The Bhikkhunī Revival Debate and Identity Problems:
An Ethnographic Inquiry

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Abstract

The bhikkhunī revival movement is a transnational or a global project that has affected alternative forms of female renunciation where bhikkhunī-hood had disappeared or was never established. The main objective of this study is to review the identity problems that have emerged due to this new monastic status of bhikkhunī-hood. This ethnographic study was conducted in 2011-2012 by interviewing dasasilmātās, including executive committee members of the Silmātā Jāthika Maṇḍalaya (SMJM), bhikkhunīs, and a government officer. Identity problems emerge in relation to the monastic robe, as it is a visible symbol indicating the transformation from one monastic identity to another. The next arena is the seniority or social hierarchy of monasticism. Dasasilmātās are not immediately amenable to changes in the monastic hierarchy. Resistance is common, but occasionally they show flexibility in adapting to the situation. Shifting identities have arisen as a new phenomenon due to the tension created by the new circumstances. These identity problems can be considered as new developments within this recent change in female monasticism, part of the complex nature of contemporary Sri Lankan Buddhism.

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Introduction

The bhikkhunī revival movement is a transnational or a global project that has affected distant localities where the bhikkhunī sāsanaya had disappeared or was never established. On the one hand, it has reshaped the perception of Buddhist female clergy in terms of constructing a bhikkhunī ideal. On the other hand, it has led to a revaluation of other forms of female renunciation in Theravāda Buddhism, especially the monastic lifestyle without full ordination that can be undertaken by religious women, dasasilmātās (ladies who take the ten vows). Although it is often assumed that the dasasilmātās are a muted group within the mainstream of monasticism, in reality they are a group that is highly affected by the bhikkhunī revival movement. Undoubtedly, this global project has an effect on fragmenting the existing alternative Buddhist female renunciants. By attempting to create homogeneity or sameness in these societies by implementing a transnational project, it has led to the fragmentation of monastic communities in several ways. Thus the very concept of the liberalized equality and freedom brought by the bhikkhunī revival movement is problematic in this regard. These fractions become evident only when scrutinized carefully, because these alternative female renunciants do not accept what is bestowed on them, but tend to pose counter arguments.

Although a number of studies have been done on the ongoing debate regarding bhikkhunīs in Sri Lanka, they have paid less attention to the consequences that have arisen due to the re-establishment of bhikkhunī movement, now almost twenty years ago. This research article will mainly focus on those consequences. In particular, I will examine how the dasasilmātās’ monastic identity is affected by the renewed bhikkhunī movement. I begin with the most crucial areas of identity problems. First, I discuss the problems relating to the monastic robe: a visible symbol indicating the transformation from one monastic identity to another. I then examine the seniority system or social hierarchy of Sri Lankan monasticism. Even dasasilmātās resist the new changes in the monastic hierarchy, though occasionally they are flexible and willing to adapt. Due to these changes, female monastic identities have shifted.

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The Bhikkhunī Revival Controversy

Scott M. Thomas, in his work *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International relations* (2005), argues that there has been a global “resurgence of religion”. He has questioned the thesis that secularization is a more or less inevitable part of the process of modernization. In his view, religion is adapting to various contexts and continues to exist globally rather than disappearing or diminishing. Similarly, in *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (2003) Talal Asad has summarized the present portrayal of religion and its influences on society:

The contemporary salience of religious movements around the globe, and the torrent of commentary on them by scholars and journalists, have made it plain that religion is by no means disappearing in the modern world. The “resurgence of religion” has been welcomed by many as a means of supplying what they see as a needed moral dimension to secular politics and environmental concerns. It has been regarded by others with alarm as a symptom of growing irrationality and intolerance in everyday life . . . if anything is agreed upon, it is that a straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular is no longer acceptable. (1)

Feminist movements, including feminist scholarship on reclaiming women’s right to freedom of religion, have arisen within the larger context of this global resurgence of religion. Feminist scholarship on religion and its claims have been from the outset mostly concerned with liberal notions of equity and freedom. The feminist struggle in promoting, and seeking to reclaim, the rights of religious women is not surprising. These rights were historically neglected and not adequately addressed. Achieving equal opportunity for the ordination of women has become more significant within those rights. Meredith McGuire writes,

The issue of the ordination of women is one of the most controversial issues because of its great symbolic importance and because the role of the clergy is more powerful than lay roles. The significance of the ordination of women is that it presents an alternative image of women and an alternative definition of gender roles. (135-136)
The present debate about bhikkhunī higher ordination occurs within this context of reclaiming rights that have been eroded (in places such as Sri Lanka, India, and Burma) or never established (in places such as Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Tibet).

