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BHIKKHUNĪS: WORTHY OF RESPECT AND SUPPORT

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BHIKKHUNĪS: WORTHY OF RESPECT AND SUPPORT**Abstract**

The present article begins by examining the legal validity of reviving an order of *bhikkhunīs* according to the parameters of the Pāli *Vinaya*, in an attempt to make the basic elements of the situation accessible to a wider audience beyond those with a specialized knowledge of Theravāda monastic law. Next, circumstances related to the transmission of Buddhism to Sri Lanka are taken up to provide a background for appreciating why the legal validity of reviving an order of *bhikkhunīs* has in the past not met with full recognition.

The article then turns to the importance of according respect and support to *bhikkhunīs*, illustrated with the case of Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā. A remarkable teaching attributed to her is translated and studied in comparison with a similar teaching attributed to the Buddha himself. The comparison throws into relief the unique contribution made by Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā's superb exposition of key aspects of the *Dhamma*. This in turn exemplifies the importance of granting women access to the life of a *bhikkhunī* in accordance with the Pāli *Vinaya*.

Keywords: *Bhikkhunī* Ordination, Kajaṅgalā, *Mahāpañhā*, *Vinaya*

Introduction

My exploration begins by taking up the account of the formation of an order of *bhikkhunīs* given in the Pāli *Vinaya*. I will attempt to present the basic legal situation in simple terms in order to make the situation transparent to the general reader. Based on what has emerged in this way, I then turn to the

transmission of Buddhism to Sri Lanka and the role played by the arahant Bhikkhu Mahinda in this respect, which helps to clarify why past generations have not fully appreciated the legal validity of reviving an order of *bhikkhunīs*.

Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī's Ordination

The legal validity of the successful revival of the Theravāda order of *bhikkhunīs* can be appreciated based on a short look at relevant key elements in the Pāli *Vinaya*. Admittedly, there are many details that render the situation somewhat complex, and I have discussed these elsewhere in a range of publications on this topic.¹ In what follows, I rather intend to present selected key elements in a straightforward manner that should be accessible to the general reader and hopefully suffice to lay to rest any misgivings.

The relevant procedure that emerges from the Pāli *Vinaya* is the option of “single ordination,” that is, ordination granted to women by an order of *bhikkhus* only.² This differs from “dual ordination,” which requires a collaboration between an order of *bhikkhus* and an order of *bhikkhunīs*. For such dual ordination, the latter order has of course to be in existence.

According to the relevant narrative portion in the Pāli *Vinaya*, the Buddha granted ordination to his fostermother Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī after her acceptance of eight weighty principles, *garudhamma*, that describe the way the new order of *bhikkhunīs* and the already existing order of *bhikkhus* will from then on collaborate with each other. One of these eight principles is the performance of dual ordination.³

Since Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī had a large following of women who also wanted to ordain, this inevitably raised the question of how to ordain these other women. When she asked the Buddha for guidance in this respect, he gave

permission for single ordination to be performed by *bhikkhus*.⁴

There are two main ways of interpreting this *Vinaya* report. One such way has been proposed by the famous Burmese Bhikkhu Mingun Jetavan Sayādaw (1868–1955), also known as the venerable U Nārada Mahāthera, a meditation master believed to have been an arahant.⁵ According to him, the underlying intention is to create a ruling relevant to a situation when an order of *bhikkhunīs* is not in existence. Given the widespread discrimination against women in the ancient Indian setting, the anticipation that an order of *bhikkhunīs* may go extinct more easily than an order of *bhikkhus* is only natural.

An alternative interpretation of the *Vinaya* narrative surrounding Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī's ordination would imply that the ruling on a single ordination results from the Buddha overlooking the obvious fact that granting ordination only to her was not enough to start an order of *bhikkhunīs* that could collaborate in giving dual ordination. This would amount to putting the Buddha in a rather uncomplimentary light.

Moreover, once he had been made aware of the problem created by his own legislation, to all appearances it did not occur to him that he may simply extend the method of ordination granted to Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī to her followers.⁶ Instead, supposedly unable to solve on his own the impasse he had created, he had to overrule his prior directive on dual ordination by replacing it with a rule on single ordination.

The ancient perspective on the matter can be explored by turning to the next episode related to *bhikkhunī* ordination in the Pāli *Vinaya*. The key question is whether the account of this episode gives indications that, once an order of *bhikkhunīs* had come into existence, dual ordinations were in some form implemented. The alternative would be that single ordination was

continued until further legislation had been promulgated by the Buddha, overruling the prior regulation on single ordination and instituting dual ordination.

In the first case, the rule on single ordination was understood as relevant only to the situation when no order of *bhikkhunīs* is in existence, in line with the first interpretation mentioned above and proposed by the venerable U Nārada Mahāthera. In the second case, however, the rule on single ordination was understood as the last rule to be followed until it was replaced by another, more recent rule on dual ordination, in line with the second interpretation mentioned above.

The next episode relevant to *bhikkhunī* ordination in the *Vinaya* concerns a procedural improvement of the type of ordination already in use, in the form of adding a set of inquiries to be asked of a candidate for ordination. One of these inquiries concerns the preceptress (*pavattinī*), clearly using a female term.⁷ Moreover, the one who is granting ordination is also designated with a feminine term (*upasampādentī*), which must be referring to a *bhikkhunī*.⁸ In other words, the wording of the rule takes for granted that a member of the order of *bhikkhunīs* was already taking part in the actual granting of ordination,⁹ and this without any reference to an additional legislation given by the Buddha to authorize such participation. In addition, the *Vinaya* refers to *bhikkhunīs* involved in the inquiry that forms part of the ordination procedure.¹⁰ This reference could not intend the candidates, as these are throughout referred to as those wanting to ordain, *upasampadāpekkhā*, reflecting the fact that at this point they have not yet become *bhikkhunīs*.

The various details that emerge in this way show that, despite the lack of an additional ruling by the Buddha overruling single ordination, the actual ordination procedure adopted at this particular point in monastic history differs

significantly from the single ordination that the *bhikkhus* would have granted to the female followers of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī. It follows that the understanding of the function of the rule on single ordination in ancient times concurs better with the interpretation proposed by the venerable Mingun Jetavan Sayādaw.

