

## THE REVIVAL OF NUN ORDINATION OF THE THERAVADA TRADITION IN SRI LANKA: A LANDSCAPE OF THE CULTURE IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD\*

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In February 1998 at Bodhgaya, India, more than a hundred Buddhist women were ordained as Buddhist nuns (*bhikkhuni*) following the nun discipline by Taiwanese monks (*bhikkhu*) and nuns. Among these were twenty women from Sri Lanka, where a tradition of Theravada Buddhism has been preserved.

In Sri Lanka, since then there has been a revival of nun ordination in the Theravada tradition, which had been suspended since the eleventh century. Now the nun discipline, which spread from Sri Lanka to China in the fifth century, is being disseminated back to Sri Lanka. This laudable event has resulted in many congratulatory messages from the Dalai Lama and other Buddhist leaders around the world. Behind the landscape of realizing the restoration of nun discipline lays the great driving force of the activities of the International Association of Buddhist Women, otherwise known as *Sakyadhita*, which has a worldwide network.

However, this turn of events has various pros and cons in each region and highlights some basic issues confronting Buddhism in modern society. In this paper, I present the process of this restoration of the nun ordination ceremony and nun discipline, and how they reflect contemporary culture.

### I. *Situating the Issues*

Over the last few decades, modernization has resulted in rapid and extreme changes to our modes of living, ways of thinking and our values. These changes include continuing efforts to construct a meaningful empirical world.

With the passage of time and accumulation of experience, people create cultural representations and form common interpretations and cognitive understandings. Or perhaps it is the other way around—people who share common interpretations and cognitive understandings desire certain kinds of cultural representations. Elucidating the historical process of these phenomena became a major issue in the 1970s in neo-Marxism and structural functionalism, as well as symbolic anthropology. The 1980s ushered in a power differential as well as the rhetoric of superiority and inferiority in the processes by which interpretation and cognition are formed. And furthermore, the concepts of shared or common came to be disparaged as

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illusions, and the basis for the existence of others and self was shaken to the core, resulting in critical anthropology and cultural criticism. Furthermore, these maintain that everyone exists without their own authentic roots or their own fixed place to live, and the culture of the contemporary world is in a predicament.

While it is doubtful that such extreme theories that suggest everything is in the process of being uprooted will be applicable to all phenomena, there has been strong recognition in recent years that fixed historical views and cultural understandings are in fact fictions. Culture and values are constructed and deconstructed by the people who represent them and by the amassing of power. In the 1990s in anthropology, culture itself began to be regarded as a floating object, and the concept of culture itself requires careful discussion, even if until now there have been common understandings and diverse definitions of it.

I argue that the following two issues and approaches are productive for further discussions in anthropology by escaping from the exhaustive arguments of the overwhelming self-criticism of the concept of culture by critical anthropologists. The first issue is the problem of system and structure. In cultural criticism, the area of inquiry only receives meaning when it incorporates how people actually perceive reality and construct their daily lives and how they maintain that space for living. Therefore culture needs to be reexamined by focusing on the issues of the interrelationship of system and structure or, in other words, the intertwining of political, economic and social activities and the stratification of individuals, groups and nations in the expansion of time and the layers space.

The second issue is how other- and self-representation relates to cultural representation, how people perceive others and different groups, and how they create their own self-image. This is not just an interpersonal issue, but is also a process between various constituents ranging from arbitrary choices to decision-making organizations. Examples include entities from ethnic/language groups, schools, local communities and religious groups, to corporations, NGOs, states and international organizations.

Culture and religion share many of the same characteristics. If culture is taken as a motion that always generates and renovates meanings even though it is incomplete, especially in terms of religion as a part of culture, then it consists of a knowledge system and a professional system that presents, retains and generates a particular set of values with its primary object being to seek and realize this set of values.

As pointed out by Gupta and Ferguson, we can no longer examine cultures as cutout pieces of a world map that can each be painted a uniform color and considered a homogenous self-contained unit. They claim that the conventional so-called “holistic” cultural explanations, as well as the concept of a “unified culture” are no more than fictions (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). By adopting their argument about the concept of culture, the exact same point can be made about the concept of religion.

Conventional anthropology has uncritically accepted such terms of religion as “Nuer religion” or “Sinhalese Buddhists’ cosmology” as phenomenon that exist homogeneously and coherently. However, Asad criticized its perception of religions as “a distinctive space of human practice and belief that cannot be reduced to any other” (Asad 1993, p.27). In other words, he critiques the idea that a single ethnic group or culture has its own characteristic religion that coherently embodies the value system of a particular social group or social structure such that the individual person can be coherently explained. On this point even Geertz’s concept of religion as a cultural system cannot escape this criticism.

Instead, the concept of culture always took on local nuances as being isolated from civilization, contributing to recognition of the originality of the cultures of non-western societies. Religion, as an object of research, is a modern concept established by the West, which still preserves some unquestioned assumption that western religion or the western approach to religion is higher ranked according to such attributes as rationalization, professionalization, and institutionalization than non-western religions.

The sphere of religion, which has managed to escape from the aforementioned cultural critique, now appears to us as an object of study grounded in a more concrete and realistic space of arguments because religion is a space in which two motions intermingle. One is to generate abstract values, which are an indispensable resource for religion. The other is motion that requires interaction between the community of specialists and teachings that maintain these values, and the institutions that support them, such as actual social and economic systems of people, information, capitals and goods. Therefore, if the concept of religion is to move beyond the non-critical study, and be placed in the realm of the “predicament” that culture is facing, then religion as a cultural sphere could be much more richly developed in regards to the system and representation.

## II. *The Globalization of Religion: The Buddhism of Today*

The Buddhist community is one of the oldest communities that has transnational characteristics from the time of its origin. In today’s world, with the mass movement of people and information and the wide dissemination of various phenomena, the transnational attributes of Buddhist activities and doctrines have also been stimulated.

### 1. **Religion and Systems: Following the Flow of Homelessness**

Gupta and Ferguson describe the conditions inherent in the de-regionalization of culture as “a generalized condition of homelessness (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, p.37).” Refugees, migrants, displaced and stateless people are practitioners of this condition. It is not difficult to include religious practitioners among them. Buddhist clergies who are called *Pabbajja* in Pali, *Syukke* in Japanese are literally a group of people who have renounced “home”, which symbolizes the life of lay people, and become “homeless.” The Buddha and Christ also renounced home, spending their lives traveling until the end of their lives. In recent years, the mobility of clergy remarkably increased since the time of Buddha and Christ (Rudolph and Piscatori 1997).

All the so-called “great religions,” share the characteristic of containing a universal message even though they have developed from regional peculiarities. Based in the context of the particular conditions burdening a particular nation or ethnic group, these religions generate a universal message that spans beyond ethnicity and culture, or indeed beyond even historicity. Tambiah points out that the only religions that have lived on as great religions up to the present are those that have been able to accept and produce the various interpretations that reflect regional characteristics and eras, demonstrate “conditional truths” suited to the conditions, and delineate “universal truths” that transcend time and space.

