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Conference Paper

Exploring Gender Equity Issues Facing Theravadin Buddhist Nuns in Australia: A Report to the Sangha

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Abstract

This paper is a summary of the presentation provided to the Australian Sangha Association Annual Conference held in Canberra 11-12 May 2023. The full bhikkhuni ordination has been provided to Buddhist women in the Theravada tradition in Australia since 2009. My study seeks to document the perception, views and experiences of Australian Theravada Buddhist nuns, monks, and laity on a range of gender issues debated internationally. Through semi-structured interviews, this study compares and contrasts participants' experiences with the findings of the existing research, providing a deeper understanding of Australian monastic life for women.

Keywords

Theravada, Bhikkhuni, Buddhism, Nun, Gender Equality, Australia

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Introduction

This paper is a summary of the presentation provided to the Australian Sangha Association Annual Conference held in Canberra 11-12 May 2023[1]. This study of Theravadin bhikkhuni[2] in

[1] The Australian Sangha Association is the representative body for Buddhist monastics in Australia. The term *sangha* refers to the monastic community of monks and nuns. The term fourfold sangha is extended to include laymen and laywomen. The full video presentation at the ASA Conference is available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHisNQuWIcY.

[2] A bhikkhuni is a fully ordained Buddhist nun. A bhikkhu is the masculine term for a monk. In the Theravada tradition, it is widely accepted that the bhikkhuni sangha had 'died out' centuries ago, and that the only monastic pathway available to Theravadin women was as a lower status 'novice' or '10 precept' nun. In 1996, a group of Sri Lankan women undertook the higher bhikkhuni ordination in Sarnath, India triggering what is known as 'The Bhikkhuni Revival'. In 2009, four Australian nuns received bhikkhuni ordination in Western Australia amidst much controversy. Nonetheless, Australian bhikkhunis continue to ordain here.

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Australia is the topic of my Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) thesis being undertaken at the University of Adelaide, supervised by Dr. Tiziana Torresi (University of Adelaide) and Dr. Nadine Levy (Nan Tien Institute). My study seeks to document the perception, views and experiences of Australian Theravada Buddhist nuns, monks, and laity on a range of gender issues debated internationally. Through semi-structured interviews, this study compares and contrasts participants' experiences with the findings of the existing research, providing a deeper understanding of Australian monastic life for women.

The importance of the project is exemplified by an almost universal response from Australian laypeople when I mention that I am researching Buddhist nuns. People immediately ask, 'Do Buddhists have nuns?' To me, this immediately flags the issue of visibility which is explored further in this paper. Subsequent questions posed usually query whether I am a Buddhist[3], and how I came about researching the topic. In response, I explain that my interest in Buddhist gender issues started in 2018 when I witnessed an incident at an Adelaide pindapata alms gathering. Monks and nuns from different temples were involved, with the bhikkhunis, who were quite senior, being segregated to the back of the line, and subsequently shunned by some devotees from particular temples. This behaviour was noted by onlookers, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, with obvious distaste, and my observations formed the embryonic questions that underpin my doctoral research.

Preparing for the study

An initial search of the academic databases for existing scholarly work on Australian bhikkhunis showed that little research had been done to date. Professor Anna Hallafoff's work

[3] The author is of Anglo-Celtic decent and identifies as a practicing Buddhist, generally associating with the Theravada teachings.

on the *Buddhist Life Stories of Australia* (2016) was the most comprehensive fieldwork specifically including Australian bhikkhunis from different traditions. And while there was a broad body of work on Buddhism in Australia, mention of bhikkhunis and Buddhist women were sparse, reinforcing the issue of lack of visibility. However, expanding the search outside of Australia found a significant number of international papers debating the contemporary Bhikkhuni Revival. This formed the foundation methodology of the project: to ask Australian monastics for their opinions and experiences on themes drawn from the international literature, thereby contributing an Australian perspective. I decided that a semi-structured interview with nuns, monks and select lay people would both provide the best data for the project, as well as give the participants a platform to have their voices on record.

In the early stages of designing the interview schedule, I consulted with a senior bhikkhuni and a senior bhikkhu on the applicability and sensitivity of the questions. It was important that I engaged with the sangha early, to ensure that the project was relevant to their lives, and to recognise the risks associated with self-disclosure for the population. I also decided to limit the scope of the project to the Theravadin tradition principally to keep the project within achievable parameters of a PhD thesis, but also in recognition of the Theravada Bhikkhuni ordination that has been happening in Australia since 2009. I believe that many of my findings may be relevant to women in other Buddhist traditions and I would encourage further research in this area.