Once the rule on single ordination has, to all appearances, this specific purpose of facilitating the ordination of female candidates when no order of *bhikkhunīs* is in existence, it would be in keeping with the Pāli *Vinaya* to rely on it for the same purpose again in later times. This would not only be in line with the *Vinaya* but also with the foundational intention of the Buddha to have four assemblies of disciples. Besides male and female lay followers, these comprise not only *bhikkhus* but also *bhikkhunīs*.¹¹

Fortunately, the validity of *bhikkhunī* ordination has by now received official recognition from the supreme court of Sri Lanka.¹² With this important step in place, it seems only a matter of time until the same validity will also be fully recognized in other Theravāda countries.

Bhikkhunī Saṅghamittā

Nevertheless, given the indications in the Pāli *Vinaya* surveyed above, the question arises why, once the *bhikkhunī* order had died out, the *bhikkhus* in Sri Lanka did not simply revive it by granting single ordination. In other words, why has the validity of taking this step not been recognized earlier?

This can best be understood by turning to the report of the transmission of Buddhism to Sri Lanka, given in the chronicle *Dīpavaṃsa*. The arahant Bhikkhu Mahinda had come from India to Sri Lanka and successfully converted even the royal family. When asked to grant ordination to the queen and

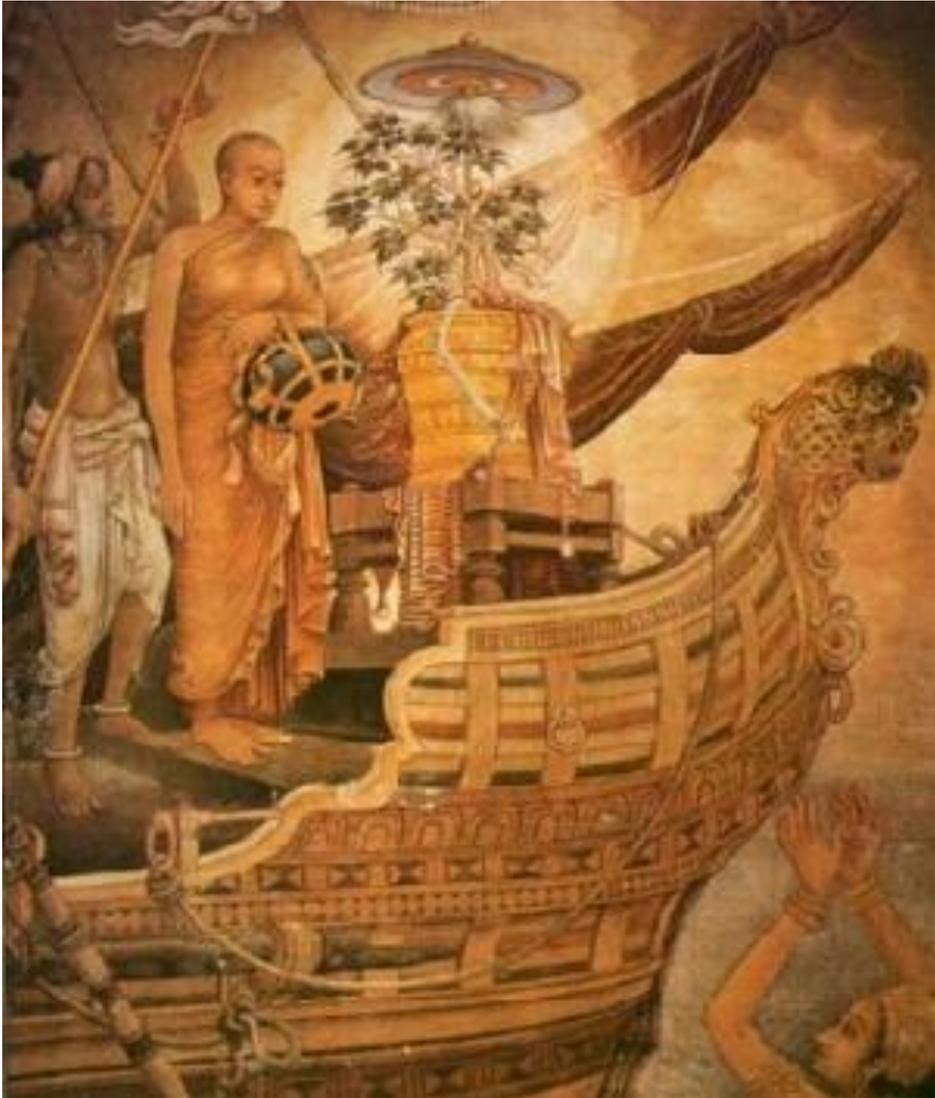
her followers, Bhikkhu Mahinda is on record for stating that it is not proper for a *bhikkhu* to give ordination to a woman.¹³ In the context in which this statement occurs, it is correct. An order of *bhikkhunīs* was in existence in India, hence the proper procedure to be followed for the case of the queen and her followers was dual ordination. The solution therefore was to invite Bhikkhu Mahinda's sister Bhikkhunī Saṅghamittā, who was also an arahant, to come with a group of *bhikkhunīs* to Sri Lanka and grant ordination. Bhikkhunī Saṅghamittā not only established the *bhikkhunī* lineage in Sri Lanka, but she also brought a sapling of the *bodhi* tree, as depicted on the image found on the next page.¹⁴

Had there been no order of *bhikkhunīs* in India, however, then the option of single ordination would have been the proper way to grant ordination to the queen and her followers.

Within its narrative setting, the succinct formulation given by Bhikkhu Mahinda served the purpose of explaining the situation to the king of Sri Lanka, for whom it would have been unnecessary to be informed of all the relevant legal details. Yet, from the viewpoint of later generations of *bhikkhus*, the succinct statement by the famous arahant Bhikkhu Mahinda can easily be taken at face value, conveying the impression that it is in principle impossible for *bhikkhus* to give single ordination to women.

It is thus only through a close inspection of the relevant portion of the *Vinaya* that Bhikkhu Mahinda's statement can be properly understood: It is indeed possible for *bhikkhus* to give single ordination to women if no order of *bhikkhunīs* is in existence that could collaborate with them in giving dual ordination.