Also, however, when religious practitioners cross borders they put down roots wherever

they land in order to re-territorialize. Unless they are ascetic hermits living isolated in nature, a monk builds another home, even if it is temporary. These “homes” take many forms, such as Buddhist temples, monasteries retreats, meditation centers, organic farms, cooperatives, hospices, and so forth. This means that they are caught in the dilemma that in order to continue to live in a condition of homelessness, they need to develop other types of socioeconomic resources and organizational networks. In this way Buddhism, which essentially contains a two-fold logic of practices of de-regionalization and re-territorialization, shows the complicated entanglements resulting from the deepening of this tendency under contemporary cultural conditions.

Appadurai analyzed five types of global cultural flows. These are flows of people, technology, finance, the media, and ideologies. To each of these keywords he added the suffix “-scape” in order to signify that these flows have an irregular movement and form that spreads like a fluid, and to signify that all of these perform as actors in an unrolling scene of groups and movements related to nation-states, multiethnic groups, diasporic organizations, religions, politics and economics. They are ethnoscape: the landscape of shifting persons who constitute the shifting world; technoscape: the landscape of the fact that technology and highly skilled labor move at high speeds across various types of boundaries; financescape: the landscape of the diversification of global capital; mediascape: the landscape of both the distribution of electronic technologies to produce and disseminate information and the images of the world created by these media; ideoscape: the constantly changing landscape of political ideologies and ideologies of nation-states, and the counter-ideologies, the meanings of which are translated depending on the context of the purposes of its proponents, local traditions, etc.

While Appadurai attributes a semantic role to these flows in opposition to the predictability of regularity as in the global economic system, he is not saying that they are completely unregulated, aimless, and non-standard phenomena. I argued that this leads us to the next challenge, which is how to understand the flows in contexts. This, in turn, gives rise to the following two issues. One is the accumulated importance of history or rather experience and memory that gives the flow a certain directionality. The other is the subjectivity of the flow in that they encompass such actors as individuals, groups, and organizations. These actors play not merely passive roles in the flow. To the contrary, it is impossible to ignore the incentive of the actors toward making rational choices and willful decisions (Ashiwa 1995, p.4).

In regard to the foregoing concern of religion and approaches to issues of cultural overlap in specific manners, I argue that religion should be reevaluated and reexamined in the layering of concrete social structures and systems within the expansion of time and the layers of space. Within this significance, the conditions surrounding the modern day movements of the clergies and their creativity of teachings and practice of religion show the landscape of contemporary culture as a system of new modality.

## **2. Religion and Cultural Representation: Christianity and Eastern Religions**

One more approach to the problem of culture and religion is that of representation. No other situation causes the activation of cultural representation as much as contact with different religions. In Asia, from the latter half of the nineteenth century in the context of Asian colonialism there was the budding of resistance movements and cultural revival movements. Central to these movements was the revival and/or modernization of traditional religions, or in

other words, indigenous systems and modalities of belief. During this period, western religious practitioners, scholars and intellectuals also deepened their interest in Asian religions as legitimate “religions” that could be positioned as equal to Christianity. In 1894 at the Chicago World’s Fair there was an exhibit of The World’s Parliament of Religions where for the first time non-western religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism were presented alongside Christianity. This is a remarkable indication of the turning point at that time of the consciousness of people, both in the West and the “enlightened” East.

However, this mutual exchange of the images of each was complicated. It was a two-way undertaking and multi-layered inter-reflections of other- and self-representations.

The World’s Parliament of Religions was made possible by progressive American Christians, religious scholars who were educated in European Orientalism, and the activities of the Theosophical Society, of which Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James were members. The Asian religious practitioners who were invited were radical enlightened thinkers, pragmatists and reformists who already had some connections with Christians in their own countries and their immigrant communities in western societies. Among these, the Sri Lankan representative, Anagarika Dharmapala, had studied under the first office of the Theosophical Society in Sri Lanka and was a proponent of Sinhalese nationalism and the Buddhist reform movement, which is interestingly referred to as “Protestant Buddhism” by Obeyeskere (Obeyesekere 1970). Dharmapala established the Buddhist Sunday school, *daham pasala*, at temples, created a Buddhist flag, printed and published great quantities of colloquial translations of sutras, and advocated strict asceticism and the renunciation of superstitions, clearly imitating the proselytizing tactics and pragmatic spirit of Protestant Christianity. Also, the social and religious status that he created of *Anagarika* to refer to a Buddhist ascetic intellectual who was neither a monk nor a layman was indeed an introduction of the secularization and popularization of Buddhism through modern rationalism.

In a similar fashion to the western interest in Asian Buddhism as the product of a combination of the Enlightenment with a critique of Christian civilization, the Asian Buddhist revivalist movement also reproduced the spirit of Christian modern rationalism even while being full of Enlightenment consciousness that called for a sweeping away of irrational traditions from Buddhism. Despite this, the Asian Buddhists, with their “eastern wisdom and mysticism,” enthralled western intellectuals who were troubled by the contradictions of Christian society’s enlightened rationalism and their old authoritarianism. And here can be seen a multi-layered folding repetition of the images of self and other, and their representations that hold true for modernity (Malalgoda 1976, Tweed 1992). Sharp writes concisely about the other-cognition incorporated into the expression of Zen as introduced to western society:

All of those Asian intellectuals who received western educations expressed their own spiritual heritage as archetypes of civilized (enlightened), scientific, rational, humane, universal religions based on direct experience with the Holy Spirit. The contemporary concept of Religion as a topic of scholarly research in comparative culture is undoubtedly a direct product of this dialogue. And within that dialogue, the western scholars were seeking a consistent fundamentally true religion, but what they found and believed was a projection of that face-to-face debate with Asia (Sharf 1995, p.105).

The Buddhism sought by western scholars and practitioners was actually the same Buddhism that Asian scholars who were modernists had attempted to reform into a more modern religion

than Christianity. However, it is also true that the western scholars and practitioners only really borrowed Buddhism to discover what it was that they themselves wanted to find.

Today, Asian religions are burgeoning with a heretofore unseen momentum (Queen and King 1996, MacInnis 1989, Keyes et al. 1995, Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). The modernization of religion at the end of the nineteenth century was a movement conducted by a limited number of elites, and from around the time of independence of Asian countries, amid waves of domestic nationalism, religion has played the role of connecting state leaders with their masses as a nation through religio-nationalism. Now, however, within the context of globalization, again the issue of reciprocal other-representations between Asia and the West has appeared, this time with new characteristics. This issue is now something that individual believers are directly related to, and have to make choices about in their individual lives.

The so-called Asian religions nowadays have two significant manifestations. One is the traditional religions practiced in Asian regions, and the other is the religions that started in Asia have now taken hold in the West, where they differ from those in the late nineteenth century Asia. Buddhism is now trying to adapt to each society in Asia and the West, providing practical activities required in everyday life, and also has in many ways become a part of the daily scene in the West as well. This has given rise to conditions that cannot be further separated in geographical space.

