# Politics of Higher Ordination for Women in Sri Lanka: Discussions with *Silmātās*

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## Abstract

The women of Sri Lanka have long captured the imagination of scholars around the world as they have courageously negotiated and re-negotiated their place in a tradition that established its roots on the island more than two thousand years ago. This negotiation has recently intensified, as some women have chosen to take robes that neither the government nor most male monastic authorities generally recognise. As a result of both field research and textual study, this paper examines the choice made by those who have chosen not to take formal ordination.

## Introduction

Briefly, my central question for the non-ordained nuns of the island was, how do you feel about higher ordination (*upasampadā*) and are you considering taking it in the future? The responses I encountered often surprised me. As shall be seen below, many non-ordained nuns were struggling with the question and some were quietly moving toward higher ordination while others had decided firmly against it. But for others still, the issue was simply irrelevant. This paper therefore suggests that, just as there is no one, singular way to practice renunciation, so there can be no one answer to its institutionalisation. There is as much diversity and multiplicity of views on this issue as there are female renunciants on the island of Sri Lanka. In almost every publication on the subject, reference is made to the unfortunate historical reality that, despite the great efforts by Sanghamitta to bring female ordination to Sri Lanka, the lineage was destroyed around the 11th century CE as a result of the Cola invasions from the North.[1] Not long thereafter, the *bhikkhunī* lineage disintegrated, leaving women of *Theravāda* coun-

tries to wait for the next Buddha to appear and re-instate it. Renunciation therefore became an exclusively male institution, and women had little opportunity to actively express or embody any potential desire they might have had for a renunciant's life.[2] All this changed when the British took possession of the island in the early 19th century, as they soon made the decision to release themselves of religious responsibilities and thereby placed the *dhamma* into the hands of society. Suddenly, Buddhism was liberated from government control and laypeople were free to become involved in religious affairs.[3] This opened the door to all kinds of revolutions, but the most significant for our purposes was the freedom suddenly made available to women to practice renunciation regardless of the future Buddha Metteyya's absence. Women took the robes themselves, shaved their heads and vowed to live according to the first ten precepts. They were not full-fledged *bhikkhunīs*, but they were living a life of renunciation that was, until that time, impossible for them. These women have come to be known by a number of different names – the most common being the *dasa silmātās* (or simply *silmātās* for short), meaning "Ten Precept Mothers." Today, there are thousands of *silmātās* in Sri Lanka (between 3000 and 4000 depending on who you ask),[4] and since they are not bound by the constraints of any official institution – either governmental or monastic – they are free to practice renunciation as they see fit.[5]

In 1996, ten Sri Lankan women traveled to Sarnath, India and were officially transformed into *bhikkhunīs* by a delegation of monks and nuns from different countries. These women, headed by Bhikkhunī Kusuma who is, as a result, referred to by many as the most senior *bhikkhunī* on the island, believed that they did not need to continue living unrecognised in their renunciation, but that they could take *upasampadā* legitimately[6] with the help of their *Mahāyāna* sisters in Korea and eventually Taiwan.[7] They refused to be excluded any longer by the *mahāsangha* and chose to walk right back into the world Mahāpajāpati and Sanghamittā had worked so hard to create for them centuries earlier. Neither the government nor most of the monastic authorities recognize them to this day, but according to some, it is only a matter of time.

The ethnographic portion of this project was conducted during the summer months of 2004. Seventeen women were interviewed on the question of higher ordination. Many spoke English, but for the rest an interpreter was used. Most of these women were *silmātās*, and all but two were Sri Lankan (the other two were Western – one from Germany and the other from America). In most cases, I had the opportunity to speak with them on multiple occasions, but a few of the interviews were limited to just one sitting. My primary objective during these interviews was to understand how the subjects viewed ordination. Were they considering going forth with it, was it more advantageous to live without it, or was it simply inappropriate to take ordination without a Buddha present to re-instate the lineage? No two answers were the same although many were alike, and as a whole they represented a vast spectrum of perspectives. The challenge

with such research is to accurately reflect this spectrum and not entrap the controversy in personal views or overly generalised conclusions.