Once this much has been clarified, there is no longer a basis for questioning in principle the legality of the revival of the Theravāda *bhikkhunī* order, as long as the main motivation is to promote upholding the Pāli *Vinaya* and acting in accordance with the Buddha's intentions.



Outstanding Buddhist Women

The full import of the Buddha's intention to ensure that there are wise and accomplished members of each of the four assemblies can be appreciated by turning to reports of the contributions made by Buddhist women in the ancient Indian setting. The broad range and remarkable nature of these contributions became clear to me on collecting material for my book publication *Daughters of the Buddha*, whose purpose is precisely to highlight this dimension of early Buddhism that has not always received the attention it deserves.¹⁵

In order to counterbalance the overall emphasis on *bhikkhunīs* in this article, I would like to mention briefly two examples of outstanding lay women. One of these is Khujjuttarā, without whom the discourse collection known as the *Itivuttaka* would not have been transmitted to later generations, including our own.¹⁶ Her role in this respect is quite unique, as she memorized the relevant discourses in the Buddha's presence and then passed them on. I am not aware of any male lay disciple who is on record for having made a comparable contribution.

The other example is Nandamātā, a non-returner with mastery of the four absorptions. The conclusion of a timely meal offering to Bhikkhu Sāriputta, who was passing by with a group of *bhikkhus*, afforded Nandamātā an opportunity to articulate her outstanding qualities. A particularly inspiring example she gives is her ability to remain mentally balanced on the three occasions when her only son was unjustly arrested, imprisoned, and eventually executed.¹⁷ In view of the importance that having a son carried for a woman in the ancient Indian setting, combined with a mother's natural affection for her child, this is a truly outstanding example of what systematic cultivation of the mind can accomplish. The report of her exemplary balance of mind is also

quite unique among the early discourses, offering a powerful source of inspiration for anyone dedicated to meditation with the aim of improving their own balance of mind.

Among *bhikkhunīs* of ancient times, rightly renowned are Bhikkhunī Khemā and Bhikkhunī Uppalavaṇṇā, who serve as role models for other *bhikkhunīs* of the past, present, and future.¹⁸ In this respect, they are the counterparts to Bhikkhu Sāriputta and Bhikkhu Mahāmoggallāna.

Other exemplary *bhikkhunīs* are Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā, renowned for her profound exposition on various aspects of the Buddha's teachings, as well as Bhikkhunī Somā, who aptly dismisses Māra's silly idea that women lack the wisdom required to reach spiritual perfection.¹⁹

Many more could be mentioned, but I would like to take up in particular the case of Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā as an example of a *bhikkhunī* who in the past has not received the attention she deserves, in particular for the rather remarkable teaching attributed to her in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya*. According to the relevant introductory narration, a group of lay disciples had requested her to expound in detail a brief statement by the Buddha, which involves a listing that proceeds from one to ten.²⁰

The idea informing this listing is to expound aspects of early Buddhist doctrine that fit the scaffolding of the numbers one through ten. Expounding this listing requires formulating a question, a brief statement, and an analysis in relation to ten doctrinal themes that proceed step-by-step from the number one to the number ten. In what follows I translate the teaching that, according to the report in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya*, Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā gave in response to this request, providing the original Pāli alongside the English for the sake of transparency and to facilitate consultation.²¹ For ease of reference in the

ensuing study section, in which I will examine selected aspects of this teaching, I underline the key doctrinal item in each section.

Translation of Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā's Teaching

eko pañho eko uddeso ekaṃ veyyākaraṇan ti, iti kho pan' etaṃ vuttaṃ bhagavatā. kiñ c'etaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ? ekadhamme, āvuso, bhikkhu sammā nibbindamāno sammā virajjamāno sammā vimuccamāno sammā pariyantadassāvī sammatthābhisamecca diṭṭh' eva dhamme dukkhass' antakaro hoti. katamasmiṃ ekadhamme? sabbe sattā āhāratṭhitikā. imasmiṃ kho, āvuso, ekadhamme bhikkhu sammā nibbindamāno sammā virajjamāno sammā vimuccamāno sammā pariyantadassāvī sammatthābhisamecca diṭṭh' eva dhamme dukkhass' antakaro hoti. eko pañho eko uddeso ekaṃ veyyākaraṇan ti, iti yaṃ taṃ vuttaṃ bhagavatā idam etaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ.

It has been said by the Blessed One: “A question about one, a brief statement of one, an analysis of one.” In relation to what has this been said? Friends, a monastic will make an end of *dukkha* in this very life on becoming fully disenchanted with one thing, fully dispassionate toward it, fully liberated from it, fully seeing its end, and fully penetrating its meaning.²² What is that one thing? All sentient beings subsist due to nutriment. Friends, on becoming fully disenchanted with this one thing, fully dispassionate toward it, fully liberated from it, fully seeing its end, and fully penetrating its meaning, a monastic will make an end of *dukkha* in this very life. When it has been said by the Blessed One: “A question about one, a brief statement of one, an analysis of one,” then it has been said in relation to this.

dve pañhā dve uddesā dve veyyākaraṇānī ti, iti kho pan' etaṃ vuttaṃ bhagavatā. kiñ c'etaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ? dvīsu, āvuso, dhammesu bhikkhu sammā nibbindamāno sammā virajjamāno sammā vimuccamāno sammā pariyantadassāvī sammatthābhisamecca diṭṭh' eva dhamme dukkhass' antakaro hoti. katamesu dvīsu? nāme ca rūpe ca. imesu kho, āvuso, dvīsu dhammesu bhikkhu sammā nibbindamāno sammā virajjamāno sammā vimuccamāno sammā pariyantadassāvī sammatthābhisamecca diṭṭh' eva dhamme dukkhass' antakaro hoti. dve pañhā dve uddesā dve veyyākaraṇānī ti, iti yaṃ taṃ vuttaṃ bhagavatā idam etaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ.