For example, in Asia it is impossible to ignore the influence of the importation of western Buddhism back to Asia. Buddhism is now practiced as the modern health oriented life style, such as daily meditation for mental training, and vegetarianism, which are popular among the urban middle class in Asia. Also socially engaged Buddhism, which is deeply concerned with environmental and social issues, and Buddhism for self-discipline are promoted by intellectuals in Asia, who have been educated in the West or by the western style of education. In the United States, the Buddhism spread by white intellectuals has been called "missionary Buddhism," while the Buddhism brought by the Asian Buddhist communities is termed "ethnic Buddhism." Especially since the end of the Vietnam War, increasing numbers of immigrants and refugees from Asian Buddhist countries to the United States have brought their own religions and, while adapting to American culture, have continued to practice their Buddhism as much as possible just like they did back in the home country. However even ethnic Buddhism, just like back in the home country, was not "original" Buddhism, but influenced by the nineteenth century reform of Buddhism, and now it is also being influenced by American Buddhism as well. Furthermore, although missionary Buddhism still mostly consists of the white educated class, and is still seeking an authentic essence in Asian Buddhism, it is strongly recognized in the United States as creating a new Buddhism to fit the needs of the modern world.

In spite of the changes to the map of Buddhism in the world today with the multi reflections of representations of self and others in different scenes and locations, the scholarly research and the recognition by practitioners has not followed this situation yet. However, recently there have begun to appear statements from western religious practitioners concerned with these issues, and criticism on the state of religious studies based on concern for cultural criticism from the non-western view points (Fields 1994, Hori 1994, Kawahashi 1998). Interestingly, they all point out in different ways that even if the map of Buddhism today is changed, the structure of hegemony of western white society regarding Asia and people of other ethnic groups continues to exist on the basis of consciousness.

Today, Buddhist doctrines and practices in their relationship to the reality are being seriously reexamined and reconsidered. How does Buddhism consider and act on the many problems facing society, such as development, poverty, AIDS, ethnic/racial conflicts and discrimination against women. In the following sections, I examine, as mentioned above, the contemporary cultural landscape in which the revival of the ordination of Buddhist nuns is occurring. In this landscape, there is a network primarily consisting of transnational Buddhist women, the support and backing of the *sangha*, which conducts activities spanning many countries, and the growth of Buddhist women intellectuals in various Asian countries. Here there is a nodal point that provides a connection between the Buddhism that is gradually permeating western society and the new image of Asian Buddhism that is being modernized but still considered as authentic.

### III. *The Revival of Nun Discipline and Sakyadhita*

#### 1. **The History of Buddhist Nuns and Nun Discipline**

The nun monastic community founded by the Buddha was brought to Sri Lanka in the third century B.C. by Sanghamitta, a Buddhist nun who was King Asoka's daughter, along with a branch from the bodhi tree under which the Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment. In Sri Lanka, the bodhi tree is an important symbol of faith for the people. People offer water to bodhi trees, and rest and pray under their shade. In folk religion the tree is likened to motherhood because of the milky white sap that flows from it. The importance of the role of Buddhist nuns is symbolized in the oral tradition that the bodhi tree, Buddhism's most sacred icon, and the symbol of motherhood, was brought to the island by a Buddhist nun along with the nun discipline.

According to Chinese records, in the year 429 of the Song Dynasty several nuns came from Sri Lanka to China by sea, and in Nanjing in the year 434, more than 300 were initially ordained as nuns by these Sri Lankan nuns. But later in Sri Lanka around the eleventh century, the kingdoms and monastic communities were destroyed and as a result the nun discipline ceased to exist. In Burma and Thailand as well around the thirteenth century the nun discipline became obsolete for the same reasons. Today, there are nun disciplines in Mahayana Buddhism in China, Korea, Taiwan and Japan, but they have completely ceased to exist in the Theravada Buddhism of Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, and in the Tibetan traditions. However, in the countries that practice Theravada Buddhism, there has developed a special status of Buddhist women who adhere to the ten precepts and have basically the same lifestyle as Buddhist nuns although they are not fully ordained as Buddhist nuns. Consequently, there are many female practitioners who fit somewhere between laywomen and Buddhist nuns in each of their own cultures' disparate social or religious contexts, but who are living without joining the Buddhist monks' monastic community.

In Myanmar female Buddhist practitioners called *thila shin*, of whom there are about 23,000, are respected by society and have several special Buddhist nunneries where training and education occur and, furthermore, they can take the Pali Sutra examination just like Buddhist monks. But the *mae chi* of Thailand, of whom there are more than 10,000, have a marginal position both socially and religiously, and without a guaranteed place or opportunity to practice

they do the cleaning and cooking at Buddhist monasteries. Sri Lanka's *dasa sil mata* (ten-precepts woman), of whom there are more than 6,000, as in Myanmar are basically respected by society and also perform Buddhist rituals.<sup>1</sup> In this way, the position of Buddhist women reflects the distinctiveness of each region. But even within a single society, depending on conditions treatment of them is not uniform. The growing recognition that this disparity is due to the fact that this group of Buddhist women does not have certification as fully ordained Buddhist nuns has led to a growing demand for the reactivation of nun discipline.

At the ordination ceremony called as *upasampada*, monks receive some 250 precepts, but in the case of nuns, in addition to the *upasampada*, they receive another some 350 nun precepts and, they are also required to study as female novices, *sikkhamana* for two years prior to their *upasampada*.

## 2. The Formation of *Sakyadhita*

In 1987 the International Association of Buddhist Women (IABW), also called *Sakyadhita* (meaning "Daughters of the Buddha") in the Pali language (hereafter referred to as SD), was formed in Bodhgaya in India by a consortium of Asian and western female Buddhist practitioners, laywomen and scholars of Buddhism together with some Buddhist monks and laymen. SD played the most important role in the revival of the nun discipline. The goals of SD were adopted as follows at the first meeting.<sup>2</sup>

1. The fostering of world peace through Buddhist teachings.
2. The creation of a network of communication for Buddhist women.
3. The facilitation of harmony and understanding among the various Buddhist traditions.
4. The promotion of education for women to study, practice, and teach Buddhism.
5. The improvement of facilities for women to study and practice Buddhism.
6. To support the revival of nun ordination in the Theravada tradition, which has since become obsolete.

The first chairperson was Chatsuman Kabilsingh. The vice chair was Ayya Khema and Jampa Tsedroen. The secretary position was filled by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, and Rita Gross was the treasurer.

It was reported in the *SD Newsletter* that "the themes put forth at the meeting were done so with a strong feeling of solidarity. If ordained Buddhist nuns, laywomen and priestesses work together as one, there is no limit to the contribution that can be made to society and to Buddhism. The things uniting us are more precious than the things dividing us".

Since then, this international conference has been held once every two years in various

<sup>1</sup> Lay persons usually follow five precepts; to refrain from stealing, incorrect speech, killing living things that breathe, chastity and taking intoxicants). *Thila shins* and *dasa sil matas* follow ten precepts which are the five precepts plus the following five precepts; to refrain from 1) taking food at inappropriate times (after noon), 2) sitting on high chairs and sleeping on luxurious, soft beds, 3) singing, dancing, playing music or attending entertainment programs (performances), 4) wearing perfume, cosmetics and garland (decorative accessories) and 5) accepting money.