In the study of the interrelationship between Buddhism and feminism, less attention is paid to gender inequalities in Buddhism as compared to other major religions. Emma Tomalin thinks that this is “. . . perhaps underpinned by views that Buddhism is less gender unequal than other religions, or that Buddhist cultures are less oppressive environments for women” (108). However, the spread of Buddhism into the West has given rise to a renewed interest in questioning the inherent ambiguities of Buddhism and an intense interest in finding an equal place for female renunciation (bhikkhunī higher ordination) in Buddhism. From the outset, liberal feminist ideologies played a crucial role in shaping this bhikkhunī debate. However, although the bhikkhunī revival movement is sometimes stigmatized as a product of Western liberal feminism alone, in fact it is a product of multiple transnational bhikkhunī advocacy projects. South Korean and Taiwanese organizations played a prominent role in the Sri Lankan bhikkhunī ordinations.

The recent history of the bhikkhunī movement is unfolding and noticeable efforts to re-establish it were visible in the late 1990s. In 1996, ten Sri Lankan dasasilmātās travelled to Sarnath, India to participate in the dual higher ordination led by the Sri Lankan Ven. Mapalagama Wipulasara together with the Sri Lankan bhikkhu saṅgha and the Korean bhikkhunī saṅgha, led by the President of the Council of Korean bhikkhunīs, Kwang Woo Sunim. In 1998 twenty Sri Lankan dasasilmātās received bhikkhunī precepts at an International Higher Ordination arranged by Master Hsing Yun of Foguangshan at Bodhgaya in India together with 132 women from 22 countries (De Silva Reclaiming the Robe 128-129). In 1998 more Sri Lankan dasasilmātās received the dual higher ordination in their own country from Sri Lankan bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs. On March 14, soon after the bhikkhunīs returned from Bodhgaya, Ven. Inamaluwe Sumangala organized and administered this ordination to 22 dasasilmātās who had completed their training at his center. With the assistance of the bhikkhunīs who had been ordained in Bodhgaya, five senior monks conducted a bhikkhunīs’ ordination at the Rangiri Dambulla Monastery in the same hall where monks ordinarily receive their ordination (De Silva Reclaiming the Robe 129). This bhikkhunī ordination was the first to be held in Sri Lanka for 1000 years. According to Sakyadhītā, from 1996 to mid 2010 there were around 500 to 1000
bhikkhunīs in Sri Lanka and many sāmanerīs waiting to be qualified for Higher Ordination. An exact number cannot be given, as there is no record of it (http://www.sakyadhita-srilanka.org/index.php/Sakyadhita/History). In the year 2003, the first international bhikkhunī ordination took place in Sri Lanka. There are ordination ceremonies taking place regularly in Sri Lanka and internationally in which Sri Lankan female renunciants participate.

The new bhikkhunī revival movement is liable to controversy due to lack of recognition from saṅgha authorities and the government, because religious conservatives considered the very attempt to reestablish the bhikkhunī higher ordination (upasampadā) a violation of the law of the Buddha or a defilement of pure Buddhism. Nevertheless, the new bhikkhunī movement, empowered by its transnational Buddhist feminist networks, proved formidable. Premakumara De Silva has called these Buddhist feminist movements, which were sponsored by feminist scholarship and community, “an inevitable or unstoppable movement...” (25).

The bhikkhunī revival movement has become a transnational or a global project for constructing the ideal of the higher ordained bhikkhunī. Nirmala Salgado writes, “The ideal of the higher ordained nun . . . represents a homogeneous ideal that evokes the egalitarian vision of a sisterhood among Buddhist nuns across the globe” (Buddhist Nuns 211-213). Chandra Mohanty has also commented that the condition of women is universal. She write that “the homogeneity of women as a group is produced not on the basis of biological essentials but rather on the basis of secondary sociological universals. What binds women together is a historical notion of the sameness of their oppression and, consequently, the sameness of their struggles” (56). If we understand the global project of bhikkhunī revival in terms of Mohanty’s argument, the dominant global ideal of bhikkhunī-hood has bridged the differences among female renunciants. In that sense, it has compelled everyone to accept the bhikkhunī as the female renunciate ideal. Although this project has the positive outcome of reclaiming women’s religious rights, it sometimes fails to recognize the legitimacy of local conceptions of female renunciation. As Thomas Borchert observes, “. . . contemporary Buddhism is marked by a tension between the transnational and the national” (529).