It has been said by the Blessed One: “A question about two, a brief statement of two, an analysis of two.” In relation to what has this been said? Friends, a monastic will make an end of *dukkha* in this very life on becoming fully disenchanted with two things, fully dispassionate toward them, fully liberated from them, fully seeing their end, and fully penetrating their meaning. What are those two? Name and form. Friends, on becoming fully disenchanted with these two things, fully dispassionate toward them, fully liberated from them, fully seeing their end, and fully penetrating their meaning, a monastic will make an end of *dukkha* in this very life. When it has been said by the Blessed One: “A question about two, a brief statement of two, an analysis of two,” then it has been said in relation to this.

tayo pañhā tayo uddesā tīṇi veyyākaraṇānī ti, iti kho pan' etaṃ vuttaṃ bhagavatā. kiñ c'etaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ? tīsu, āvuso, dhammesu bhikkhu sammā nibbindamāno sammā virajjamāno sammā vimuccamāno sammā pariyantadassāvī sammatthābhisamecca diṭṭh' eva dhamme dukkhass' antakaro hoti. katamesu tīsu? tīsu vedanāsu. imesu

kho, āvuso, tīsu dhammesu bhikkhu sammā nibbindamāno sammā virajjamāno sammā vimuccamāno sammā pariyantadassāvī sammatthābhisamecca diṭṭh' eva dhamme dukkhass' antakaro hoti. tayo pañhā tayo uddesā tīni veyyākaraṇānī ti, iti yaṃ taṃ vuttaṃ bhagavatā idam etaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ.

It has been said by the Blessed One: “A question about three, a brief statement of three, an analysis of three.” In relation to what has this been said? Friends, a monastic will make an end of *dukkha* in this very life on becoming fully disenchanted with three things, fully dispassionate toward them, fully liberated from them, fully seeing their end, and fully penetrating their meaning. What are those three? The three feeling tones. Friends, on becoming fully disenchanted with these three things, fully dispassionate toward them, fully liberated from them, fully seeing their end, and fully penetrating their meaning, a monastic will make an end of *dukkha* in this very life. When it has been said by the Blessed One: “A question about three, a brief statement of three, an analysis of three,” then it has been said in relation to this.

cattāro pañhā cattāro uddesā cattāri veyyākaraṇānī ti, iti kho pan' etaṃ vuttaṃ bhagavatā. kiñ c' etaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ? catūsu, āvuso, dhammesu bhikkhu sammā subhāvitacitto sammā pariyantadassāvī sammatthābhisamecca diṭṭh' eva dhamme dukkhass' antakaro hoti. katamesu catūsu? catūsu satipatthānesu. imesu kho, āvuso, catūsu dhammesu bhikkhu sammā subhāvitacitto sammā pariyantadassāvī sammatthābhisamecca diṭṭh' eva dhamme dukkhass' antakaro hoti. cattāro pañhā cattāro uddesā cattāri veyyākaraṇānī ti, iti yaṃ taṃ vuttaṃ bhagavatā idam etaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ.

It has been said by the Blessed One: “A question about four, a brief statement of four, an analysis of four.” In relation to what has this been said? Friends, a monastic will make an end of *dukkha* in this very life on fully and well cultivating the mind in four things, fully seeing their end, and fully penetrating their meaning. What are those four? The four establishments of mindfulness. Friends, on fully and well cultivating the mind in these four things, fully seeing their end, and fully penetrating their meaning, a monastic will make an end of *dukkha* in this very life. When it has been said by the Blessed One: “A question about four, a brief statement of four, an analysis of four,” then it has been said in relation to this.

*pañca pañhā pañc’uddesā pañca veyyākaraṇānī ti, iti kho paṇ’
etaṃ vuttaṃ bhagavatā. kiñ c’etaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ? pañcasu, āvuso,
dhammesu bhikkhu sammā subhāvitacitto sammā pariyantadassāvī
sammattābhisamecca diṭṭh’ eva dhamme dukkhass’ antakaro hoti.
katamesu pañcasu? pañcasu indriyesu. imesu kho, āvuso, pañcasu
dhammesu bhikkhu sammā subhāvitacitto sammā pariyantadassāvī
sammattābhisamecca diṭṭh’ eva dhamme dukkhass’ antakaro hoti.
pañca pañhā pañc’uddesā pañca veyyākaraṇānī ti, iti yaṃ taṃ vuttaṃ
bhagavatā idam etaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ.*

It has been said by the Blessed One: “A question about five, a brief statement of five, an analysis of five.” In relation to what has this been said? Friends, a monastic will make an end of *dukkha* in this very life on fully and well cultivating the mind in five things, fully seeing their end, and fully penetrating their meaning. What are those five? The five faculties. Friends, on fully and well cultivating the mind in these five things, fully seeing their end, and fully penetrating their

meaning, a monastic will make an end of *dukkha* in this very life. When it has been said by the Blessed One: “A question about five, a brief statement of five, an analysis of five,” then it has been said in relation to this.

cha pañhā cha uddesā cha veyyākaraṇānī ti, iti kho pan' etaṃ vuttaṃ bhagavatā. kiñ c'etaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ? chasu, āvuso, dhammesu bhikkhu sammā subhāvitacitto sammā pariyantadassāvī sammatthābhisamecca diṭṭh' eva dhamme dukkhass' antakaro hoti. katamesu chasu? chasu nissaraṇīyāsu dhātūsu. imesu kho, āvuso, chasu dhammesu bhikkhu sammā subhāvitacitto sammā pariyantadassāvī sammatthābhisamecca diṭṭh' eva dhamme dukkhass' antakaro hoti. cha pañhā cha uddesā cha veyyākaraṇānī ti, iti yaṃ taṃ vuttaṃ bhagavatā idam etaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ.

It has been said by the Blessed One: “A question about six, a brief statement of six, an analysis of six.” In relation to what has this been said? Friends, a monastic will make an end of *dukkha* in this very life on fully and well cultivating the mind in six things, fully seeing their end, and fully penetrating their meaning. What are those six? The six elements of release. Friends, on fully and well cultivating the mind in these six things, fully seeing their end, and fully penetrating their meaning, a monastic will make an end of *dukkha* in this very life. When it has been said by the Blessed One: “A question about six, a brief statement of six, an analysis of six,” then it has been said in relation to this.

satta pañhā satt' uddesā satta veyyākaraṇānī ti, iti kho pan' etaṃ vuttaṃ bhagavatā. kiñ c'etaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ? sattasu, āvuso,

dhammesu bhikkhu sammā subhāvitacitto sammā pariyantadassāvī sammatthābhisamecca diṭṭh' eva dhamme dukkhass' antakaro hoti. katamesu sattasu? sattasu bojjaṅgesu. imesu kho, āvuso, sattasu dhammesu bhikkhu sammā subhāvitacitto sammā pariyantadassāvī sammatthābhisamecca diṭṭh' eva dhamme dukkhass' antakaro hoti. satta pañhā satt' uddesā satta veyyākaraṇānī ti, iti yaṃ taṃ vuttaṃ bhagavatā idam etaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ.