It is all too easy to present these issues through the lens of feminist rights. In other words, to assume that women *should* fight for higher ordination and that those who do not are bowing to the pressures of patriarchy. Rita Gross' *Buddhism After Patriarchy* was groundbreaking on a variety of levels, but it stimulated a perception that Buddhist women *should* and indeed *must* make certain demands on what she sees as a patriarchal and unjust system dominating Buddhist Asia. This worldview, which has been instrumental for the development of both Buddhist Studies and even Women Studies, nevertheless unintentionally marginalised Asian Buddhist women. References are scattered throughout Gross' book that assume that Asian Buddhist women are neither aware of, nor bothered by, the patriarchy she believes they are constrained by, which is why she believes that "many of the most significant and necessary developments in Buddhism regarding gender issues will first be articulated by Western Buddhists" (Gross, 1993: 25). Such statements unfortunately isolate Asian Buddhist women from dialogue and essentialise an Asian-Western dichotomy. Cheng recently gave voice to her frustration in this regard in her recent book, *Buddhist Nuns in Taiwan and Sri Lanka: A Critique of the Feminist Perspective* (2007), arguing that it is all too often assumed by Western Buddhist writers that Asian Buddhist women are all the same — a pattern I sincerely wish to avoid here.

This paper therefore does not advocate for, or against, higher ordination for women in Sri Lanka. It is certainly not for me to decide how women in another country ought to conduct their lives. Pressure can take on many forms, and pressuring women to fight *for* institutional inclusion is just as problematic as pressuring women to stay out of it. This paper does not have as its objective to pressure women to do anything. It is, rather, an examination of the views encountered during my fieldwork which will hopefully provide insight into how some of the female renunciants of the island engage with the spiritual politics of higher ordination. It will, consequently, also explore how they engage with each other as they find themselves moving toward one or another of the various factions of the debate. The *silmātās* of Sri Lanka each have their own reasons for renunciation, their own motivations for having taken the kinds of robes they have chosen to take, and this paper seeks to reflect the multiplicity of their voices rather than to draw overly-generalised conclusions about who they are, either collectively or individually.

It was not difficult to find *silmātās*, nor was it difficult to have them agree to being interviewed. Contrary to popular opinion, the *silmātās* I encountered were curious and very open to being interviewed. Indeed, it seemed that they were as curious about me as I was about them. On a number of occasions, our roles were eventually reversed, with the *silmātās* interviewing me rather than the other way around. I encountered *silmātās* in every corner of the small island and engaged in

a number of informal conversations along with all the formal interviews I conducted. I discovered that, just as Bartholomeusz (1994) and Salgado (2004) described in their works, *silmātās* practice renunciation with tremendous variety and creativity. There is no right way of being a *silmātā*, no guidebook or formal doctrine to be followed. There is simply the desire for renunciation and the freedom to practice this in whatever way suits them best. Such freedom is surely appealing, but I did not often encounter women citing it as their primary justification for abstaining from the on-going *bhikkhunī* revolution in their country. Their reasons were much more complicated, multi-layered and appeared to be the result of conflicting emotions and realities. Sumedha Silmātā, for example, did not seem to care very much about the question. She was over 75 years old, had lived her life and had no interest in pursuing political debates any longer. She broke the mold in her community by taking the robes 60 years earlier and was now prepared to leave such issues behind. She did mention, however, almost in passing, that she considered herself a fully ordained *bhikkhunī* today, regardless of whether or not she was officially initiated into the tradition as such. She felt that, after 60 years of practice and service, she had become a kind of honorary *bhikkhunī*. Indeed, she believed that a ceremony could not produce a *bhikkhunī* – only personal intention and practice could. The monastic life for Sumedha was a state of mind. This legitimated her practice and life choices and even diminished – however inadvertently – the efforts made by those who chose to fight for ordination instead. Her views were surely supported by the government recognition she received on her fiftieth anniversary as a *silmātā* – the photograph and memorabilia from the event were proudly displayed in the front hall of her *ārama* for all to see. And yet, when I asked her if she would bow to a *bhikkhunī* who had been practicing less time than her, she admitted that she would. It was obviously not a clear-cut issue then: she believed she was a *bhikkhunī* and that ordination was ultimately irrelevant, but she simultaneously accepted a social hierarchy that most of the male monastic elite refused to recognise. Likewise, she was not interested in public ordination and yet she displayed the relics of her institutional recognition with pride for all to see. Her ambiguity on the subject is a perfect example of the ambiguity of the situation.