It is important to examine the lives of female renunciants who may have disregarded such influences and how these alternative groups of non-bhikkhunīs view the consequences of the bhikkhunī revival movement. These groups include the dasasilmātā of Sri Lanka, thila-shin of Burma, mae-chi of Thailand,
donchee of Cambodia, and maekhao of Laos. Dasasilmātās wear orange or brown robes, the thila shin of Burma wear pink or brown, while the donchee of Cambodia, the maekhao of Laos, and the maechee of Thailand wear white (http://www.buddhistwomen.eu/EN/index.php/Texts/BuddhistNuns). These female renunciants mostly observe ten precepts and there are no commonly accepted ordination procedures. Therefore there are large variations in monastic procedures, practices and behaviour.

Non-bhikkunīs are outnumbered in Theravāda countries where the bhikkunī movement has already been established. Although many studies have been conducted on new bhikkunī-thood, alternative forms of renunciants were to some extent regarded as a neglected, abandoned group or "peripheral category of the monastic community-in Thai mae chee tradition (quoted in Cook 152)” within the mainstream discussion (see more in Tambiah 1984). Therefore bringing the voices of non-bhikkunīs to the forefront is a timely need within the bhikkunī ordination controversy.

Identity Problems

According to McGuire, “Self-identity refers to each person’s biographical arrangement of meanings and interpretations that form a somewhat coherent sense of ‘who am I?’ Often the question ‘who am I?’ is answered in terms of ‘this is where I belong’” (52). Buddhist female renunciants form their self-identity in part by belonging to a specific monastic group, which also acquires a group identity. But often studies categorize these renunciants as belonging to a specific monastic group as a realm of power even though the renunciants themselves do not believe that they really belong to the said monastic group. For instance, a female renunciant who wanders in sacred premises or lives with her own family members in a separate room may not identify herself as a dasasilmātā but just as a renunciant.

Monastic identity is profoundly social because it is constructed through interaction with others. Monastic communities are constructed over time and space by interaction and competing with “the other”, i.e., other types of female renunciants, the lay community, and the bhikkhus. These identities are defined by the teachings of a particular religion and what has been added through the evolved historical conjunctures. Although society seems to recognize dasasilmātās and bhikkunīs as similar renunciants because of the similarities in their outer appearance, they in fact belong to groups that are distinct in terms of
their history, precepts, robe, seniority, etc. Therefore, the visibility of resistance and counter resistance from these two competing female monastic groups is not surprising. But at the same time, as a result of interacting with each other, dasasilmātās share the features of the new bhikkhunī identity where they see it as more convenient or an enhancement of their monastic vocation. The focus here will be on the identity problems of dasasilmātās, in terms of issues related to the monastic robe, hierarchy, and shifting identities. The presentation of counter arguments by the bhikkhunīs will be discussed in describing how even bhikkhunīs are affected by the same issues.

**Bhikkhunī Robe (kaḍa sivura) and Pride**

In her fieldwork, Cheng has recognized the importance for a bhikkhunī of bhikkhunī ordination and having a bhikkhunī robe. They confer on her the same level of status as the bhikkhu, apparently giving her a sense of equality and empowerment. As stated by a Sri Lankan bhikkhunī: For example, the Chinese SA 490 reports the wanderer Jambukṣadaka as asking Śāriputra thus:

I have always believed that becoming a bhikkhunī is important . . . when you are a ten-precept nun, you are just like an ordinary lay person. But when you don the (bhikkhunī) robe, you have status, and people respect you better . . . because of the special robe, people know the difference between ten-precept nuns and bhikkhunī. Previously a nun’s robe was an ordinary garment with trousers. But the bhikkhunī wear the same as the bhikkhu. And we can do the same works as the bhikkhu. So we are formal monastic members . . . (Cheng 173-174)

Although the above quotation raises many controversial issues, it is interesting to look at whether is it possible to recognize the differences between dasasilmātās and bhikkhunīs from the appearance of their robes. According to many dasasilmātās who were interviewed for the present study, people do not seem to recognize the difference. Dhammabuddhi silmātā mentioned, “People do not care whether we are dasasilmātās, sāmaṇerīs or bhikkhunīs, but what we do is important to them.” Dasasilmātās hold such a standpoint because they do not like to undermine their monastic vocation as dasasilmātās. All these female renunciants perform the same rituals like bōdhi pūja, pirit chanting, etc. for the laity, except that they do not participate in for sāṅghika dāna (alms giving for the
saṅgha) or accept aṭa pirikara (eight standard requisites used by the saṅgha).