Themes in the International Studies

In reviewing approximately 300 international publications, I identified three main types of study. These spanned different traditions and included arguments from both monastic and lay academics, which I will summarise here.

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Buddhist papers

Much of the scholarship explored the legitimacy of bhikkhuni ordination, the purity of lineage, interpretations of the vinaya[4], linguistics, historical precedent, the garudhamma[5], monastic rules and the hierarchies that have developed in different countries. It was clear that there was a 'conservative' group of authors that opposed bhikkhuni ordination, and a 'progressive' group that supported full bhikkhuni ordination. The majority of lay academics tended to be in the progressive camp, but also tended to portray monasticism as repressive and problematic. I was keen to see how the Australian monastics responded to this type of criticism.

Feminist papers

Certain studies examined the issues facing Buddhist women from a feminist perspective. Unfortunately, however, a lot of this work became problematic as some displayed orientalist attitudes toward Asian countries. For example, despite some ground-breaking work in her book *Buddhism After Patriarchy,* American feminist Rita Gross problematically claimed:

> All these new currents in Buddhism owe something to Buddhism's immersion in the global network of ideas and influences, but the Buddhist feminist concerns are especially dependent on Western feminism and are taken most seriously by Western Buddhists. The most powerful agent promoting post-patriarchal Buddhism is the auspicious coincidence of feminism and Buddhism in the West. That Western Buddhists should have so quickly moved into leadership on this issue, which is so critical for Buddhism's future, is due to an auspicious coincidence of two independent streams of influence (Gross 1993, p. 218).

The understandable responses to this type of position detracted from research on the needs and lived experiences of the nuns (Cheng 2007; Salgado 2013; Sasson 2007; Yeng 2020). This

[4] The vinaya are the monastic rules.
[5] The garudhamma are eight rules specific to bhikkhunis and the focus of much debate. The most contentious being the requirement for even the most senior bhikkhuni to bow down before the most junior bhikkhu.

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was further complicated by a simplistic East-West dichotomy where some conservatives would attack "feminism" as being a western construct, as seen at the 2007 Hamburg conference[6] (Mrozik 2009). Many studies highlighted the work of politically active Buddhist Women's groups such as Sakyadhita International. With Australia being a notionally 'Western' country, I was interested to see if any of these debates had any impact on the nuns here.

Lived-Experience Papers

Throughout the literature, a small number of studies involved fieldwork and where the academics actually spoke with the bhikkhunis. Notably the work of Susan Mrozik (Mrozik 2014), Amy Langenberg (Langenberg 2018) and Cheng Wei-Yi (Cheng 2007) explored the nun's agency, how historical voicelessness and role models impact the bhikkhuni sasana[7], the myriad of day-to-day problems that nuns face in different countries, how many nuns live in monocultural societies with embedded societal norms, and how nationalist politics can quash emerging bhikkhuni orders. With so little fieldwork in Australia, these topics became an integral part of my research questions.

Fieldwork

Michelle Spuler identifies that '[one] problem is that almost none of the few studies on the adaptation of Buddhism to the West are based on fieldwork' (Spuler 2002, p. 4). So going out to see the nuns and monks in their communities was an essential part of the study. And it was a wonderful experience. The primary purpose of the fieldwork was to spend time with the monastics in their day-to-day lives, and to answer any questions or concerns about the study.

[6] The International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha: Bhikkhuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages, was held in July 2007 at the University of Hamburg, Germany.
[7] The bhikkhuni sasana loosely translates as the 'nuns' order'.

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I was made to feel welcome at every monastery and vihara[8], and while not every monastic was willing to participate in the project, all of the nuns, monks and laypeople that I encountered were happy to chat about the study. Most of those who decided to participate in the study opted to either be interviewed by ZOOM™ or to provide a written response. It was also made clear that some monastics chose not to be interviewed on account of being dedicated to their renunciate practice.

My visits included sites in Western Australia, Victoria, South Australia, and New South Wales. I chose communities that had indicated some interest in the study and contacted each site in advance to get permission to visit. Where appropriate, I was also in contact with the various lay groups who supported the monastics, who again were very helpful in facilitating my visits. Approximately half of the interviews can be directly attributed to the fieldwork visits, with other participants responding directly to the broadcast study promotion.