Sucitta Silmātā, her disciple, was younger and much more concerned with the politics of higher ordination. She did not consider herself an honorary *bhikkhunī* despite her accumulated twenty-five years of renunciation, and debated the question of *upasampadā* much more emphatically. She felt that a significant distinction should be made between *silmātās* and *bhikkhunīs*, but she was skeptical about the process and about the kind of women who were willing to challenge authority so publicly. She spoke with respect about the monks and stated that if they did not recognise the process, they must somehow be right. She imagined that there must be a problem with the procedure, that perhaps *bhikkhunīs* were not following the rules properly, and she had no intention of becoming a

member of a community that was either lax or inappropriate in any way. But when I asked her how much interaction she had had with *bhikkhunīs*, she admitted that she had had virtually none. She did not really know anything about th e*bhikkhunīs* of her country, had never spent time with any of them, and thus I can only assume that her views were based on hearsay. However, she was also clear about the fact that if the monks ever did officially recognise the *bhikkhunī upasampadā*, she would move in that direction. In other words, her faith rested on their shoulders. So long as the monks failed to believe in the process, so would she.

Candra Silmātā, a non-ordained nun from a different part of the country, would have agreed with Sucitta in this regard. Candra began the interview by emphatically declaring that no significant differences existed between her life and the life of a *bhikkhunī*. She stated with conviction that *upasampadā* was not the means to awakening. What was important was liberation from the clutches of *saüsāra*, and reciting the *pātimokkha* was not the way to get there.[8] It was therefore very clear in her mind that too much energy focused on institutionalisation was a waste of time and that the women who were so eager to change the system were somehow focusing on all the wrong questions. Indeed, during an emphatic speech about the irrelevance of ordination, Sucitta concluded that *silmātās* were spiritually superior to *bhikkhunīs* because *silmātās* leave the world behind with more sincerity. They are not bothered by questions of outside recognition. And yet, just like Sucitta before her, Candra also admitted that if the monks ever did recognise higher ordination for women, and thus if the government promised to take care of nuns and financially support them as they do the monks, she would follow suit. In fact, she whispered near the end of one of our interviews that, before his death, her teacher instructed her to take *upasampadā* when it becomes officially recognised.

These women and many others I interviewed all seemed to be deeply impressed by the authority of the male monastic institution and were averse to challenging it in any way. Social hierarchy is largely respected in Sri Lanka, and overstepping it requires a spirit of conviction and rebellion many women did not express. It requires, moreover, a great deal of courage as it may entail financial repercussions. Although this was never stated to me directly, it was clear that many of the *silmātās* faced significant economic difficulties – to the point that, as we shall see below – some were left to fend for themselves with a life of homelessness. Whatever financial support they did receive – and this varied from one community to the next – was largely the product of lay people's donations. There was therefore little security in these livelihoods (which I was repeatedly told was not the case for the *bhikkhus*), and I suspect that for many of the *silmātās*, challenging monastic authority carried with it the risk of losing the little bit of lay support they might have managed to procure. The ambiguity expressed by many of the *silmātās* interviewed was surely a result of such conflicting realities