<sup>2</sup> Most contents of SD's activities mentioned in this paper are the extracts from the *Sakyadhita Newsletter* issued by IABW. In addition, information was acquired from the papers that mention the IABW, an interview with the present chairman of the IABW in March 1998, the website of the IABW, email exchanges with a nun, Tsomo, a secretary of the IABW, etc.



Buddhist countries and sites in Asia.

### 3. The Characteristics of *Sakyadhita*

Among the characteristics of SD as an organization, the following three points can be identified. The first is the attributes of the participants and members, the second is the structure of the shifting conference, and the third is the message of the conference.

The first point is that the main players in the activities are a class of intellectual women from both Asia and the West who can communicate in English as a lingua franca, while SD gets its strength from each person's network that spans beyond their religious sect. These women have an abundance of achievements and experiences in Asia, as well as Europe and America, where they have concrete individual experiences in the actual state of affairs of Buddhist women and have developed their own independent networks. The coalescence of their experiences and networks is the greatest resource of the SD movement.

For example, Chatsuman Kabilsingh, the first chairwoman, was the daughter of a famous Thai Buddhist nun. After studying Buddhist philosophy at universities in India, Canada and Thailand, she became a professor at Thammasat University. She has published many writings on Buddhism, and was a central figure in the movement to improve the position of the *mae chi* (Buddhist laywomen in Thailand). Her mother, Voramai Kabilsingh, established the first women's temple in Thailand. Voramai poured her energy into teaching *mae chis* and improving their educational conditions, and later in Taiwan received the nun discipline from Buddhist nuns of the Mahayana tradition to become a fully ordained nun herself. Although Chatsumarn was a laywoman, she was a most avid activist in the revival of nun ordinations and discipline (Bames 1996, p.269). Later she was ordained as a nun in Sri Lanka.

The vice chair, Ayya Khema, is also a model example of a western female practitioner who spent many years in Asia. Khema was a German-born American who became a *dasa sil mata* in Sri Lanka in the 1970s, and later collaborated with other *dasa sil matas* there to establish a Buddhist school for female students in the south of Sri Lanka. She earned the respect of the people, and was recognized by the Sri Lankan government as a western *dasa sil mata*. She was also an active supporter of the revival of the nun monastic community (Bartholomeusz 1994, p.146-147).

The treasurer Rita Gross is a professor of comparative religion at the University of Wisconsin. Raised in a Christian environment, after converting to Judaism she encountered and then began practicing Tibetan Buddhism. She is the leading academic theorist on the connection between feminism and Buddhism, and has written many publications (Boucher 1993, p.52-59).

While there were some intellectual women involved in the Buddhist reform movement in the nineteenth century as well, their numbers were few, and most were members of the upper or upper middle class. In the case of SD, the number of participants and the leverage and sphere of influence of each has increased, as well as the speed and independence of actions and information, which differ remarkably from a century ago. Furthermore, each person's cultural and informational resources are pooled together for the common consciousness of Buddhist women beyond Buddhist sectarian differences, resulting in SD's great strength as an association. Also, even within the existing monastic community, we cannot ignore the fact that transnational activities are underway in Taiwan and Korea and there is support being received from the sects of Tibetan Buddhism as well. The support for SD from the Dalai Lama, the leader of Tibetan

Buddhism who himself has embodied a traveling “center” since leaving Tibet and who is popular and trusted in the West, gives the SD movement social and religious legitimacy and authority. Furthermore, Shin Yung, who was the abbot of the Fo Guang Shan Temple in Kaohsiung, Taiwan has also supported it. It has a number of branches such as the Fo Guang Shan Hsi Lai Temple in Los Angeles, which is one of the largest Buddhist temples in the United States with its complex of university, hostels, community center, museum and hospital. They have a huge overseas Chinese network that deepens political ties between Taiwan and the United States. Their support of SD is not one-sided. For Tibetan Buddhism and Fo Guang Shan Temple, who recognize that the efforts of women are essential to expanding the sphere of activities worldwide, to help the activities of SD is to gain a place that clearly demonstrates to the world their support for Buddhist women.

The second point is that SD does not have a fixed geographic base, and every two years the location of the conference shifts, a condition that contributes to continuation and growth. This format most clearly demonstrates that the SD movement is a contemporary cultural system without a fixed center of a physical place, but one that shifts and is equally open to the world. SD also has no aims to establish a headquarters office or special temples or permanent training institutes. The biennial conference itself provides the sole space for activating the network and its advocacy. There the members realize the visualization, confirmation, replenishment and revitalization of the energy for action. Moreover, the conference is not in the same place every time, but shifts each time to places connected to Buddhism. Preparing for and holding the conference are the responsibility of the local members where it is convened, in cooperation with the committee. Since the first conference was held in Bodhgaya, they have been held in Bangkok, Thailand (second conference, 1991), Colombo, Sri Lanka (third conference, 1993), Ladakh, India (fourth conference, 1995) and Phnom Penh, Cambodia (fifth conference, 1997). The next conference, the fourteenth one, will be held in Yogyakarta, Indonesia in 2015.

This conference has similar characteristics to those of the “traveling kingship”, which was a traditional style of kingship in various regions, such as Africa, Central Asia and medieval Europe. Neither has a fixed place nor territory, the center is always shifting to successive other places, and they only stay for a moment in one place, presenting themselves through ceremonies, conferences, and other performances held in a mood of festivity that invite the local dwellers to attend. In this manner they induce people to recognize their legitimacy and assertiveness. In the case of SD, the conference is the stage where the chair and board members are selected, nominations are made, there is a recap of activities and a determination of its future direction, all of which result in the revelation and reproduction of the center. Ultimately, this gathering of over a hundred western and Asian Buddhist women, each clad in their various robes and distinct vestments, is a sight to behold. It is a conference with the landscape of a traveling pageant from one town to another, replete with semiotic functions.

The conference is held for about 10 days, with the first day opening ceremony beginning with the chanting of the *tripitaka* and devotion to the three noble truths by all in attendance. Congratulatory addresses are read by organizers from the religious and political spheres of the host country. In the case of Thailand, this would be the supreme monk of the monastery (*sangaraja*) of Thailand, while in Sri Lanka it would be the President of Sri Lanka, while the Dalai Lama might talk at any conference. Then an invited guest speaker delivers the keynote speech. These endorsements from the secular and the religious worlds are an extremely effective way to advocate for the legitimacy of the content of the conference and promote the

activities of SD. On the second day there are annual reports of activities, and from the third day workshops on various themes start and run for several days. This is followed by educational sightseeing tours to such places as local famous Buddhist temples, Buddhist ruins, etc. During the conference, participants are required to lodge and dine together. Every morning there is meditation in the style of each denomination, then meals are taken together, so there are many other opportunities for exchanges, sharing opinions, etc., in addition to the actual meetings. All of this accomplishes the first two of the aforementioned goals of SD.