It has been said by the Blessed One: “A question about seven, a brief statement of seven, an analysis of seven.” In relation to what has this been said? Friends, a monastic will make an end of *dukkha* in this very life on fully and well cultivating the mind in seven things, fully seeing their end, and fully penetrating their meaning. What are those seven? The seven factors of awakening. Friends, on fully and well cultivating the mind in these seven things, fully seeing their end, and fully penetrating their meaning, a monastic will make an end of *dukkha* in this very life. When it has been said by the Blessed One: “A question about seven, a brief statement of seven, an analysis of seven,” then it has been said in relation to this.

aṭṭha pañhā aṭṭh' uddesā aṭṭha veyyākaraṇānī ti, iti kho paṇ' etaṃ vuttaṃ bhagavatā. kiñ c' etaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ? aṭṭhasu, āvuso, dhammesu bhikkhu sammā subhāvitacitto sammā pariyantadassāvī sammatthābhisamecca diṭṭh' eva dhamme dukkhass' antakaro hoti. katamesu aṭṭhasu? aṭṭhasu ariye aṭṭhaṅgike magge. imesu kho, āvuso, aṭṭhasu dhammesu bhikkhu sammā subhāvitacitto sammā pariyantadassāvī sammatthābhisamecca diṭṭh' eva dhamme dukkhass' antakaro hoti. aṭṭha pañhā aṭṭh' uddesā aṭṭha veyyākaraṇānī ti, iti yaṃ taṃ vuttaṃ bhagavatā idam etaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ.

It has been said by the Blessed One: “A question about eight, a brief statement of eight, an analysis of eight.” In relation to what has this been said? Friends, a monastic will make an end of *dukkha* in this very life on fully and well cultivating the mind in eight things, fully seeing their end, and fully penetrating their meaning. What are those eight? The eight [members of] the noble eightfold path. Friends, on fully and well cultivating the mind in these eight things, fully seeing their end, and fully penetrating their meaning, a monastic will make an end of *dukkha* in this very life. When it has been said by the Blessed One: “A question about eight, a brief statement of eight, an analysis of eight,” then it has been said in relation to this.

nava pañhā nav’ uddesā nava veyyākaraṇānī ti, iti kho pan’ etaṃ vuttaṃ bhagavatā. kiñ c’etaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ? navasu, āvuso, dhammesu bhikkhu sammā nibbindamāno sammā virajjamāno sammā vimuccamāno sammā pariyantadassāvī sammatthābhisamecca diṭṭh’ eva dhamme dukkhass’ antakaro hoti. katamesu navasu? navasu sattāvāsesu. imesu kho, āvuso, navasu dhammesu bhikkhu sammā nibbindamāno sammā virajjamāno sammā vimuccamāno sammā pariyantadassāvī sammatthābhisamecca diṭṭh’ eva dhamme dukkhass’ antakaro hoti. nava pañhā nav’ uddesā nava veyyākaraṇānī ti, iti yaṃ taṃ vuttaṃ bhagavatā idam etaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ.

It has been said by the Blessed One: “A question about nine, a brief statement of nine, an analysis of nine.” In relation to what has this been said? Friends, a monastic will make an end of *dukkha* in this very life on becoming fully disenchanted with nine things, fully dispassionate toward them, fully liberated from them, fully seeing their end, and fully penetrating their meaning. What are those nine? The nine abodes

of sentient beings. Friends, on becoming fully disenchanted with these nine things, fully dispassionate toward them, fully liberated from them, fully seeing their end, and fully penetrating their meaning, a monastic will make an end of *dukkha* in this very life. When it has been said by the Blessed One: “A question about nine, a brief statement of nine, an analysis of nine,” then it has been said in relation to this.

dasa pañhā das’ uddesā dasa veyyākaraṇānī ti, iti kho pan’ etaṃ vuttaṃ bhagavatā. kiñ c’etaṃ paṭicca vuttaṃ? dasasu, āvuso, dhammesu bhikkhu sammā subhāvitacitto sammā pariyantadassāvī sammatthābhisamecca diṭṭh’ eva dhamme dukkhass’ antakaro hoti. katamesu dasasu? dasasu kusalesu kammaopathesu. imesu kho, āvuso, dasasu dhammesu bhikkhu sammā subhāvitacitto sammā pariyantadassāvī sammatthābhisamecca diṭṭh’ eva dhamme dukkhass’ antakaro hoti. dasa pañhā das’ uddesā dasa veyyākaraṇānī ti, iti yaṃ taṃ vuttaṃ bhagavatā idametam paṭicca vuttaṃ.

It has been said by the Blessed One: “A question about ten, a brief statement of ten, an analysis of ten.” In relation to what has this been said? Friends, a monastic will make an end of *dukkha* in this very life on fully and well cultivating the mind in ten things, fully seeing their end, and fully penetrating their meaning. What are those ten? The ten wholesome pathways of action. Friends, on fully and well cultivating the mind in these ten things, fully seeing their end, and fully penetrating their meaning, a monastic will make an end of *dukkha* in this very life. When it has been said by the Blessed One: “A question about ten, a brief statement of ten, an analysis of ten,” then it has been said in relation to this.