and social concerns, and thus was not limited to philosophical leanings. More striking than this ambiguity, however, was the consistent assumption made by nearly all of the *silmātās* interviewed that the source for all the problems with *upasampadā* was to be found in the women taking it. *Silmātās* consistently and unabashedly condemned the *bhikkhunīs* of their country during our interviews, all the while admitting their interest in the process should the government recognise it. There was something disturbingly misogynistic about this. Buddhism has had to contend with misogyny throughout its history – as have all religious traditions – and as Janet Gyatso (2005) recently noted, this misogyny has seeped into female monastic institutions and has been consciously or not, integrated into monastic mores and customs with tangible effects. It is this very misogyny (or androcentrism) that propelled Rita Gross into the field of Feminist Studies and led her to become one of the great pioneers of the field. It was therefore not surprising to encounter such views in this context, but it was difficult to hear nonetheless.

Another example of this female-focused condemnation emerged from the critiques many of the *silmātās* made about the rules and regulations *bhikkhunīs* were believed to be plagued by. *Silmātās* live according to ten simple precepts, while higher ordination requires 301 more. *Silmātās* all over the island consistently emphasised the merits of a simpler lifestyle, insisting that too many rules hinder meditation practice.[9] Remembering hundreds of rules and abiding by them faithfully is obviously not the right path for everyone,[10] but the consistent lack of reference made to male monks in this regard was noteworthy to say the least. None of the *silmātās* interviewed expressed concern that the men might have a hard time with the many rules imposed. Although I did not pursue this question in my interviews, I suspect that most of the *silmātās* had faith that men could manage monasticism with greater ease. Women, on the other hand, were assumed to probably be less capable. Although this paper cannot address the issue here, it is likely that a connection exists between these views and the predominant Buddhist prejudice concerning women and their inferior karma.[11]

Darsanī Silmātā, a bright and energetic 25 year-old, was particularly vocal with regard to male-female dynamics and monasticism. She was adopted by her teacher Daya when she was a young child after her father died and her mother became mentally unstable. The teacher and disciple lived together like mother and daughter in a gentle and affectionate home – a good example of the shades of grey available to *silmātās*. Like Sumedha Silmātā, Daya was not overly interested in issues of higher ordination, but her young apprentice certainly was. Darsani had very strong feelings against the ordination process, but unlike the other *silmātās* I have referred to here, this was not out of deference to the monks. In fact, it was quite the opposite actually. First of all, Darsanī was absolutely convinced that the rules a *bhikkhunī* was expected to follow are overwhelming. She believed that a nun could not even extend her right arm without breaking

a precept. She insisted on this point, continually extending and retracting her right arm for effect. She believed that nuns are imprisoned by their rules and can do nothing for themselves. She passionately argued that they could not sweep the floor lest they kill a bug, nor can they pick flowers for *pājā*. They could not cook or clean for themselves, and thus require the world to cater to them. Darsanī was committed to this view. She did not trust *bhikkhunīs* and certainly did not want to become one of them (again, despite the fact that she did not know any *bhkkhunīs* directly). She also spoke with conviction against the monks and refused to have to answer to them. As a *silmātā*, she felt free to do and practice as she desired with only Daya to answer to – a woman she obviously loved and trusted implicitly. But if she were to take ordination, she would have to bow to a monastic institution she had no interest in. She would, in her view, have to confess to the monks and scrape to the floor every time she approached one. Darsanī was the only *silmātā* I spoke with who demonstrated such strong views against the monks and their establishment. Bartholomeusz (1994) seems to have encountered such opposition regularly in her interviews, but in my work, Darsanī alone was willing to speak against the monks so intensely and was proud to be free of them. Her misconceptions about the *bhikkhunīs* and their limitations, however, were unfortunate. She, along with many other *silmātās*, had somehow been given the impression that *bhikkhunīs* had little to offer. All of the *silmātās* admitted that they had virtually no contact with *bhikkhunīs*, and yet they were consistently convinced that *bhikkhunīs* were a disappointment and a disgrace. I must add, however, that Darsanī's conviction was probably also motivated, at least in part, by a love for her teacher. Daya meant the world to her, and I believe she could not imagine living without her. Were she to take higher ordination, she would most likely be expected to leave Daya behind. Cheng (2007) encountered this issue as well, and reported that many elderly *silmātās* were concerned that if their young disciples took *upasampadā*, they would eventually come to despise them and move away. This was something Darsanī was not prepared to do so long as her teacher was alive. Nevertheless, the fact that she felt justified couching her decision in misogynistic assumptions about the *bhikkhunīs* reveals an intriguing feature of the social and political climate of the *silmātā* experience.