At the time of the Australian Sangha Association conference in May 2023, twelve nuns, six monks and four lay supporters (2F 2M) have been interviewed in the study. A crucial part of the study design is how I work with and analyse the interview transcripts. The original transcript is provided to the participant after the interview. The participant has full editorial rights to the transcript to ensure that their voice has been accurately captured. The edited/finalised transcript will then be published, with consent, as an appendix to the thesis. There has been justifiable criticism of written records throughout the ages, particularly those written by men, in that the voices of the nuns are buried or silenced. Even recently, a claimed 'translation' of the *Therigatha*[9] has proven to be the voice of a Caucasian American man

[8] Vihara – a place where monks and nuns reside.
[9] The *Therigatha* are a collection of verses of nuns dating back to the time of the historical Buddha and are considered part of the Buddhist canon.

causing debate and pain within the sangha (Akāliko 2021; Weingast 2020). By ensuring that the vetted transcripts of my study participants are available, this both ensures that their voices are there, and recorded in a national archive.

Ordination, Structure and Rules

The most important finding of the study is that Theravadin bhikkhunis do exist in Australia, however there are still temples here that tell their devotees not to support bhikkhunis nor the monks who support bhikkhunis. It was interesting to note that this latter finding rarely came up when talking with nuns but was commonly heard during conversations with monks and laity.

It was also clear that a lot of the academic work does not accurately represent the lived experiences and attitudes of bhikkhunis. It is common misconception that a bhikkhuni's "confession" is to a monk much as one might see in Catholicism, which is not the case and which the nuns were happy to correct. There is also an idea amongst many non-monastics that all nuns' monasteries directly answer to monks' monasteries, and that monastic rules are repressive. My study found that our Australian nuns' monasteries have full autonomy, and respondents were very clear that their agency is uncompromised. Many pointed out that the patriarchal hierarchies outlined in many international studies, which are evident in many traditionally Buddhist countries, are not actually part of the vinaya. Participants emphasized that their devotion to their practice and living by their vinaya is essential to their training, and that the patriarchal repression envisioned by many academics is misunderstood. Moreover, while culturally specific patriarchal customs do influence some temples and communities, there is plenty of scope to challenge and contest these in Australia.

As an aside, one dominant theme in the responses is the importance of information technology for Australian monastics, for networking, dhamma talks, ovada, sutta studies[10] and other communication both with monastics and lay supporters. Many studies in traditionally Buddhist countries where there is a "temple on every corner" simply do not envision the isolation and distances encountered by Australian renunciates. Again, Prof Anna Halafoff has some excellent work in this area of digital communication in Buddhism (Halafoff, Tomalin & Starkey 2022).

Feminism

The interviews were structured to ask participants for their views on issues that were raised in the international scholarship, of which feminism was one of the recurrent themes. Whether it was an academic applying a feminist framework and concluding that monasticism was patriarchally repressive, a conservative monk claiming that the whole Bhikkhuni Revival was a Western feminist initiative, or a dispute between academics on orientalism, I simply asked the participant to comment on these issues.

Most participants burst into laughter, quipping that, 'Yes, 2600 years ago the Buddha decided to be a Western feminist' [paraphrased from multiple interviews]. There was a clear disconnect between the academic questions being asked and the lived experience and viewpoints of the monastics. That is not to say that monastics were not supportive of many feminist ideals. Rather, by and large, what was more important to them was their own renunciate practice, living the dhamma, and working towards enlightenment. When questioned about politically active groups supporting Buddhist women, such as Sakyadhita

[10] Dhamma talks are Buddhist teachings, sutta studies particularly examine Buddhist texts, the ovada refers to a fortnightly teaching and communication between bhikkhunis and a qualified bhikkhu.

International, again most participants were politically aware, but not politically active. When the issue of 'traditional patriarchal structures' arose, participants acknowledged that in some countries and temples this was an issue, but also clarified that such structures are not laid out in the vinaya. Several participants noted that in many Theravadin dominant countries, such hierarchies are state endorsed. And, while some of these values have been imported to particular Australian Buddhist communities, the relative freedoms of religion that are protected in Australia are conducive to the growth of a bhikkhuni sasana.