For the members, who normally obtain information through newsletters and the Internet, the conference is of great significance, enabling them to concretely experience the movement. For participants from western countries, this is an excellent opportunity for them to observe and understand the history and current conditions of Asian Buddhism and the local conditions of Buddhist women. Also many of the participants are Buddhist women from the host country who rarely have the chance to have an impact on the thinkings of foreign Buddhist women. Therefore, the conference provides a good opportunity for Asian Buddhist women intellectual leaders to update their knowledge and networks, as well as to “educate” and “enlighten” their local Buddhist women through the acts and words of foreign Buddhist women from various countries.

As there is plenty of endorsement and interest generated through the congratulatory addresses and other opening activities, they are widely reported in the local media such as television, newspapers and magazines, thereby spreading the message of SD in the host country. The media also actively report on the conference as it proceeds.

In this way the conference creates multiple relationships of “see” and “be seen” between the participants and the host country and among the participants themselves. The relatively long duration of the conference at around ten days is an interesting amount of time. It is sufficiently long for people to get to know each other through practices of discussions, ceremonies, and living together, while too short for them to become the focus of locally problematic issues if they had.

The advocacy and discussions conducted at the conference range from such things as radical issues shaking traditional Buddhism to issues explicitly indicating the problems facing the Buddhist world in the host country. In general, the conference has a strong impact on both the participants and on the society of the host country, but it ends and disappears before much local opposition or criticism towards it can emerge. Seen from the SD standpoint, just holding the conference in itself strengthens the legitimacy and activities of SD in the host country, and so the holding of the conference is considered to be a initiation for admission into the SD territory of discourse and practice.<sup>3</sup>

In this way the activities and meanings of SD are synonymous with its annual conference that is held in various countries in Asia. After the conference ends, the conference program and content of discussions are posted on homepages and announced in newsletters. This is generally summed up as follows: “The issues touched upon at the conference will continue to be discussed in newsletters and publications. Buddhist nuns and laywomen around the world gleaned confidence and spiritual strength from the conference. On the national and regional

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<sup>3</sup> Other themes of the workshops, for example at the SD conference in Colombo, were “Maintaining Human Value in a Time of Rapid Change,” “Dharma in Family Life,” “Challenges in Monastic Life Today,” “Self-transformation Through Buddhist Meditation,” “Women, Buddhism, and the World Community,” etc.

level, these women will continue to contribute to the social activism projects in their own communities with gusto.” In this way, without having a concrete home base, but backed by a wide network, the space of the conference will be expanded gradually by connecting each location where the conference is held at regular intervals. The holding of the conference and the messages sent out during the conference are the content and space of activities.

The third point is that one of the main characteristics of SD is its strong platform for critically presenting the crux of issues directly facing modern Buddhism. This attitude toward confronting issues is connected to Enlightenment in the important fourth item on the list of goals laid out at the establishment of SD, “The promotion of education for women to study, practice, and teach Buddhism.” The overall themes of the conference so far, such as “Women and the Power of Compassion: Survival in the 21st Century” (Ladakh, India), “The Power of Buddhist Women” (Bangkok, Thailand), “Buddhist Women in Modern Society” (Sri Lanka), and “Women in Buddhism: Unity and Diversity” (Cambodia), are all concerned with the reconsideration of the relationship between women and Buddhism.

Furthermore, the workshops always take up issues that are relevant to the locale of the conference host. In the case of Cambodia, the reports entitled “Diverse Approaches to Peace and Social Action” and “Women and Engaged Buddhism” suggested how Buddhism could contribute to peace and social reconstruction after many years of conflict and war. The same is true for other reports such as “Rebuilding Buddhism in Cambodia: An Historical Perspective,” “From Angkor to New York: Cambodian Buddhist Laywomen in the New World,” etc. In Sri Lanka, which has been wracked by long-standing ethnic conflict, there had been some criticism of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism but not an open debate about Buddhism’s responsibility for the ethnic violence. At the SD conference held in Sri Lanka a number of important reports were made on the common theme of “Peace and Conflict Resolution in a Threatened World.” In this way, SD moves beyond only highlighting women’s issues to cast powerful messages to society and to Buddhism as a whole. At the center of these messages is the most symbolic yet practical demand outlined at the time of its establishment that makes SD unique; the revival of nun ordination and discipline in Theravada Buddhism.

#### IV. *Situation and Reactions to Restoration of Nun Ordination*

##### 1. **History and Background of the Revival of Nun Discipline**

In Sri Lanka there is a conventionally accepted status for female Buddhist practitioners, *dasa sil mata* (ten-precept women). This was created by the women of the wealthy class who played a central role under the leadership of Anagarika Dharmapala in the early twentieth century for the purpose of “Establishing a Buddhist women community similar to that of Christian nuns.” Although the majority of the applicants since then have changed from middle and upper class women to poorer women from rural villages, the social status of *dasa sil mata* had been socially and culturally accepted. However, there was strong opposition from the monastic community to the restoration of nun ordination and discipline, and it had been a controversial issue from the outset (Bartholomeusz 1994, p.10, 110, 111).

This restoration of nun discipline in Theravada Buddhism has been the focus of discussion from the time of reformation and modernization of Buddhism in every Buddhist community

and country in Asia. Especially in Sri Lanka, there have been long-standing debates over the pros and cons of the restoration of nun discipline. Therefore, there was already tension between SD and Sri Lankan Buddhism from the stage of the preparation of the third SD Conference in Colombo.

The Buddha Sasana Committee, the largest laymen group of Buddhist devotees in Sri Lanka, and the Ministry of Buddhism, concerned that the issue of nun discipline might create rifts between laymen and laywomen and within the monastic community, made an offer of support to the SD conference on the condition that there would be no mention of the topic of the restoration of nun discipline. The preparatory committee of the third SD conference criticized the condition and resolutely refused it. Finally, with the support from the president of Sri Lanka, Dingiri Banda Wijetunga, the SD conference was successfully held. *SD Newsletter* reported that active “enlightening” discussions were held during the 1993 conference.<sup>4</sup>

On March 12, 1998, Sri Lankan women who had been formally ordained as nuns at Bodhgaya, India started to bestow the nun ordination on some twenty Buddhist women at a temple in Dambulla, Sri Lanka. This ordination restored the first nun discipline in Sri Lanka. This event was widely reported in the media, together with the images of the nuns. However, since this ordination was independently planned by some Buddhist monks and SD members, it was not approved by any monastic orders in Sri Lanka.<sup>5</sup>

On April 8, 1998, an emergency meeting of the existing Buddhist establishment at Kandy was held that issued a public announcement of strong opposition to the restoration of nun discipline. The representatives of this meeting were archbishops of monastic orders, regional chief monks and the presidents of Buddhist universities. They visited the new President of Sri Lanka, Chandrika Kumaratunga to hand her a letter requesting her judgment as a president of the greatest supporter of Buddhism, as to whether she officially approved the introduction of nun discipline.