The most extreme views concerning ordination came from a Western *silmātā* named Samādhi who had taken the robes four years earlier. She lived in a meditation center in the forest under the care of the monks. This is a highly unorthodox situation for both the monks and for her, as the *Vinaya* is explicit against monks and nuns living in such close proximity. Samādhi Silmātā felt that the *upasampadā* taken by Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs* was glaringly illegitimate. She would rather wait as a *silmātā* for Buddha Metteyya to appear and revive the *bhikkhunī sāsana* properly. I asked her why she thought the lineage disappeared in the first place and she explained that it was because women were "cruel, dangerous and

manipulative." Indeed, that is why the Buddha hesitated before giving them ordination. He knew how difficult women were and did not want them in his community. I invited two Sri Lankan *silmātās* to partake in this interview, as they were eager to meet a Western *silnātā*. Although they made great efforts to be mindful of their speech, they were even more shocked by her responses than I was (which was confirmed with me later in private). Before we began the interview with Samādhi, she asked us to obtain formal permission from the chief monk of the center (the kind of situation Darsanī was rebelling against). We agreed, kneeled before him together and the Sri Lankan *silmātās* reverently made our request. After hearing about my research and intentions, he reluctantly agreed. My interpreter explained to me afterward, however, that just before we stood to depart, he reprimanded the *silmātās* before him for even broaching the issue of higher ordination. He scolded them for their interest in the matter and urged them against ever taking it. My interpreter was offended by his manner, but the *silmātās* said nothing to me. Samādhi's views against the process were obviously influenced by the views of a teacher she venerated deeply. Women, she believed, were not to take the robes until the next Buddha in line made his appearance. Clearly, institutionalised monasticism was currently inappropriate for women and that the most women could hope for was to sit at the feet of the much more fortunate men.

For all of the above *silmātās*, and many more, ordination was a question to be negotiated seriously. Whether they were quietly considering it or believed it to be thoroughly inappropriate, *bhikkhunī upasampadā* was on their minds. But for many others, ordination was thoroughly irrelevant. Bodhimitta Silmātā, for example, lived in a world all her own where ordination meant nothing. She was a housewife and mother before she became a *silmātā* and she remained a householder after too. She lived at home with her children and their families – something that directly contradicts the concept of renunciation for most. She wore the orange robes and shaved her head, but slept at home at night in the very bed she shared with her husband while he was alive, surrounded by her family members. For Bodhimitta, renunciation was not a philosophical pursuit. She did not take the robes as a result of any kind of insight or realisation about human suffering. Rather, renunciation was, for her, a command given from above: an anonymous god appeared to her in her dreams and insisted she become a *silmātā*. Her husband was unfortunately opposed to her renunciation. Consequently, according to her interpretation of the events, her anonymous god eliminated him from the equation - he was caught making an illegal purchase and was sent to prison. Bodhimitta was thus free to embark upon the journey she was being instructed to take, which began with a vow to perform the fire walk annually at a local festival for the next 21 years. When her husband returned from jail many years later, the couple discovered that they had even less in common than before. They fought often and he eventually committed suicide by hanging himself

in their home. Bodhimitta insisted that this event did not cause her any sense of loss or suffering. He opposed her renunciation and, in her view, was punished accordingly by the gods above. From that day forward, Bodhimitta was free to live a life of renunciation at home, which in her books primarily involved channeling gods and the spirits of the dead for her clients. She did not seem to know very much about Buddhism and certainly did not ascribe to the popular Western misconception of Buddhism functioning exclusively as a philosophy. For her, Buddhism was first and foremost an issue of exorcism and deity appeasement.