Day to day issues

Amongst the academic papers that involved international fieldwork, there were multiple issues that local nuns faced. One of the questions that I asked participants was, "What is something that a nun might experience, that a monk wouldn't?" The response was unexpected and almost universally bhikkhunis expressed that monks get to live with teachers and role models who have 20-30-40 vassas[11]. In Australia, bhikkhuni ordination has only been in place since 2009, so the opportunity to immerse oneself in a community of very senior bhikkhunis is not possible yet. The word 'gravitas' came up a lot during interviews, and the nuns were all very aware that gravitas is something that is developed over time. The term "bootstrapping" was also prominent in the responses, not only in establishing monasteries and infrastructure, but in relearning and reinstituting the bhikkhuni vinaya as a living model. This was unlike the bhikkhu vinaya which has been passed down from monk to monk for centuries.

[11] Vassa: the annual rain's retreat. A bhikkhu's or bhikkhuni's "age" is counted on the number of rains retreats that they have undertaken since their full ordination.

Similarly, since the whole Australian bhikkhuni sasana is in its teenage years, and spread very thinly, a relatively junior nun may be asked to become an abbot, or a spiritual director, or to run a retreat. No junior monk would be expected to take on such responsibilities. Furthermore, several participants expressed that undertaking this kind of role has a real impact on the nun's ability to develop their own practice, their own gravitas in their words, to devote themselves to the renunciate lifestyle. This was perhaps more marked between city nuns and forest nuns. The issue of visibility also came up again, with a real internal conflict at the individual level between the desire for a hermetic practice and the desire to teach and be publicly seen as a bhikkhuni.

When questioned on what barriers bhikkhuni's face, overwhelmingly the nuns assured me that their day-to-day food, medicines, and shelter were amply met. Nonetheless, with only three major monasteries for Theravadin nuns in Australia, the opportunities to travel and grow were seen as limited. The biggest issues that participants raised were Australian immigration visas and aged care. I acknowledge that both of these problems have also been raised by the Australian Sangha Association who are working to resolve these.

Multiculturalism

With so many of the international studies being undertaken in countries in which Buddhism is the primary religion, my study focusses on how Australia's unique multicultural population has an impact on bhikkhunis, and how bhikkhunis may impact Australia's culturally diverse Buddhist communities. It should be noted that while my study information was widely distributed by the Australian Sangha Association, 96% of respondents were directly related to the Bodhinyana monastery network. This community is known to be multicultural and teaches in English. Several interviewees related that there is a very real fear amongst lay parents that

their children won't engage with Buddhism. It is believed that second and third generation Australian Buddhists may see this religion as a hungover relic from "mum and dad's old country". There is a belief that in growing up in an Australian culture and educational system, children will want a Buddhism that is relevant to their Australian life. This will include a fourfold sangha of different colours, genders, and with values that align with what they see at school and that this represents the best chance for both the longevity and growth of monastic Buddhism in Australia.

Regarding East/West issues, particularly as outlined in the academic work, respondents did acknowledge that there are 'parallel congregations' in Australia (Bubna-Litic & Higgins 2011). Monastics generally agreed with academics in that people from traditionally Buddhist countries tended to value their respective cultural religious experience. Westerners however, predominantly sought an individual experience, with transactional expectations of meditation classes, retreats, dhamma talks, and sutta classes, with the goal of personally achieving nibbana[12]. Providing for these disparate expectations can contribute to the strain on bhikkhunis, particularly in the cities where they're already bootstrapping.

Study progress

I anticipate that recruitment for the study will conclude in late June 2023[13]. The project is in the initial stages of data analysis and is expected to be finalised in mid-2024. There is currently one publication (Sneddon 2022) on the project that can be freely accessed by members of the

[12] Nibbana refers to the spiritual goal of Buddhism, the release of suffering.
[13] At the time of the ASA conference and the presentation of this report, participant recruitment was still open. Two additional participants, both monks, were interviewed prior to the publication of this paper.

Australian Sangha Association. Project findings will be published in academic journals, and a copy of the thesis will be lodged with a national archive (details to be confirmed).

Conclusion

Australian bhikkhunis in the Theravada tradition do exist, and the consensus of study participants is that Australia is fertile ground for a healthy and growing fourfold sangha. It is clear that in the landscape of Australia's diverse and fragmented Buddhist populations, there remain conservative pockets of opposition to bhikkhuni ordination. Nonetheless, as the Australian bhikkhuni sasana continues to mature, grow, and engage with devotees, their potential contribution to the transmission of Buddhism in the West is significant. This study has identified clear gaps in the academic record regarding this culturally and historically important community and recommends further research into the issues facing Buddhist women in Australia.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

There are no conflicts of interest.

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