Study of Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā's Teaching

Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā concludes her teaching by inviting the lay disciples in her audience to approach the Buddha and report the teaching that had just been given by her. The lay disciples do as they have been told and, on hearing their report, the Buddha endorses the teaching by stating that Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā is wise and possessed of great wisdom. He also indicates that her teaching should be considered worth being memorized, and thus transmitted to future generations, as he would have expounded the matter in the same way.²³

According to the introductory narration, when Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā had been requested to expound on this topic, she had to inform her visitors that she had not heard an exposition of this type from others, wherefore all she could do is to expound it on her own:²⁴

na kho pan' etaṃ, āvuso, bhagavato sammukhā suttaṃ sammukhā paṭiggahitaṃ, na pi manobhāvanīyānaṃ bhikkhūnaṃ sammukhā suttaṃ sammukhā paṭiggahitaṃ. api ca, yathā m' ettha khāyati, taṃ suṇātha sādhukaṃ manasi karotha, bhāssissāmī ti.

Friends, I have not heard this in the presence of the Blessed One, not learned this in his presence, and I have also not heard this in the presence of meditating monastics, not learned this in their presence. Yet, listen and pay careful attention to what I will say, according to how it seems to me.”

Thus, all that Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā had as the starting point for her teaching was the following information reflected in the request by the lay disciples:²⁵

vuttam idaṃ, ayye, bhagavatā mahāpañhesu: eko pañho eko uddeso ekaṃ veyyākaraṇaṃ, dve pañhā dve uddesā dve veyyākaraṇāni, tayo pañhā tayo uddesā tīṇi veyyākaraṇāni, cattāro pañhā cattāro uddesā cattāri veyyākaraṇāni, pañca pañhā pañc' uddesā pañca veyyākaraṇāni, cha pañhā cha uddesā cha veyyākaraṇāni, satta pañhā satt' uddesā satta veyyākaraṇāni, aṭṭha pañhā aṭṭh' uddesā aṭṭha veyyākaraṇāni, nava pañhā nav' uddesā nava veyyākaraṇāni, dasa pañhā das' uddesā dasa veyyākaraṇāni ti. imassa nu kho, ayye, bhagavatā saṅkhittena bhāsītassa kathaṃ vitthārena attho daṭṭhabbo ti?

Revered lady, the Blessed One said in the Great Questions: A question about one, a brief statement of one, an analysis of one; a question about two, a brief statement of two, an analysis of two; a question about three, a brief statement of three, an analysis of three; a question about four, a brief statement of four, an analysis of four; a question about five, a brief statement of five, an analysis of five; a question about six, a brief statement of six, an analysis of six; a question about seven, a brief statement of seven, an analysis of seven; a question about eight, a brief statement of eight, an analysis of eight; a question about nine, a brief statement of nine, an analysis of nine; a question about ten, a brief statement of ten, an analysis of ten. Revered lady, how should the meaning of this succinct statement by the Blessed One be viewed in detail?

In the ancient Indian setting, such a listing was not necessarily considered self-evident in its implication. This can be seen from another discourse that reports the householder Citta in debate with the leader of the Jains. When Citta highlights an inconsistency in the position taken by the leader of the Jains, the latter becomes somewhat abusive, and Citta relies on

these ten questions to silence him, evidently because the Jain leader was unable to make sense of this type of presentation.²⁶

This makes it already to some degree noteworthy that Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā was able to give the teaching translated above based on just this rather cryptic indication. Her exposition unfolds in a manner that can perhaps be summarized with the help of the following list:

- 1) dispassion toward nutriment.
- 2) dispassion toward name-and-form.
- 3) dispassion toward the three feeling tones.
- 4) cultivation of the four establishments of mindfulness.
- 5) cultivation of the five faculties.
- 6) cultivation of six elements of release.
- 7) cultivation of the seven awakening factors.
- 8) cultivation of the members of the noble eightfold path.
- 9) dispassion toward the nine abodes of beings.
- 10) cultivation of the ten wholesome pathways of action.

Unlike Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā, as readers of the discourse collection in which her teaching has been recorded, we are in the fortunate position of being able to consult how the Buddha himself dealt with this topic. The relevant discourse reports the Buddha declaring that this type of teaching is beyond the ken of those outside of his dispensation (*sāsana*), to the extent that nobody in the world will be able to expound it except for the Buddha, one of his disciples, or someone who has heard it from them.²⁷ This declaration invests the actual teaching with special significance.

The teaching attributed to the Buddha can be summarized as follows, with the items that differ placed in italics:

- 1) dispassion toward nutriment.
- 2) dispassion toward name-and-form.
- 3) dispassion toward the three feeling tones.
- 4) *dispassion toward the four nutriments.*
- 5) *dispassion toward the five aggregates of clinging.*
- 6) *dispassion toward the six internal sense spheres.*
- 7) *dispassion toward the seven stations of consciousness.*
- 8) *dispassion toward the eight worldly conditions.*
- 9) dispassion toward the nine abodes of beings.
- 10) *dispassion toward the unwholesome pathways of action.*

On comparing the two listings, what stands out immediately is that the second listing consistently takes up items toward which one should have dispassion. Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā instead alternates between items that call for dispassion and those that rather require cultivation.

Now, making an end of *dukkha* in this very life, which is the key target mentioned in relation to each of the ten items in both lists, indeed requires dispassion, but it also requires cultivation. That is, the flexible approach adopted by Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā certainly does justice to the aspiration of making an end of *dukkha* in this very life. There is no reason in principle why a coverage of this topic should be confined to dispassion only.

Reflecting this basic difference in approach, the two listings agree on items related to dispassion. These are items 1, 2, 3, and 9 in both lists, which call for dispassion toward nutriment, name-and-form, the three feeling tones, and the nine abodes of beings.

In the case of item 10 there is a thematic agreement, as both lists take up the ten pathways of action. Whereas the second listing calls for dispassion

toward their unwholesome manifestations—killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, malicious speech, harsh speech, gossiping, covetousness, ill will, and wrong view—Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā instead commends cultivation of their wholesome manifestations.

In regard to items 5 and 6, the second listing’s commendation of dispassion toward the five aggregates of clinging and the six internal sense spheres clearly takes up key topics for insight contemplation. Nevertheless, Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā’s reference to a cultivation of the five faculties broaches a topic of similar importance. Her commendation of cultivating the six elements of release also touches on important topics, as these six cover the four *brahmavihāras*—loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity—as forms of release from ill will, harming, envy, and passion respectively, together with signlessness as a release from signs and overcoming conceit as a release from doubt.