When I initially approached Bodhimitta, she assumed I was there for her services. She immediately spoke to me of a dead grandfather who was the cause behind my financial difficulties. I explained that I had no financial problems. She then assumed I was there for help with an angry husband, but I promised her that my husband was by no means an angry man. It took her quite some time to release herself of her channeling habits and realise that I was there to ask her questions. But even after she settled down for the interview, she continued to speak in circles invoking gods and goddesses, and explaining the world in terms of the celestial characters she was surrounded by in her imagination. Bodhimitta was a fascinating woman who lived in the world and yet was uninterested by it. She was a householder and a nun all at once. She was practical and involved in her community, took care of her home and her family members, and at the same time lived in a cosmic universe that only she could see. Bodhimitta was very far from the classical image of a Buddhist nun and served as a good reminder that Buddhism cannot be essentialised as a purely philosophical pursuit. Ordination and monastic recognition were completely dismissed by her as beside the point.

Homeless *silmātās* were similarly uninterested in the subject. I came across such women all over Sri Lanka, but predominantly in Kataragama and Anurādhapura. These women roam about the island without a roof to call their own. They are, in fact, to all intents and purposes, the most extreme renunciants I encountered during my research, for they had renounced everything without exception. The only difference between them and the Buddhist ideal was that the world around them had renounced them back. I spent a few days with a group of homeless *silmātās* living beneath Sri Mahābodhi in Anurādhapura. These women seemed to know very little about Buddhism and were more often hungry than concerned with the politics of ordination. They seemed to have a profound devotional practice, but could barely function much of the time for lack of food or support. I never even asked them about *upasampadā* as it did not seem appropriate. The little shack they once lived in just outside Sri Mahābodhi was bulldozed a few years earlier by the chief monk of the area and they were still waiting for him to fulfill his promise of rebuilding it. This was a much more important topic for them than ordination, as they faced sleeping outside beneath the trees every night where rape was a concern, not even permitted to remain

within the safe walls of Sri Mahābodhi after 10 pm (while he, so I was told by numerous people in the area, lived in palatial comfort and provided lay donors with *dana* menus). These women shared everything together – a common hunger, daily fears and insecurities, and for some, a painful history. One *silmātā*, for example, took the robes after her husband tried to kill her. She ran away and chose the life of a wandering *silmātā* as her only realistic alternative. When I asked her why she did not join a *ārama*, her answer was that she did not have any money to make an entry offering, and thus was condemned to a life of homelessness due to her poverty. Another *silmātā* was widowed at a very young age and renounced the world when no other option presented itself.[12] She provided me with the same financial explanation about why she had not joined a *ārama*. I was told of other *silmātās* with similar tales, although one in particular proudly distinguished herself from her companions in this regard: she claimed to have become a *silmātā* when she was fifteen for religious reasons and chose her life of homelessness specifically, and not because she had nowhere else to go. According to her calculations, she was at the time of the interview eighty years old.

Despite their homelessness and perhaps even mental instability in some cases, it was clear that these women shared a very intense devotion for the tree under which they lived. They all repeatedly proclaimed that, despite their suffering and hunger, they felt proud and honored to live by the tree of the Buddha's awakening. They insisted that their suffering paled in comparison with the joy they felt for being able to remain so close to it, and affirmed, repeatedly, that they were in fact living very much as the Buddha had lived: wandering and free. The homeless *silmātās* were a paradox: on the one hand, they were a tragedy of Sri Lankan Buddhism, and yet on the other, they were inspiring. I could not help but notice that, in my time on the island, I never came across a seemingly similar homeless monk.