Bhikkhunī respondents agree to this point as stated by Kusala bhikkhunī: “Most people do not see the difference between these two groups but this difference is seen mostly by their own dāyakas (lay devotees). But it should be so as the bhikkhunīs need more recognition.” She thinks that the difference, not being easily identifiable, is an obstacle to a higher level of respect for bhikkhunīs. In other words, she says that there should be a difference and it should be identifiable as they are following adhi sīlaya.

The main distinction of the bhikkhunī robe, kaḍa sivura, lies in the procedure through which the robe is produced. Therefore this difference is not immediately noticeable. Dasasilmatās have been using the same colour robes as bhikkhunīs for many years. There was a controversy over dasasilmatās’ using robes similar to those of bhikkhus in the 1980s. This was severely criticized by the bhikkhus who point out that they are not eligible to do so (Daily Mirror). According to Anulā silmatā,

Our greatest hāmu māṇiyō (Sudharmacāri silmatā- the first silmatā in Sri Lanka) wore a white robe. Then the colour changed dramatically. Even dasasilmatās are using ocher robes today. It is wrong. But I myself never change this yellow robe. Because there should be a difference between the bhikkhu robe and ours.

The very purpose of using a variety of colours was to indicate the difference between bhikkhus and female renunciants. The colour of the robe is used to perpetuate the subordinate social status of female renunciants. Here Anulā silmatā seems to be an example of the internalization of such subordination. But now there is no agreement on the colours of the robes used by the dasasilmatās. Some groups of female renunciants use specific traditional colours. However, this causes confusion among outsiders.

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3 Sīlaya is often synonymous with the precepts that Buddhist female renunciants have to follow. Here sīlaya also refers to the “virtue” and “morality” of Buddhist renunciants. For dasasilmatās it is ten precepts or sikkhāpadas; for bhikkhunīs it is 311 pātimokkha rules. These high numbers of Vinaya rules denote higher virtues or morality. Therefore it is called adhi sīlaya.

4 ... The whole cloth used for the robe is first shredded into parts and then stitched together to appear segmented. This pattern the Buddha himself likened to the paddy fields of the Magadha region of India.” This 'kada sivura' simply signifies the intricacies that one should encounter to withdraw any attachment and it would be thoroughly devalued item that which would not even motivate theft... (http://exploresrilanka.lk/2011/08/sivura-the-story-of-the-saffron-robe/).
Although dasasilmaṭās are not particularly concerned about the colours of their robes, there are occasions, when they have had to face problems regarding the different robes. For instance, Dhammakanthi silmāṭā highlighted an important issue faced by the young dasasilmaṭās in her district.

Some of these bhikkunīs are using the robe to show their power. There is no such worth in the robe . . . Our young dasasilmaṭās are worried about being rejected from some of the places (University), as they do not wear bhikkunī robes. They are worried about their monastic status. Some of these young undergraduate dasasilmaṭās told me that they do not introduce themselves as dasasilmaṭā. Some of them, at sometimes, don bhikkunī robes.

It seems that these young dasasilmaṭās use the bhikkunī robe to temporarily escape from the difficulties they encounter (this is not the generalized picture of all the young dasasilmaṭās). However, this is not the only example that can be cited to show the uses of the bhikkunī robe by dasasilmaṭās while at the same time they reject the status of bhikkunī-hood. For instance, Dhammakanthi silmāṭā told me that some dasasilmaṭās have worn the bhikkunī robe when they have traveled to other countries. Some of these dasasilmaṭās know that there is more respect for the bhikkunī status in foreign lands; they believe that these countries support the revival of the bhikkunī movement. This creates a contradiction. Although rejecting bhikkunī-hood, they want to garner its benefits. Therefore it can be seen that the bhikkunī robe has a symbolic significance and this is used to indicate the worthiness of the monastic identity of bhikkunīs.

On some special occasions, dasasilmaṭās have been asked to wear robes similar to the bhikkunī robe. It was intended to identify dasasilmaṭās as bhikkunīs. However, this made some participants uncomfortable.