Item 8 in the second listing, in the form of dispassion toward the eight worldly conditions—loss and gain, disrepute and fame, blame and praise, and pain and pleasure—has its counterpart in Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā placing a spotlight on the cultivation of the noble eightfold path. This is, of course, a key element in the early Buddhist path to liberation and an integral part of the teaching given by the Buddha already in what according to tradition was his first sermon after having awakened,²⁸ whereby he set in motion the wheel of Dharma.

The second listing’s item 4, in the form of dispassion toward the four nutriment, seems not too different from item 1 in both listings, as the nutriment on which all sentient beings of the human and animal type subsist is the first in the traditional listing of four nutriment, which comprise material food,

contact, volition, and consciousness.²⁹ Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā instead presents a cultivation of the four establishments of mindfulness as the fourth item in her list. The four establishments of mindfulness are of course another key element of the early Buddhist path that certainly deserves to be cultivated in order to make an end of *dukkha*.

The second listing's item 7, in the form of dispassion toward the seven stations of consciousness, results in a redundancy, as both listings mention the nine abodes of beings as their item 9. Yet, the first seven of these nine abodes of beings correspond to the seven stations of consciousness.³⁰ In this way, from the viewpoint of item 9, item 7 becomes indeed redundant. Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā instead commends as her item 7 a cultivation of the seven awakening factors, yet another key element of the path to awakening.

In this way, when setting side-by-side the actual exposition reportedly given by the Buddha and Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā's way of expounding the same basic topic, the result is startling. The Buddha's teaching, at least in the form in which it has been transmitted (and thus potentially suffering from a transmission error), contains partial or full redundancies: Item 1 takes up the type of nutriment on which sentient beings subsist, which is the same as the first of the four nutriments mentioned as item 4.³¹ The coverage of item 9 takes up dispassion toward the nine abodes of beings, even though dispassion toward seven of these nine has already been mentioned earlier under item 7, and the listing of nine abodes only has two more instances to add to that.³²

No such redundancy can be found in Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā's exposition. Her exposition takes up the topic of nutriment only in relation to item 1, and when coming to item 9, dispassion toward the nine abodes of beings breaks entirely new ground rather than mostly repeating what has been said earlier. I

am not aware of any other instance among Pāli discourses where a disciple is on record for expounding a particular topic in a way that can be considered an improvement over the way the Buddha has reportedly dealt with it. This goes to show to what degree Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā’s teaching deserves to be reckoned an outstanding contribution.

Now, just imagine someone had raised some legalistic argument to stop Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā from taking full ordination, thereby preventing her from receiving the support she needed for her monastic life and for her dedication to the practice that must have been responsible for her superb ability to give such teachings. Or else imagine the same legalistic argument being used to cast doubt on the validity of her ordination, thereby depriving her of the respect that, in the traditional setting, naturally comes with the status of being a *bhikkhunī*. In such a case, the lay disciples may have thought it not worth their while to request that she expound on this matter, and her powerful exposition would not have occurred in the first place.

In this way, the example of Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā can be taken to illustrate the importance of ensuring that *bhikkhunīs* can offer their contribution to the welfare of the Buddha’s dispensation. It is for this reason that the debate on the legality of *bhikkhunī* ordination has ramifications beyond those who are ordained, and it is important for the average Buddhist to have at least a general idea in this respect. Hopefully the discussion in the first part of this article has been able to provide this much.

Janet Gyatso rightly points out that “the flourishing of Buddhist monastic communities depends on the support of the laity; that dependence is built into the foundation of Buddhist monasticism from the start.” For this reason, the thriving of the order of *bhikkhunīs* “will depend on whether a critical

mass of the Buddhist community decides to support them.”³³ This article will have achieved its aim if it has thrown into relief the worthiness of supporting *bhikkhunīs* and giving them the respect they deserve. We are living in challenging times, where we need all our resources. We just cannot afford to close the door to future Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalās.

Conclusion

A close inspection of the relevant parts of the Pāli *Vinaya* shows that a revival of an extinct order of *bhikkhunīs* is a legally valid option, and this option has by now fortunately received recognition from the supreme court of Sri Lanka. Circumstances of the transmission of Buddhism to Sri Lanka appear to have been responsible for a loss from sight of the validity of this procedure.

The importance of supporting the revived *bhikkhunī* order becomes evident on acknowledging the significant contributions made by *bhikkhunīs* in the past to the *sāsana*. A particularly remarkable case that so far has not received the attention it deserves is the teaching given by Bhikkhunī Kajaṅgalā on her own accord, which a close inspection shows to be an improvement over a similar exposition attributed to the Buddha himself. Her example should suffice to inspire granting *bhikkhunīs* the respect and support they require to live the monastic life and offer their contribution to the stability and growth of Buddhism in contemporary times.

Abbreviations

AN	<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>
D	Derge edition
Dīp	<i>Dīpavaṃsa</i>
DĀ	<i>Dīrgha-āgama</i> (T 1)
DN	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
P	Peking edition
PTS	Pali Text Society
SĀ	<i>Samyuktāgama</i> (T 99)
SĀ ²	partial <i>Samyuktāgama</i> (T 100)
SN	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
T	Taishō edition (CBETA)
Ud	<i>Udāna</i>
Up	<i>Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā</i>
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i>

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Endnotes

¹ These can be accessed by searching for “*bhikkhunī* ordination” and “*bhikkhunī* order” on the webpage of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies that offers a survey of my various publications; see <https://www.buddhisticquiry.org/resources/publications/>

² The Pāli *Vinaya* does not recognize the existence of other *Vinaya* lineages. Due to being based on the parameters of the Pāli *Vinaya*, my discussion does not cover—or intend to take an implicit position on—ordinations conducted by members of different *Vinaya* lineages.

³ *Cullavagga* X.1, Vin II 255,19.

⁴ *Cullavagga* X.2, Vin II 257,7: *anujānāmi, bhikkhave, bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetun ti*; translated by Horner 1952/1975: 357 as: “I allow, *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs* to be ordained by *bhikkhus*.”

⁵ For a translation see Bodhi 2010: 135–142.