Near the end of my work in Sri Lanka, and after having spoken with many *silmātās* and heard their views and complaints about ordination, I realised I needed to speak with *bhikkhunīs* as well. I did not have enough time to interview many, but I spoke with three and hope to return to the island soon to continue the discussion. I wanted to understand what they knew about the *silmātās* of their country – presumably they had each been one before they went forth into higher ordination – and why they thought they were being so vilified by them. One of the *bhikkhunīs* had never even noticed the homeless *silmātās* before, but the others were well aware of them (as were most Sri Lankans I encountered) and they all repeatedly insisted that they were crazy or at the very least "not real *silmātās*", and that I should not waste my time with them. Many laypeople in Anurādhapura were concerned that they gave the "real *silmātās*" of their community a bad name. The security guards at Sri Mahābodhi grew increasingly uncomfortable with my visits there. They kept trying to re-direct me to "better subjects" for my research. Eventually, the ones I was working with disappeared

from the site and it was impossible to find them again. When I asked the guards where they had gone to, they told me that they never stay long in the same place and had probably moved along to another area. I could not help but wonder if they were not in fact "invited to leave" instead. It was all quite suspicious, but I will never know for sure.

As for the other *silmātās* and their views of the process, the *bhikkhunīs* I spoke with were not entirely taken aback. They were surprised to hear misconceptions such as the notion that *bhikkhunīs* could not sweep the floor or pick flowers, or that the precepts would impede their progress in meditation and were concerned about where these views were coming from. But they seemed to have expected criticisms concerning their life-choice. One *bhikkhunī* argued that *silmātās* are, overall, largely uneducated and ignorant women. She was therefore not surprised to discover how misconstrued their views were. This issue of education was a sore one, as all of the *silmātās* I encountered – except for Bodhimitta and the homeless ones – made a point of their education. Sumedha Silmātā introduced me to one of her nuns who was a schoolteacher and emphasised the importance of education in her *ārama*. Daya Silmātā proudly showed me the government scholarship Darsanī was awarded for academic excellence. In a government-sponsored *ārama*, the *silmātās* functioned as the primary educators of the village, teaching classes for both children and adults alike. Education was an important point in all of these encounters, and the insistence on it by the *silmātās* revealed how sensitive they were to the charge of their ignorance. And yet, as knowledgeable as they were, their misconceptions about ordination were glaring.[13]

According to the *bhikkhunīs* interviewed, the sooner *silmātās* become properly educated the sooner they will realise their mistakes and pursue higher ordination. I suggested that perhaps some of the *silmātās* will choose to stay outside the institution even after it is formally recognised and they become "properly educated," but they all disagreed with me emphatically. One *bhikkhunī* told me that, once ordination is legitimated and all *silmātās* are granted an appropriate understanding of the process and the precepts they would be expected to follow, all of the *silmātās* would take *upasampadā*. The ones who refuse will simply disappear into the pages of history. In other words, in the very near future, one way or another, *silmātās* will no longer exist on the island of Sri Lanka. They have no place in Buddhism, as they are not a category the Buddha envisioned, and thus they will duly evaporate as the feminist embarrassment they are. It did not appear to occur to these *bhikkhunīs* that some *silmātās* may in fact, enjoy living outside social boundaries rather than within them despite their collective poverty and lack of recognition.

The question of female ordination in Sri Lanka is not a simple one. Answers were shaped by a variety of issues, not all of which were philosophical or religious in nature. Financial and social considerations played a significant role, as did relationships with teachers and the lay community. These layers of motiva-