## 2. Arguments and Actions regarding the Restoration of Nun Discipline

Regarding the restoration of nun discipline, various agencies discussed and took actions

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<sup>4</sup> The pros and cons of arguments over the restoration of nuns discipline generate controversies in the society, especially in Sri Lanka, but not so much in such other Buddhist countries as Thailand and Myanmar. The reason is considered as follows; in the process of the organization of the modern state, Thailand succeeded in the centralization of monastic communities all over the country with the topmost monk, *Sangaraja*. However, since the restoration of nuns discipline is the issue in the unified monastic community as the highest decision-making organization, other Buddhist monks or lay persons cannot directly participate in its decision. Moreover, *mae chi* themselves are conventional existence and they are not the existence “which should be taken up” relevant to the reform of Buddhism. Therefore, even if there are calls for the restoration of nun discipline, it is in the situation where any authorization cannot be made effective until the unified monastic community makes a final decision. However, there are some Buddhist sects in Sri Lanka, but there are no monastic systems that unify the monastic communities all over the country. As a result, it is difficult to unify opinions concerning an independent monastic community’s innovative event. We also have to remember that the special status of *dasa sil mata* was justified and socially and culturally accepted by people because of the fact that it was created and supported by Dharmapala, a promoter of the revival and reform of Buddhism, and needed by people at that time. Therefore, although a gap between the system which makes the restoration of nuns discipline possible and its meaning was structurally predictable, and, if their performance is socially accepted with the protections by the famous Buddhist leaders, nuns will gradually become a significant part of the landscape of Buddhism in Sri Lanka for a through discussion of the nuns’ situation in Myanmar (Kawanami 2013).

<sup>5</sup> *Daily News*, March 14 1998, p.1, Sri Lanka, etc.

according to their respective attributes and intentions. Supporters of the restoration of nun ordination showed their strong expectation that this movement would encourage people to reconsider related fundamental issues of modern Buddhism. These issues are:

1. Issues of the status of women in the modern monastic community; if Buddhist women enter the monastic community, they will be governed by the monastic community's regulations and customary rules. In particular one of the eight precepts that nuns have to follow demands their obedience to monks. This precept says that even a senior nun has to obey the most recently ordained monk. This precept is still imposed on nuns in most Buddhist communities despite the understanding among modernist clergies and believers that it was created in the social and historical context of the time when Buddha lived, and is not applicable in the modern era. Consequently, the restoration of nun discipline will assure the formal religious status of fully ordained nuns as being equal to monks, but bring another discrimination against women within the framework of precepts, that will not result in the improvement of the status of Buddhist women.
2. Antinomy of agenda for clergy between individual enlightenment and relief of society and people; the people who support the restoration of nun discipline expect nuns to positively enter into social service activities utilizing the caring nature of women. However, the discipline of the Theravada tradition emphasizes the importance of clergy maintaining a detachment from this world, and practicing self-discipline. How does modern Buddhism enable a balance between the pursuit of individual enlightenment and the commitment to social relief?
3. Issues of the difference between clergy and the lay devotee; the restoration of the nun discipline will subordinate female Buddhist lay devotees and *dasa sil mata*, even though some are more committed to the practice of Buddhist teachings than the Buddhist nuns. Throughout the history of Buddhism, often lay devotees were more knowledgeable and pious than the clergy. In the modern period, what is the religious and social boundary between clergy and lay people, and how is its validity established and maintained?

These issues have been addressed as serious concerns for the reformation of Buddhism in contemporary society. The restoration of the nun discipline shows these issues again in the related outcomes.

Despite these issues and criticism, fully ordained Buddhist nuns gradually started to appear in Sri Lankan society. After the first group was ordained at Dambulla, the controversy over the pros and cons of the restoration of the nun discipline started, aside from these fundamental issues. Famous Buddhist monks and scholars began to debate in the media. Summaries of the supporters' and opponents' positions are as follows:

Supporters' opinions:

1. Nun discipline will lead to the prosperity of Buddhism since it revives a position that has been vacant among the four-group assembly established by the Buddha.<sup>6</sup>
2. Nuns can approach women in the Buddhist community, which is difficult for monks.
3. Nun discipline will open the path to attain the final nirvana for all women.

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<sup>6</sup> It refers to *Bhikkhus* (monk), *Bhikkhusni* (nun), *Upasakas* (laymen devotee) and *Upasikas* (laywomen devotee).

4. The restoration of nun discipline is an achievement that follows Dharmapala's wishes.
5. The restoration is a result of the feminist movement, which all societies respect.

Opposition party's opinions:

1. Since it is historical fact that suspension of nun discipline is the Buddha's will, its restoration is against the Buddha's will.
2. As the ordination was transferred by the Mahayana tradition to the Theravada tradition, it is not authentic and reflects the decline of Theravada Buddhism.
3. The restoration of nun discipline will result in divisions and conflicts in cleric communities and Buddhist society, which will lead to the decline of Buddhism.
4. Nun ordination was not conducted according to the correct procedures. For example, the creation of *sima* (sacred boundary) was not correct.<sup>7</sup>

Each party's opinions included various arguments on Buddhist doctrine, feminism, ordination procedures, etc., and their conclusions were not easily arrived at. However, the disclosure of these divergent opinions in some ways deepen people's understanding of Buddhism and have an effect gradually on preparing the way for the acceptance of nun ordination. When the issue of restoration shifted to religious authority and politics, the nature of the movement became rather different from the SD's initial purposes. Here I focus on a series of reactions to this nun ordination, such as those expressed in the letter to the Sri Lankan president, by examining the contents of the arguments expressed in the letter, and the relevant people's opinions to show how developments exceeded the intentions of SD.

Firstly, the action of the authorities of religious communities that rely on the judgment of the president, as the highest authority of the lay world to make final decisions on an incident that occurred in the monastic community, is a substantial request for *Kathikawata*. *Kathikawata* is the practice of reformation and regularization of monastery and its order by the authority of the king, which has been practiced by kings in Sri Lanka throughout history.<sup>8</sup> Purification of a Buddhist monastery is a privilege only permitted to the Buddhist king, and after the monastic community lost the Buddhist kingdom in the early nineteenth century, it had refused any intervention by the secular modern state into the monastic orders. However, this incident is considered an official announcement by the monastic community that the president, as the Buddhist king (in this case, it is queen as the president at that time was woman), protected Buddhism and its legitimacy. It shows how the weakened monastic community in modern times began to depend on secular power, approving the president, the supreme head of secular power democratically elected, as a blessed Buddhist king (queen), even though Sri Lanka has become a modern secular state. This constituted a significant turning point in the relationship between religion and the state in Sri Lanka.

Secondly, the restoration of the nun discipline has become ensnared in the political strategies of lay power. At that time, the president, Chandrika Kumaratunga had to convince the monastic community to support her policy towards the devolution of state power to solve the ethnic conflict. Since the monastic community asked the president to make the final decision,

<sup>7</sup> Regarding the argument surrounding the restoration of nun discipline, I received many suggestions and information from Professor Emeritus J.B. Dissanayake, University of Colombo.

<sup>8</sup> Through its history the monastic community has delegated the authority of purifying the monastic community to the Buddhist king. This authority is called *Kathikawata* (Ashiwa 1991).

the question of the restoration of nun discipline enabled her to use it as a political instrument for negotiating with the monastic community to support her policy. However, she was also expected to be at the forefront of female empowerment as a female president. If she refused to approve the restoration of the nun discipline according to requests from the monastic community and did not support the promotion of the women's position in religion, her reputation to rebuild her international credibility that was damaged by the ethnic conflict would have been seriously damaged once again. In this way, there was a context in which the pros and cons of the restoration of nun discipline were debated that had no direct relationship to the purposes and goals of SD but rather reflected the political circumstances of the state.

