

## The Original Ordination of Buddhist Nuns

According to Buddhist tradition, the Buddha's mother, Maya, died seven days after the Buddha's birth. He was then raised by his aunt Mahapajapati Gotami, along with her own children. After the Buddha had initiated the order of monks and following the death of the Buddha's father, King Siddhodhana, it is said that she asked the Buddha to also ordain women.

We find the record of this in the Pali text *Cullavagga* which is the second of the two volumes composing the *Khandhaka*, the second section of the *Vinaya Pitaka*.<sup>1</sup> Here is my paraphrase:

While the Buddha was residing at Kapilavastu he was approached by Mahapajapati Gotami. She asked, "Permit women to also observe the same doctrine and discipline, the same lifestyle, as the monks you have ordained."

The Buddha replied, "Gotami, don't ask me to do this."

She asked a second time and a third time and on both occasions got exactly the same response.

Following this, Mahapajapati was deeply distressed and left weeping. The Buddha himself departed for Vesali.

Then Mahapajapati cut off all her hair, donned yellow robes, and taking with her many Sakya women, she travelled to Vesali. She arrived with swollen feet, covered with dust and stood weeping at the entrance to where the Buddha was staying. Ananda, noticing her there, asked what was so distressing her. She explained that it was because the Buddha had refused to allow for the ordination of women as nuns. Ananda told her that he himself would seek to secure the Buddha's permission for this.

Ananda approached the Buddha and told him that Mahapajapati had arrived with swollen feet, covered with dust and was deeply distressed because the Buddha had refused to allow women to become nuns. The Buddha told Ananda to desist from asking him to permit this. Ananda renewed the request a second and a third time getting exactly the same response. Ananda then decided to approach the matter differently. This time he asked, "If women were to adopt the same lifestyle as monks, living under the same doctrine and discipline, would they then be capable of achieving the state of arhatship, the state of not needing to be reborn?" The Buddha conceded that under these conditions women were indeed capable of achieving this state. Ananda then pressed his case as follows, "Since if women were nuns they would be capable of achieving this state then consider permitting Mahapajapati to be ordained as a nun, remembering that she is your maternal aunt and the one who raised you after your mother died. Please permit women to adopt the same lifestyle as monks, living under the same doctrine and discipline."

At this point the Buddha relented, saying, "Ananda, if Mahapajapati will accept the following eight conditions then I will consider her to have been ordained as a nun:

1. A nun, even if she was 100 years old, must unfailingly express reverence to any monk she encounters, even if that monk was only ordained that very day.
2. Under no circumstances must a nun reside in a district where there are no monks.
3. Once a fortnight, nuns must unfailingly wait for the monks in that district to appoint a fast day and for a monk to come and formally instruct them about that day.

4. A nun must unfailingly invite all nuns and all monks to express any criticism of her based on what they have seen, heard or suspect.
5. If a nun has committed a serious breach of discipline, then she must undergo penance for a full fortnight with both the order of nuns and monks being cognisant of this.
6. Only after a female novice has observed these rules for two years will she be eligible to seek ordination from both the order of nuns and the order of monks.
7. Under no circumstances whatsoever must a nun revile or abuse any monk in any way.
8. A nun will never be allowed to officially reprove a monk, but a monk is allowed to officially reprove a nun.

Ananda then explained to Mahapajapati these eight conditions. She agreed and Ananda informed the Buddha accordingly. He responded,

“Ananda, this concession (allowing women to be nuns) will unfortunately cut in half how long Buddhist teaching can survive, from 1000 years to 500. Burglars find it easy to steal from households which have many women but few men. Just as women in their weakness cannot stand against burglars, so they do not have the same resilience as men when it comes to living under the doctrine and discipline I have established for monks. Women who become nuns are like a disease infecting a flourishing rice paddy or a field of sugar-cane and reducing the long-term ability of such fields to produce good crops. I have insisted on these eight conditions, which must not be transgressed under any circumstances, precisely to protect the doctrine and discipline I have established, just as a man might build a dyke to contain a body of water.”

## Conclusions

1. The Buddha was extremely reluctant to admit women into the Sangha.
2. The Buddha believed that it was possible for women to attain the ideal state but only if they abided by the same doctrine and discipline as that observed by the monks.
3. However, the Buddha also believed that women are weaker and inferior to men and that their inclusion would inevitably weaken the Sangha and reduce the durability of his teaching.
4. The Buddha believed the acceptance of an order of nuns was only viable provided they were strictly subservient to the monks, adhering to the eight conditions he set down for them.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/bits/bits099.htm> Viewed 21/11/17.