We were asked to wear that robe. I do not exactly know whether it is a bhikkunī robe. We were not in a position to refuse. I did not like to wear that piece of covering strip. I felt uncomfortable when I wore it (interview with Dhammapradīpa silmāṭā).

It seemed that the organizers of the event wanted to show a common identity shared by student dasasilmaṭā and student bhikkunīs. Perhaps the organizers
were not aware of the discomposure of the dasasilmātās or perhaps the resistance shown by the dasasilmātās was ignored/disregarded.

Apart from the dasasilmātās who were asked or even compelled to don the bhikkhunī robe, some other dasasilmātās do not care about the difference between the bhikkhunī robe and dasasil robe. For instance, Suwarnamālī silmāṭa said,

I do not consider whether I am using a bhikkhunī robe or any other robe. It is worn to protect one from the hot and cold climate. Other than that, there is no such specialty. Sometimes I wear a kada sivura when I am in the āramaya. But I don a dasasil robe when I’m outside. Actually, we don what we receive. Can we ask our dāyaka not to offer bhikkhunī robes? They do not understand the difference. I am not going to teach them the difference. If I do so, they will not offer us anything.

Although she says that she is not concerned with what she wears, she chooses to don the bhikkhunī robe when she is in the āramaya but not when she is outside. She has concerns about explaining this to the dāyakas as it might create problems with the offerings made to her. Dasasilmātās are compelled to act like this, as some of them do not get sufficient donations and offerings. In this sense, rather than following the practices of the Vinaya code, they are redefining and adapting to the circumstances of their day-to-day renunciate lives.

Although the bhikkhunī robe is an enhancement of their monastic status, dasasilmātās are anxious about it. According to them, sometimes bhikkhunīs misuse their monastic robe. Dhammacārī silmāṭa mentioned, “The bhikkhunī robe has become jewelry for them (bhikkhunīs).” Jewelry is a personal adornment used as a marker of a specific social status and personal status; it belongs to the laity. The dasasilmātās are concerned that such practices promote vanity and arrogance among bhikkhunīs. Dhammakaṇṭhī silmāṭa called this “giving into pride, in ignorance of the consequences.” But instead of blaming the bhikkhunīs, she criticized the people who have created the problems or who have given the bhikkhunī ordination to renunciants. Her argument is that bhikkhunīs behave in such an arrogant manner because they are not correctly guided and neglect to nurture the spirit of renunciation. It indicates indirectly that female renunciants, whether they are dasasilmātās or bhikkhunīs, should always be guided. This again reflects the internalization of subordination by female renunciants.
However, some dasasilmātās are very displeased with the arrogance of bhikkhunīs. For instance, they call the ordination a “worthless thing” or “piece of board”. On the other hand, they seem to pay reverence to their own monastic robes. One said, “We were given this dasasilmātā robe and it instilled respect and fear for it. Thus we never do anything unnecessary against it. But those youngsters who don bhikkhunī robe do not have läjja-baya (shame-fear).” According to Obeyesekere, “Practice of läjja-baya—to be ashamed of subverting norms of sexual modesty and proper behavior and to fear the social ridicule that results from such subversion—is instilled into Sinhala children through early childhood training” (505). The dasasilmātā who said this comes from a rural background, where she was brought up with a deep sense of läjja-baya, and she looks at the conditions in monastic life through the same lens. What she means by lack of läjja-baya is the forwardness of the bhikkhunīs. This will be elaborated in the following section.

Hierarchical troubles

The hierarchical problems among the Buddhist female renunciants can be identified in terms of the seniority of the monastic vocation. Seniority of monastic vocation is highly respected in the Buddhist monastic community. Seniority is based on the date of higher ordination. Dasasilmātās base seniority on the date of their renunciation of lay life. In that sense, bhikkhunīs are in a higher monastic position than the dasasilmātās. However, when it comes to practice, the situation is vastly different.