Thirdly, there was ambiguity in the relationship with foreign powers. It is clear that the restoration of the nun discipline could not be realized without the support of foreign networks. However, the chief monk of the Buddhist monastery in Dambulla, who had started the nun ordination, announced in the newspapers that he only wanted to help the sincere and pious Buddhist women to realize their wish, and he had no relationship with any NGOs, which were widely seen as an encroachment of western neoimperialism in Sri Lanka. In other words, he made a pre-emptive move to prevent opponents of the restoration of the nun discipline from linking it to western neoimperialism by declaring that the restoration of the nun discipline was not due to external pressure from foreign NGOs including SD.

The Sri Lankan people have been ambivalent about foreign relations, on the one hand strongly oriented towards having a good reputation and influence from abroad, while, on the other, refusing foreign involvement in internal affairs since colonial times, and even after their independence. In Sri Lanka these ambivalent mentalities and attitudes are entwined with practical considerations, and refracted in a complex fashion in politics and culture. For instance, Sri Lankans are proud of their country's abundant natural resources of beaches and mountains and its rich history as represented in Buddhist ruins. They strongly wish to use these resources to promote tourism in order to attract foreign tourists and currency. At the same time, they wish to counter the dilution of traditional values, the inflow of western values, and the commodification of Buddhism. The contradictions of maintaining self-respect and seeking the esteem of foreign countries contribute to an ongoing complexity. In this regard the ethnic riots of 1983 were an important watershed. The majority Sinhala Buddhist community received much international criticism for attacking the minority Tamil community, which is mostly Hindu and had demanded a separate state. Consequently from that time, the Sri Lankans started to be more aware that they were being watched by the international community, and sought to restore self respect. These contradictions are also seen in the reactions of the monastic community and people to the restoration of nun discipline. Therefore, the strategy of the supporters of restoration was a complex one that sought to encourage Sri Lankans to consider that the restoration was a domestic issue that was decided voluntarily by Sri Lankans without being influenced by external power, while at the same time applying a constant pressure on domestic public opinion by positing the restoration as an international issue.

Although the restoration of the nun discipline raised fundamental issues concerning modern Buddhism that began as a controversy among Sri Lankan intellectuals, and highlighted political and cultural issues, the reactions of most Sri Lankans were to keep observing the unfolding of the issue without commenting. Especially in the villages, where there is widespread disappointment and criticism of Buddhist monks due to perceived deterioration of their quality regarding piety and dedication, villagers still warmly welcome respectable monks



and nuns visiting their village, and to stay with them if they are perceived good. However, while all villagers know the customs and manners such as proper language and attitudes for interacting with monks, they have no cultural guidance to prepare them for interacting with nuns in daily life. How do they address to nuns? Should the manner to offer the food to nuns be the same as to monks?

The reality has been that the different agencies seeking to restore nun discipline have different motivations and purposes, so they react differently to the restoration. However, adaptation and reformation will certainly be created through these processes of everyday interactions of nuns and people. The ways in which nuns will be integrated in to the Buddhist communities, and how this will change traditional norms and create new ones are crucial matters in practice.

### **3. Dual Enlightenments: Modern Education and Religious Awakening**

In the previous sections, I have considered various issues in the process of the restoration of the nun discipline. Here I would like to raise an argument in regard to the following issues. The religious awakening in Buddhism is usually translated as “enlightenment” while modern rationality also names it as “enlightenment.” The restoration of the nun discipline has enabled women to enter the monastic community and given them the equal right to male monks to attain enlightenment in Buddhism. I argue that Buddhist women, especially Asian Buddhist women, are inevitably incorporated into a framework of dual enlightenments; at first they are enlightened by the spirit of modern rationality and then able to be led to Buddhist religious enlightenment.

Women have been expected to play social and cultural roles, especially since gender studies and feminist theory have become significant areas of research and provided common ground for the awareness of gender issues in modern society. Gender studies have shown that women have played stereotypical roles of responding to the expectations of society as well as those of the opposite sex. They were seen as females, mothers, wives, daughters, etc. Another role for women is as persons who have to survive strategically in the contemporary world with a strong self consciousness. One role imposed on women is that of an active performer who is educated and enlightened with the intention of promoting gender equality and even a gender free society. This hardship of the role of women that emphasizes their activity and high self conscious is another result of the feminist movement. Therefore, feminist movement identifies two types of women, namely one who is not enlightened nor educated, and does not know how to exercise her given rights; and the other who is enlightened, educated and exercises her given rights to attain the way to women’s liberation.

There is a strategy of politicization for the purpose of liberating women in the current political and social systems. Politicization in this case refers to the role of a woman who is aware of herself and transforming from a non-enlightened to an enlightened person. However, the issue is that while playing the role of the political self is unavoidable in order to have standing in the current system, it only serves to strengthen the current system as a precondition.

This issue overlaps considerably with the debates over the restoration of the nun discipline. This is especially the case in the context of SD where the solidarity of western and Asian women is entangled in the representations of other and self to create complicated circumstances. Leading intellectuals should at least have realized that a simple framework of the West

versus Asia is out of the question, and that Orientalism is but a fantasy. However, it is quite significant to realize that both western and Asian women share a common doctrinal ground in the depths of their hearts—i.e., the emphasis on intensive enlightenment of Buddhist women, in terms of both modern education in general and the education of Buddhist doctrine, protocol, languages, morality, etc. This suggests the deep-seated issues in the restoration of the nun discipline. This can be clearly observed in a part of the above-mentioned report on the SD conference in Colombo that appeared in the *SD Newsletter*.

(Jampa Tsedroen gave her talk) during the first plenary session in the afternoon of the opening day on *Challenges in Monastic Life Today* that was discussed with high interest immediately after the talk and throughout the conference in a workshop with an increasing number of *Dasa Silmathas* [*dasa sil mata*] participating. Lacking education on this topic the *Dasa Silmathas* took their chance to question this topic and finally to demand the re-establishment of the *Bhiksuni* Order in Sri Lanka. But it was also evident that the first thing to do in Sri Lanka is to improve the education of the women interested in becoming part of the Monastic community.<sup>9</sup>

As this passage clearly shows, the purpose of the SD conference was to stimulate *dasa sil matas*' self-awareness as Buddhist women and encourage them to demand the restoration of the nun discipline. This is the same as the opinion that all Asian Buddhist women should be enlightened (or educated) before being enlightened religiously through the teachings of the Buddha.

On the other hand, in American Buddhism, a new movement has started. Rita Gross, the founding member of SD says, "In Asian Buddhism laywomen are outside the monastic community and therefore can interact only marginally" (Gross 1996 p.134). The new movement searches the forms of the Buddhist community where anyone can develop unique relationships with one's family and communities, even though being in the secular world without receiving nun ordination, and also being able to attain enlightenment. This Buddhist community will positively approve of families, sexuality, labor, social activities, etc., without making a strict demarcation between those who are ordained and those who are not, questioning the authority of the formality of the ordination in Asia.