⁶ Note that the basic fact that the *bhikkhus* were expected to become active in relation to the ordination of female candidates is already evident from the directive on dual ordination that is part of the eight principles, which the Buddha communicated to Ānanda, from whom the

bhikkhus would naturally have come to know about it. With this much in place, the Buddha would not have been prevented from granting ordination to Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī’s followers himself by the wish to avoid becoming personally responsible for their monastic training—whatever form that may have taken at this early stage in the evolution of Buddhist monasticism—as he could have just delegated this task to the *bhikkhus*, either by telling Ānanda or addressing them directly. In other words, authorizing the *bhikkhus* to ordain the female candidates, instead of granting such ordination himself, was not the only possible way for the Buddha to entrust the former with the monastic training of the latter.

⁷ *Cullavagga* X.17, Vin II 271,30: *kā nāmā te pavattinī ti?*; translated by Horner 1952/1975: 375 as: “What is the name of your woman proposer?”

⁸ *Cullavagga* X.17, Vin II 271,21: *anujānāmi, bhikkhave, upasampādentiyā catuvīsatiṃ antarāyike dhamme pucchitum*. The key term *upasampādentiyā* is a feminine form of the present participle of *upasampādeti*, “to grant ordination,” and in the present context must be functioning as an instrumental. The term has unfortunately been mistranslated by Horner 1952/1975: 375: “I allow you, *bhikkhus*, to question a woman who is being ordained about twenty-four things that are stumbling-blocks”; the correct understanding of the term can be seen in Cone 2001: 476, based on which the reference to “a woman who is being ordained” in the above translation can be corrected to “a woman who is granting ordination.” I am indebted to Bhikkhu Brahmāli for drawing my attention to the significance of this passage.

⁹ This can be confirmed by turning to the corresponding rule for *bhikkhus*, *Mahāvagga* I.76, Vin I 93,26: *anujānāmi, bhikkhave, upasampādentena terasa (PTS: tassa) antarāyike dhamme pucchitum ... konāmo te upajjhāyo ti?*; translated by Horner 1951/1982: 120 as “I allow you, *bhikkhus*, when one is being ordained to ask him about things which are stumbling-blocks for him ... What is the name of your preceptor?” (This translation needs to be corrected; see above note 8). The procedure clearly reflects the type of ordination already undertaken at the time the ruling is pronounced, confirming that in this case, as in the case of the corresponding rule for *bhikkhunīs*, the issue at stake is merely the introduction of a set of inquiries.

¹⁰ *Cullavagga* X.17, Vin II 271,31: *tena kho pana samayena bhikkhū bhikkhunīnam antarāyike dhamme pucchanti; upasampadāpekkhāyo vitthāyanti maṅku honti na sakkonti vissajjetum*; translated by Horner 1952/1975: 375 as: “Now at that time *bhikkhus* asked *bhikkhunīs* about the things which are stumbling-blocks. Those wishing for ordination were at a loss, they were

abashed, they were unable to answer.” For a more detailed discussion of the somewhat unusual grammar and probable implications of the reference to *bhikkhunīnaṃ* in this quote see Anālayo 2017: 15–18.

¹¹ DN 16 at DN II 105,8 reports the Buddha’s determination not to pass away until he had wise and accomplished *bhikkhunī* disciples as one of the four assemblies; see also SN 51.10 at SN V 261,18, AN 8.70 at AN IV 310,32, Ud 6.1 at Ud 63,32, Waldschmidt 1951: 208 (16.8), DĀ 2 at T I 15c2, T 5 at T I 165a19, T 6 at T I 180b26, T 7 at T I 191b28, and T 1451 at T XXIV 387c27.

¹² <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/news/special-report-landmark-supreme-court-ruling-affirms-equal-rights-for-buddhist-bhikkhunis-in-sri-lanka/>

¹³ Dīp 15.76, Oldenberg 1879: 84,19: *akappiyā, mahārāja, itthipabbajjā bhikkhuno*.

¹⁴ Courtesy Bhikkhu Ānandajoti.

¹⁵ I already discussed the case of Kajaṅgalā in Anālayo 2022: 133–147.

¹⁶ See Anālayo 2022: 55f.

¹⁷ AN 7.50 at AN IV 65,16.

¹⁸ SN 17.24 at SN II 236,16, AN 2.12.2 at AN I 88,16, AN 4.176 at AN II 164,7, and EĀ 9.2 at T II 562b19; see also the *Mahāvastu*, Senart 1882: 251,21.

¹⁹ MN 44 at MN I 299,1, Up 1005 at D 4094 *ju* 6b2 or P 5595 *tu* 7a7, and MĀ 210 at T I 788a16; SN 5.2 at SN I 129,23, SĀ 1199 at T II 326a17, and SĀ² 215 at T II 453c26.

²⁰ AN 10.28 at AN V 54,26.

²¹ The translated portion is found in AN 10.28 at AN V 55,16 to 58,13; abbreviated portions have been supplemented with the full text.

²² The translation “monastic” is meant to signal that in the present context the term *bhikkhu* functions in a general way that is not confined to males who have received full ordination; see on this usage in more detail Collett and Anālayo 2014.

²³ Legittimo 2012: 368 points out that “[h]er explanations indeed partly differ from those given by the Buddha. Nevertheless, when the lay followers, taking her advice, subsequently go to see the Buddha and repeat the nun’s exposition, the Buddha is said to fully approve her teaching.”

²⁴ AN 10.28 at AN V 55,9.

²⁵ AN 10.28 at AN V 54,26.

²⁶ SN 41.8 at SN IV 299,27 and SĀ 574 at T II 152c26.

²⁷ AN 10.27 at AN V 50,17; for a less strongly worded declaration see the parallel EĀ 46.8 at T II 778c13.

²⁸ SN 56.11 at SN V 421,12; for a comparative study see Anālayo 2012 and 2013.

²⁹ On the four nutriments see in more detail Nyanaponika 1981.

³⁰ This can be seen when comparing AN 7.41 at AN IV 39,16 with AN 9.24 at AN IV 401,5.

³¹ AN 10.27 at AN V 50,28 and 52,5.

³² AN 10.27 at AN V 53,9+35.

³³ Gyatso 2010: 5; see also Mrozik 2014.