The emergence of bhikkhunī-hood created a status problem. Although bhikkhunīs think of themselves as higher in status than dasasilmātās, dasasilmātās do not seem to accept the seniority of newly ordained bhikkhunīs. For instance, Uttarā silmātā pointed out:

We were frustrated by the behaviour of some bhikkhunīs in our district. There was a funeral ceremony of one of our māṇiyō (dasasilmātā) and they did not allow bhikkhus to perform rituals. They interfered and sabotaged it. The bhikkhus were tolerant and patient. We also had to put up with this conduct, as the bhikkhus did not seem to have any negative reactions. Not only that, but the same group behaved in an unpleasant way during the ceremony held on dēvālaya premises. Again, bhikkhus were not allowed to sit in the front seats. These bhikkhunīs came earlier and sat. All these things happen because of their arrogance.
I have myself noticed such an incident in an almsgiving (dānaya) for clergy in 2012. As a part of the almsgiving there was a pirit chanting. When the bhikkhus began to chant pirit, suddenly one chief bhikkhunī who had a microphone began to do the same. But her voice was louder than the bhikkhus’, and the bhikkhus’ voices were hardly heard. A leading bhikkhu advised all the bhikkhunīs not to let it happen again, warning them to be conscious of their position in the monastic hierarchy. It seemed that the bhikkhunī with the microphone felt no subordination to the bhikkhus. Symbolically the ceremony was an occasion for reconciliation to bring bhikkhus, bhikkhunīs, and dasasilmātās into the same forum. But in the saṅgha hierarchy, bhikkhunīs are expected to be mindful of their subordinate position, including their conduct, the place where they are, and whom they are with.

All of these examples involve adhi sīlaya (higher virtues) that are observed by bhikkhunīs. The establishment of the bhikkhunī saṅgha was contingent on women agreeing to follow many rules in addition to those laid down for bhikkhus, in particular rules of deference to the bhikkhus. Bhikkhunīs are expected to follow 311 pātimokkha rules, whereas bhikkhus are expected to observe 227 pātimokkha rules.

Although bhikkhunīs follow adhi sīlaya, some of the senior dasasilmātās do not wish to bow down to bhikkhunīs who have been ordained recently. For instance, one of the senior dasasilmātā was displeased as she had to follow junior bhikkhunīs at one of the almsgiving ceremonies. Her proposed solution was to organize two separate rows for dasasilmātās and bhikkhunīs. This forced the organizers to have two separate alms givings for bhikkhunīs and dasasilmātās whereas their intention was to build a space for reconciliation between the parties where they could interact with each other. Bhikkhunī Sraddhā shared her views regarding this as follows.

It is true that we sometimes felt uncomfortable about sitting at an almsgiving together, as they are not even ordained as sāmaṇerī. But in our district we do not have any problem. We never think of them as subordinate to us. Our sīlaya (virtue) is with us. We keep silence when there are such troubles. We never made any troubles for them. Because we were also dasasilmātās before we were ordained. Therefore we never degrade them.
When it comes to practice, it is not surprising that both groups feel uncomfortable in face-to-face interaction, as each group claims seniority over the other. Although some of them attempted to be reconciled, as bhikkhunī Sraddhā said, they are not always successful. Sumitrā silmātā stated that she and her pupils avoid bhikkhunīs. They never participate in almsgiving or any other event if they have to sit with bhikkhunīs.

However, there are some rare occasions on which both dasasilmātās and bhikkhunīs live together under the same roof of an ārāmaya. For instance, Tilakā silmātā lived with her gōlayā (pupil), who was ordained as a bhikkhunī. The pupil decided to become a bhikkhunī by obtaining the permission of Tilakā silmātā, but after the ordination she did not have any place to stay, so she stayed for some time with Tilakā silmātā. However, due to the practical problems that both of them encountered, the bhikkhunī is now living on her own in a separate small ārāmaya. The pupil was now senior in status due to her higher ordination, but neither wanted to worship the other. Moreover, Tilakā silmātā told me that after the higher ordination the pupil seemed to change. Thus Tilakā silmātā herself helped her to build a separate ārāmaya. The pupil often visits her.

My gōlayā (pupil) is senior to me in terms of higher ordination. But I cannot offer any reverence (worship) to her, because I am her dasasil preceptor. Likewise she is unable to do so as she is now a bhikkhunī. Earlier I felt uncomfortable. But we have got used to it. She does not worship my feet, rather she seems to respect me.