The question is then, how we can understand the fact that Gross, who is creating a unique American-style lay Buddhism, is a key member of SD and promoting the revival of the nun ordination. It is clear that the direction of the restoration of nun discipline is in opposition to that of American Buddhism. If she says that the proposal for a new type of monastic community is a declaration of support for the diversity of Buddhism, she should have recommended the formation of a Buddhist nun monastic community in America and the new type of Buddhist community in Asia as well. We can surmise that in this view each region has its own role, such as the promotion of the new lay Buddhist community in America, and the support of women's education and the restoration of nun discipline in Theravada traditions in Asia. This clear division of roles between Buddhism in America and Buddhism in Asia seems to reflect a consciousness among the intellectuals more than just regional difference or approval of diversity of Buddhism.

The reality is that it is neither American Buddhist women activists nor leaders of

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<sup>9</sup> *Sakyadhita News Letter*, vol. 5, no. 2, Summer 1994

intellectual Buddhist women in Asia, but local women such as newly ordained Buddhist nuns and *dasa sil matas*, who eventually confront the numerous issues in practical situations caused by the restoration of nun ordination. These issues are diverse, from such everyday matters as the daily meals that lay devotees will offer to nuns, to the disciplinary matter of the lack of opportunities of continuing the training and education to develop the spiritual stages and practical manners for nuns after they have been ordained. In 1998 in Colombo, I met a nun who had just been fully ordained in Dambulla. She was still very excited and told me between her tears of joy about the religious ecstasy she felt for the first time in her life during her ordination ceremony. She was going to undertake training as a nun for a short period at a temple in a suburb of Colombo, and then return to her home village. She said with a nervous look on her face that she did not know what would happen upon her return to her village as she would be the first and the only nun in the village temple. Her every action would be watched closely by village people and society in general, with the pros and cons of the nun ordination being perceived through her own actions. In addition, she had no guarantee of financial assistance by village devotees and moral support by senior monks. She would have to start everything by herself.<sup>10</sup>

Even Ayya Khema, who had earned ongoing respect as *dasa sil mata* in Sri Lanka, lost followers gradually after being ordained in the Mahayana tradition in late 1980s. She eventually closed the Buddhist nun monastery in Matara, in the southern part of Sri Lanka, to return home to America.<sup>11</sup> However, Sri Lankan nuns have no such option of leaving their homeland, and can only return to daily lives in their community. Regarding this issue, Rado highlighted this situation by citing the example of Islamic women where, although the issues surrounding the pros and cons of the wearing of the scarves by women has become embroiled in questions of international politics, bureaucratic structures, state principle, etc., it is the women who are ultimately forced to make the final decision as an individual choice and to take risk and responsibility for it (Rado 1996). Both Sri Lankan nuns who received the nun ordination and women who made a choice to stay as *dasa sil matas* are in the same position on the frontiers of practice.

It is not only villages that need Buddhist nuns. Now Buddhism has spread all over the world and the numbers of temples are increasing. Therefore, monks and nuns who are pious and capable of managing temples and providing services to Buddhist communities are vital. Some old Buddhist temples, especially in Singapore, America and Australia are also suffering from a shortage of successors. I often heard stories told in a joking tone that to counter the shortage of monks and nuns in advanced countries, temples in Asia are expected to play the role of manufacturing factories to produce young and talented clergies for export to the advanced countries. The restoration of the nun ordination in the Theravada Buddhist communities in Asia would provide support for this process of manufacture and export. As

<sup>10</sup> There is a scholarship fund for Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka, its aim "being to provide education to needy *dasa sil matas* and build their self-confidence." It aims at changing the consciousness itself that "Even if I cannot reach nirvana since I am a woman, at least I would like to discipline myself according to the teachings of Buddhism." (Karkowitz 1995, p. 54, 56)

<sup>11</sup> Before 1997, there are some examples that the women in the Theravada tradition independently received nun ordination at the provincial monasteries in Taiwan, South Korea, or America. In recent years the temples of the Theravada tradition in America that allow Asian and non-Asian woman who live in the U.S. to be ordained as nuns are also increasing in number.

such, the structural issues of Buddhism in Asia and the western countries can be observed even in the revival of nun ordination.

Other structural issues caused by the introduction of the nun ordination can be highlighted within local Buddhist women's communities as well. When the nun ordination started in Sri Lanka, it brought about a new stratification between, on the one hand, the educated and ordained nuns and, on the other hand, the other women devotees and practitioners such as *dasa sil mata*, female priests of folk religions who are not educated to the same degree as nuns but are still pious devotees of Buddhism and enrich the popular Buddhism and folk religions. Should the styles of women practitioners be undermined by increasing respect for ordained nuns, this would help to diminish popular belief as Buddhism in Asia, while the structural issues in America whereby Buddhism has been criticized for being known as white elite Buddhism could come to be found in Sri Lanka between the educated elite nuns and other less educated women practitioners.

The revival of the nun discipline in Theravada Buddhism, aside from its intention and results of the restoration of women's rights in religion such as Buddhism, in consequence shows the differentiation between Asian Buddhist women and western Buddhist women, and the allocation of a new role to all Asian women by imposing a dual enlightenments on them of spiritual enlightenment following the modern educational and rational enlightenment. It also causes a differentiation between the formally ordained elite Buddhist nuns and other non ordained, less educated women practitioners as *dasa sil mata*.

The landscape of contemporary culture, issues of cultural representation and social systems as seen in the surrounding circumstances of the revival of the nun ordination, such as the movements of feminism and SD and the reactions of society and cleric communities, will be better understood only when it is examined through the eyes of each newly ordained nun who starts to face everyday issues in practice on the front lines, and through the eyes of the old women who made a choice to stay as *dasa sil mata* after years of pious devotion.

### Conclusion

The restoration of the nun discipline and SD activities show the landscapes of modern culture. From the introduction of the nun ordination into the Theravada tradition in 1998 in India, until today, around 500 to 1000 nuns are said to have been ordained in Sri Lanka. The website of SD in Sri Lanka says "ordained nuns now perform certain religious and ecclesiastical activities on an equal footing with the monks, and thus enjoy better religious and social status – nevertheless they are still waiting to be officially recognized as part of the Buddhist sangha in Sri Lanka." (January, 2015) Continuous observation of each trend and activity is necessary for further understanding of the process of developments and outcomes.

These characteristics show exactly the same aspects of contemporary culture and value creation processes in the contexts of the landscapes of globalization that I posited in the first section of this paper.

This paper was written as part of the on going research on contemporary culture and society as seen in religion, mainly Buddhism, and its interactions within Asia as well as between Asia and the western countries (Ashiwa 2009, Ashiwa and Wank, ed. 2009). It aims to understand the phenomena that has been studied as religion, in a broader approach that

combines both the arguments of social systems and institutions and of the cultural representations in the context of globalization. I believe that the parallel structures of religion, state/local politics and economy and the linkages between them can be well observed and argued by scholars in various locales and disciplines.

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