanese nuns described in Hannah's article. They make the choice to be silent.

Anagol notes that discourse of historians on colonial India often pays attention to male activist's nationalist efforts whereas when women's agency is even noticed, it is often women with education and power that are noticed and not women as a whole. Similarly, because nuns of Daxingshan Nunnery avoid fame, their actions in empowering women might be oblivious to others.

The Creative Nuns

The third agent in the founding of the *bhikkhunī* training program is the Sri Lankan nuns themselves. Women from less economically advanced countries are sometimes seen as passive and unaware of the possibilities of changes unless otherwise "educated" by women from more economically advanced countries. The Western and Taiwanese nuns described in Hannah's work reflect this stereotype. In the founding of the *bhikkhunī* training program, however, the initiative taken by Sri Lankan nuns is crucial and should be noted.

After the *dāna* ceremony on October 5, 2010, Manelwatta Temple received numerous letters from Sri Lankan Buddhist nuns asking for further assistance. The requests in these letters ranged from the repair of a nunnery to medical bills to a long-term scholarship. The letters were passed on to Daxingshan Nunnery, which decided that instead of answering each single request it might be more efficient to hold regular

alms-giving ceremonies for nuns. This led to annual *dāna* ceremonies for Buddhist nuns at Manelwatta Temple.

Among the many letters sent to Manelwatta Temple was a request for educational assistance. I was told by volunteers associated with Daxingshan Nunnery that although the nuns are not academics themselves, they had come into contact with books published by Buddhist feminists that promote various empowerment means for women such as Buddhist women's education. Because the Buddhist tradition has a long history of emphasizing the value of education (Bodhi), the nuns of Daxingshan Nunnery did not hesitate about the request for educational opportunities. Coincidentally, Manelwatta Temple had a large parcel of land and Chandima Thero already had the idea of founding a Buddhist university on the temple grounds. When Daxingshan Nunnery expressed the wish to found a *bhikkhunī* academy in Sri Lanka, Chandima Thero was more than happy to provide the necessary land. Within two years, a Buddha Hall, a lecture building and a hostel were built. The construction was completed in July 2012. All expenses were paid by Daxingshan Nunnery. Additionally, Daxingshan Nunnery also pays the cost of running the training program, including staff salaries, food and lodging for the nuns, utility bills, etc.

Even though the training program at this moment is still just a "program," Taiwanese volunteers who are associated either with Chandima Thero or with Daxingshan Nunnery have the habit of calling it "Bhikkhunī Academy" (hence the title of this article). They hold the hope that a permanent and formal academy for *bhikkhunīs* will eventually be established. However, in Sri Lanka hostility against *bhikkhunī* ordination still exists (Nathaniel); therefore, a higher educational institution that carries the title *bhikkhunī* does not seem possible at present.

The nuns of Daxingshan Nunnery had hoped to provide education for *bhikkhunīs*, but they soon realized that many applicants were

without higher ordination. They had also hoped to provide an advanced level of education for *bhikkhunīs* who already had a certain level of education, but given the scarcity of educational opportunity for Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka, it did not seem proper to turn down applicants with lesser education. As a result, they decided to include as many Buddhist nuns in the training program as possible. Although there is a certain degree of screening of student nuns (by the head monk of Manelwatta Temple, Pallewela Sarada Thero, and a male lay lecturer), most applicants with secondary education are accepted. Therefore, one finds student nuns of all monastic status (*bhikkhunīs*, *sāmanerīs* and *dasa sil mātās*) and a wide range of educational levels.

The training program is designed as a three month program and accepts fifty students at each session. The first session began on November 13, 2011, with forty-six qualified students. Each session starts with one week of meditation retreat followed by lectures in four areas of studies: Buddhist Studies, Language, Social Science and Special Activities. The student nuns follow a rigid timetable starting at 4:30 a.m. The training program also includes visits to hospitals and nursing homes in order to enhance student's skills in counseling.⁹

Many of the nuns who have finished one session of the training program express the wish to continue their training. The request is passed on to Daxingshan Nunnery. Although it wants to develop an advanced level of training program, because of the constraints of financial means and human resources the plan remains under discussion.

In addition, Chandima Thero was encouraged by a highly popular Chinese monk of the Pure Land School, Ven. Chi K'ung, to pursue his

⁹ Also see the webpage of Theravada Samadhi Education Association, <https://sites.google.com/site/samadhi21/education-projects/bhikkhuni-academy>, accessed on 18 July, 2013.

plan of establishing an international Buddhist university. The foundation-laying ceremony for Nagananda International Buddhist University, on the grounds of Manelwatta Temple, took place on June 25, 2013. As the University is still under construction at this time, it is still to be seen how the founding of a formal higher educational institution might affect the Buddhist nuns training program. Informants associated with Chandima Thero claim that the Buddhist nuns training program will continue.

The role of Sri Lankan nuns in the founding of the Bhikkhunī Academy was crucial. Rather than waiting passively for empowerment projects from others, they took the initiative to seek education. As Elizabeth M. Bucar suggests, religious women's agency should be understood within the context of moral conformity. It should be recognized that had the Sri Lankan nuns not themselves taken the creative step of soliciting assistance for education, the Bhikkhunī Academy could not have been founded. In this case, the agency for empowerment did not begin from without but from within.

Conclusion

In this article, I introduced three agents that together brought about a Buddhist nuns' training program in Sri Lanka. The first agent, the missionary monk Chandima Thero, bridges two Buddhist traditions. While introducing the Theravāda tradition to Mahāyāna Chinese Buddhists in Taiwan, he helped to bridge the other two groups of women agents discussed in this article.

The second agent is Daxingshan Nunnery in Taiwan. For those of us who are familiar with academia and feminist discourse, which urges the oppressed to speak out, it is often forgotten that not all are comfort-

able with or have the eloquence to gain notability. I called them “silent feminists.” Although the nuns of Daxingshan Nunnery prefer to remain unnoticed, they seek to empower women.

The third agent is a group of women whom I label “creative nuns.” These nuns are “creative” for taking the initiative to break through the cultural conformity unfavorable to Buddhist nuns and to create a situation enhancing their educational opportunity. In Taiwan, *bhikkhunī* ordination is seen as a given right of Buddhist nuns and the nuns of Daxingshan Nunnery had originally intended to cater only to *bhikkhunīs*. Had non-*bhikkhunī* Sri Lankan nuns not taken the initiative to seek educational assistance, the Bhikkhunī Academy may not have been established in the first place.

Also notable is the cross-traditional exchange between the three agents. It has been said frequently that Buddhism in America is unique in that all of the different Buddhist traditions can be found in America, so much so that Tweed suggests a theory of “translocative analysis” that emphasizes movement, position, and relation (20) for the study of American Buddhism. In reality, having plural Buddhist traditions in the same location is not unique to America. The increasing pace of globalization has hastened exchanges among different Buddhist traditions in Asia. For example, Tibetan Buddhism has gained increasing popularity in predominately Mahāyāna Chinese Taiwan (Yao) and Theravāda Buddhism has received less but still some attention in Taiwan. The founding of Bhikkhunī Academy mirrors Tweed’s translocative theory, for it involves the movement, position and relation between two traditions and two locations.

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