Unlike some other cases, this relationship did not give rise to conflict. They seem to have a mutual understanding and a desire to continue their relationship. However, we cannot expect the same on other occasions (see more in Mrozik 8 and Salgado, Buddhist Nuns 153-159). In most cases, dasasilmātās do not accept the monastic seniority of bhikkhunīs. Tusitā silmātā added more in this regard:

We could bow down to [bhikkhunīs] if they were in a high status of sīlaya. There is no such spiritual development, but some of them are just arrogant. Therefore we do not like even to sit for dānaya (almsgiving) with them. They often sit in the front seats. We are senior to them, so why should we sit behind them?
To avoid being degraded in front of bhikkunīs, Tusitā silmātā seems to present her disinclination for bhikkhunī-hood as due to lack of virtue in bhikkhunīs. In other words, although bhikkhunīs follow 311 pātimokkha rules, this dasasilmātā does not think these pātimokkha rules have had an impact on the cultivation of spiritual development in bhikkhunīs, as they use the pātimokkha rules as a means of showing pride (a form of power) over dasasilmātās.

However, bhikkhunī Kusalā had a different response on this issue. “Dasasilmātās most probably do not participate at almsgivings with us, as they are incapable of accepting the sāṅghika dāna (almsgiving offered to saṅgha). Even we did not accept sāṅghika dāna when we were dasasilmātās.” Theoretically, dasasilmātās are not allowed to accept sāṅghika dāna or aṭapirikara (eight standard requites offered to the saṅgha) or to participate in pāṃsakūla (funeral rites performed by the saṅgha). However, more and more often dasasilmātās are participating in these events. They are redefining the limitations and boundaries of the monastic sphere of dasasilmātās.

It is interesting to see how dasasilmātās define the precepts that they follow. They are the same set of sikkhāpada that sāmaṇerīs (female novices) observe. But according to Dhammacārī silmātā, “We observe sāmaṇera dasasil because we were given sil (precepts) by a bhikkhu when we were ordained. That is not the gahaṭṭha dasasil (lay ten precepts). Thus we even can wear a bhikkhunī robe (kaḍa sivura).” What she wants to emphasize is that there is no real difference between bhikkhunīs and themselves, as they already follow the same code of discipline for novice renunciants (for more on this, see Salgado Religious Identities 935-953). But she also wants to contend that the dasasilmātā observation of the precepts goes beyond what laypeople do when they elect to observe the precepts.

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5 Sāmaṇera sil or precepts are the training precepts one should follow prior to becoming a bhikkhunī. Sāmaṇeras and sāmaṇerīs observe the ten precepts as their code of behavior.

6 For instance, Sumedhā silmātā explained the differences between the gahaṭṭha dasasil and sāmaṇera dasasil. According to her, in terms of precepts, dasasilmātās have to follow precepts that are very similar to the precepts that sāmaṇerīs have to observe. But dasasil (ten precepts) can be observed even by a lay person. There is a difference between the manners of observing precepts. The sāmaṇera sīlaya is observed all together at once, whereas dasasil should be observed one by one. If someone breaks one precept of sāmaṇera sīlaya she/he has to observe all the ten precepts again, as they are observed together. Sāmaṇera sīlaya is often given by a bhikkhu.
Perhaps one might argue that this is purely a rhetorical strategy on the part of dasasilmātās to enhance their monastic status. However, Dhammacārī silmātā’s statement was accepted not only by bhikkhunīs but also by some dasasilmātās who said that they are strictly following the gihi or gahaṭṭha dasasil by even wearing the yellow dasasil robe.

These statements reflect diversity among dasasilmātās regarding the precepts they follow. They give different explanations about their practices based on their knowledge, prior experiences, and preceptors. Some of them have received the sāmanera sil from a bhikkhu although they call themselves dasa-silmātās; others observe gahaṭṭha dasasil. These differences are reflected in the way they wish to be addressed. Tusitā silmātā refused to be addressed as dasasil mǟṇiyō. Instead, she proposed the term mehenin vahanse- venerable ordained women (a term normally applied to a bhikkhunī). She added:

If someone says simply dasasilmātā it indicates certain limitations. Although we follow the ten precepts, they are similar to precepts followed by a sāmanera (male novice). Sometimes I used to hear them calling us sīlammā or upāsikammā. At such times, I correct them. We are not upāsikā who only observe five precepts. We are Buddhist renunciants who have sacrificed our whole lives for the sāsanaya. We should be addressed as mehenin vahanse.