tion also seemed to contribute to the conclusions each had drawn concerning the alternative. The few *bhikkhunīs* I interviewed felt very strongly about the philosophical and religious "rightness" of their decision to take higher ordination. I do not think it would be an exaggeration to suggest that they were zealous in this regard, championing their position as one of liberation from the confines of a patriarchal system that the others remained pathetically shackled to. It was also clear to me from those interviews, however, that a certain element of urgency lay behind their conviction: strength is to be found in numbers. So long as the majority of *silmātās* refuse to join the ranks, the ordination movement for women remains vulnerable. *Silmātās* on the other hand seemed at least, to some degree, threatened by the *bhikhhunīs* because they took steps that might undermine their own practice and life of renunciation. *Bhikkhunīs* also displayed courage and independence which I suspect triggered some emotional response as a result. If more *silmātās* walk away from their unrecognised status and choose a life of formal ordination instead, the pressure to follow suit will become stronger and it will become more difficult to criticise the movement and its participants from the safety of unordained walls. All of these concerns, and surely many more, were brimming beneath the surface when they considered the question of higher ordination. And I would be remiss not to suspect that there were even more layers behind their answers that I was not able to see.

The female renunciants of Sri Lanka are currently facing a tremendous challenge as they are being asked to position themselves along political, social and religious lines with a variety of consequences awaiting them on the other side. For some of the women, the answer was clear and had to do with religious truth. But for most others, the answer was steeped in uncertainty and ambiguity, as they faced potential risks that they may or may not be prepared to take. For many others still, the question was irrelevant. For the homeless *silmātās* and the independent Bodhimitta, the politics of higher ordination were too far from their reality to consider. The homeless *silmātās* were barely surviving, and when survival is at stake, theory is meaningless. However, as Janet Gyatso recently pointed out to me, if the homeless *silmātās* join their *bhikkhunī* sisters, they just might find the clout they are missing to demand that the shack that was bulldozed by the chief monk of the area be rebuilt.[14]

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## Notes

1 For discussions about the historical disappearance of nuns in Sri Lanka, see R. A. L. H. Gunawardana (1979: 37-39; 1988) and T. Bartholomeusz (1994: 18-22). For a discussion of nuns in India, see A. Sharma (1978) and for a discussion of their disappearance, see N. Auer Falk (1980).

2 The male monastic lineage of Sri Lanka was not, however, untouched by the ravages of history. It went through multiple phases throughout its history, and changes continue to this day. For a discussion of this history, see H. Bechert (1970).

3 For an excellent survey of the British response to Buddhism during this period, see Elizabeth J. Harris' most recent work, *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter* (2006).

4 According to De Silva (2004) in a written article, there are approximately 4000 *silmātās* on the island. When I interviewed her, however, she suggested that there were only 3000. It is unlikely that the numbers dropped so radically in such a short time. A few years earlier, Salgado (2000) also claimed that there were only about 3000, as did Goonatilake (1997). During my time in 2004 in Sri Lanka, I attempted to obtain the official numbers from government offices in Colombo, but to no avail.

5 For a history of the development of *silmātās* in Sri Lanka, see T. Bartholomeusz (1994), L. W. Bloss (1987), and R. Gombrich and G. Obeyesekere (1988).

6 Numerous arguments have been put forth in recent years concerning the legitimacy of reclaiming ordination for women in a Theravāda context. See for example, C. Kabilisingh (1988) and K. Devendra (1988). Most recently, see also W. Cheng, (2007).

7 For description of this event, see R. De Silva (2004). For a description of the 1998 ordination ceremony in Bodhgaya, see Y. Li (2000).

8 This viewed was also reflected in Elizabeth J. Harris' work (1997: 100).

9 Bloss encountered the same response (1987: 19).

10 This is a view Bartholomeusz (1994: 136-37) encountered repeatedly as well.

11 Wei-Yi Cheng addresses this issue at some length in her book (2007: 57-68).

12 This was the first time I heard of such "entry offerings" and, unfortunately, I could not pursue the subject with the non-homeless *silmātās* during my stay. This is a question, however, that I would like to pursue upon my return.

13 For further reference to their general lack of education, see Karma Lekshe Tsomo (1999) and Cheng (2007) suggests that, although *silmātās* may have been largely uneducated in the 80s and 90s, the situation has improved since then.

14 I gave a version of this paper at the Annual South Asia Conference in 2006, and this was part of Janet Gyatso's response. I thank her again for this comment and insight.

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