Her words indicate that she is totally against being addressed as sīlammā or upāsikammā, terms generally used for Buddhist laywomen. Such an intermediary position between the status of laywomen and Buddhist renunciants would not give dasasilmātās the appropriate position in monasticism. On the contrary, it would place them in a subordinate position (Bartholemeuz uses the term “lay nun” for dasasilmātās to show their ambiguous position). Tusitā silmātā proposed mehenin vahanse, which is a term used generally for bhikkhunīs. In that sense, she claims a status equal to bhikkhunīs. Thus when encountering the tension of the monastic hierarchy, dasasilmātās claim their own monastic space, which is still controversial.
Shifting Identities

As we have seen, both dasasilmātās and bhikkunīs have identity problems. Such identity problems have created tension among renunciants, especially among the young ones and particularly in situations where they need to decide their monastic status as dasasilmātās or bhikkunīs. Young renunciants now face numerous difficulties in deciding their monastic path.

Meanwhile, I found that some of the renunciants who changed their monastic status had returned to their old monastic status. For instance, Nandasīlā silmātā, who was ordained as a dasasilmātā in 2001, was then ordained as a sāmaṇerī in 2007 with the ambition of becoming a bhikkuni. But she remained a sāmaṇerī only for a few months. She encountered difficulties in adapting to the new environment into which she was ordained. After wandering in several places she went back to her guru mǟṇiyō (preceptor-dasasilmātā). It could be that she was simply uncomfortable with the new environment. Thus renunciants who decide to change their monastic status may face numerous troubles in doing so. They may be shocked by an unfamiliar setting -- staying with new inmates, new rituals, new way of daily living. If they fail to cope, there is no mechanism for taking care of them. They may become vulnerable and risk becoming destitute.

Uppalavaṇṇā silmātā explained that some renunciants who were ordained as bhikkunīs came back within a few months to get ordained as dasasilmātās. In such instances, if local dasasilmātās are not in a position to solve these problems, higher level organizations of dasasilmātās (district or national) can assist. Most of the time, these renunciants were admitted after receiving strict advice. She added,

Although they are motivated by the outward appearance of bhikkunīs, soon they understand that, there is no such difference. They understand the “freedom of the religious life” we lead very well. Actually, they create problems by changing their monastic status. Sometimes we tell them not to rejoin the dasasil order.

Although she wishes to emphasize that there is no difference between the two monastic statuses, even though one could discern this in outward appearance, by saying “freedom of religious life” she unconsciously adds more value to the bhikkunī vocation in indicating the effort one should make to stay as a bhikkunī. However, dasasilmātā organizations are becoming stricter about shifting monastic status. Uppalavaṇṇā silmātā told me that these shifting
identities are going to be regulated in the near future. Undoubtedly, this will add more complexity to the practices of female renunciation.

Changing monastic status is not easy. It is a hard decision that can be influenced by societal pressures. Rather than thinking about spiritual development, some of these renunciants have to waste their time worrying about the certainty of the monastic vocation they follow. This makes even bhikkhunīs (who re-converted to revert to dasasilmātā) feel guilty. Their shifting identity makes them more vulnerable to being stigmatized as attention can be focused on them. Therefore both dasasilmātās who convert to bhikkhunīs and bhikkhunīs who convert to dasasilmātās face enormous challenges including ill-treatment, being stigmatized, etc. Thus shifting one’s identity reflects the inner complexities and dilemmas taking place in the present female renunciant status. Finally, the above argument challenges the common assumption that conversion takes place in one direction only, while at the same time demonstrating how (re)conversion takes place.

Conclusion

The present status of Buddhist female monasticism in Sri Lanka is undergoing dramatic changes because of the newly emerged bhikkhunī movement. This article has attempted to look into the vicissitudes of identities of female renunciants who have been severely affected by the above conditions. While the bhikkhunī movement is a transnational project which values the liberal notion of homogeneity, it has created new issues relating to female renunciation.

In the Sri Lankan context, it appears that identity and the bhikkhunī robe are crucial issues. Although sometimes dasasilmātās are critical of the impact the new bhikkhunīs have on their day-to-day lives, they also seem to have adapted quite well to the renunciant everyday issues related to the robe. In terms of hierarchy, both dasasilmātās and bhikkhunīs have their own explanations and interpretations. The final discussion regarding shifting identities challenges the common assumption that conversion takes place in one direction only (dasasilmātās become bhikkhunīs), demonstrating how (re)conversion in the opposite direction also takes place.

This study concludes that dasasilmātās have not simply accepted the changes brought about by the newly ordained bhikkhunīs. A homogeneous ideal of the bhikkhunī would not work everywhere, as outsiders assume or expect. We have seen that dasasilmātās are not a muted group and their agency is a crucial factor in this conversation.
References


THE BHIKKHUNĪ REVIVAL DEBATE AND IDENTITY PROBLEMS


