



## WOMEN'S SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY IN BUDDHISM: THE BHIKKHUNĪ SAṄGHA AND ITS CHALLENGES

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### ABSTRACT

Women's spiritual authority in Buddhism has been both affirmed and contested since the time of the Buddha. The establishment of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha marked a radical moment in the religious history of ancient India, granting women institutional access to renunciation, education, and liberation. Early Buddhist texts such as the *Therīgāthā* vividly testify to women's spiritual achievements and doctrinal insight, demonstrating that enlightenment was not restricted by gender. Despite this early recognition, the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha faced structural constraints, most notably the imposition of the *garudhammas* and the dependence of nuns on the Bhikkhu Saṅgha within the Vinaya framework. Over time, socio-cultural patriarchy, political upheavals, and institutional decline led to the disappearance of the Bhikkhunī lineage in several Buddhist traditions. In the modern period, the revival of the Bhikkhunī ordination has emerged as a significant religious and ethical issue. While Theravāda countries continue to debate the legitimacy of revival, Mahāyāna traditions have maintained an unbroken Bhikkhunī lineage, offering alternative models of female monastic authority. Contemporary Bhikkhunīs actively contribute to education, meditation instruction, social welfare, and interfaith dialogue, yet they continue to face challenges such as limited institutional recognition, unequal access to resources, and resistance rooted in conservative interpretations of Vinaya. This article critically examines the historical foundations, doctrinal

debates, and contemporary dilemmas surrounding women's spiritual authority in Buddhism, arguing that the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha remains central to realizing the Buddha's vision of spiritual equality and compassion.

**KEYWORDS:** Bhikkhunī Saṅgha; Women in Buddhism; Spiritual Authority; Vinaya; Garudhammas; Therīgāthā; Gender and Religion; Buddhist Monasticism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Women's spiritual authority in Buddhism has long been a subject of sustained scholarly attention and contemporary debate, particularly in discussions concerning gender, religion, and institutional power. From its earliest formulation, Buddhism articulated a path to liberation that was grounded not in social identity but in ethical conduct (*sīla*), meditative discipline (*saṃādhi*), and wisdom (*prajñā*). This emphasis on practice and insight rather than birth, caste, or gender marked a radical departure from the dominant socio-religious structures of ancient Indian society, which were largely patriarchal and restrictive toward women's religious autonomy.

The Buddha's teachings consistently affirmed that women possess the same spiritual potential as men. Canonical sources repeatedly state that women are equally capable of attaining the highest stages of spiritual realization, including arahantship. Such affirmations directly challenged prevailing assumptions that women were spiritually inferior or incapable of renunciation and higher wisdom. Within this doctrinal framework, the establishment of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha—the fully ordained order of Buddhist nuns—stands as one of the most revolutionary developments in the history of world religions. It offered women formal access to monastic life, structured spiritual training, and a recognized position within the Buddhist institutional framework.

However, despite this early recognition of women's spiritual capacity, the historical and institutional evolution of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha reveals a more complex and ambivalent reality. While women were admitted into monastic life, their participation was shaped and constrained by Vinaya regulations, socio-cultural attitudes rooted in patriarchy, and shifting political circumstances. Over time, these factors significantly influenced the degree to which women could exercise spiritual authority within Buddhist institutions. This tension between doctrinal equality and institutional hierarchy has remained a persistent feature of Buddhist history. This article critically examines the foundations of women's spiritual authority in

Buddhism by exploring three interrelated dimensions: the doctrinal basis for gender equality, the historical establishment of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, and the institutional challenges that emerged through Vinaya regulations and social structures. By situating the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha within both textual traditions and historical realities, the discussion seeks to illuminate how women's spiritual authority has been affirmed, limited, contested, and reinterpreted across time.

## 2. Doctrinal Foundations of Women's Spiritual Authority

At the doctrinal level, Buddhism presents a fundamentally inclusive vision of spiritual liberation. Core teachings such as the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the doctrine of non-self (*anattā*) are universally applicable and make no distinction based on gender. Suffering (*dukkha*), its origin, cessation, and the path leading to liberation are understood as universal conditions of existence. Consequently, the means to transcend suffering are equally accessible to all beings who cultivate ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom. The Buddha repeatedly emphasized that liberation depends on personal insight and disciplined practice rather than biological or social identity. This emphasis is particularly significant in the context of ancient Indian society, where women's roles were largely confined to domestic and reproductive functions, and access to formal religious education was limited. By asserting that women could attain the same spiritual goals as men, Buddhism challenged deeply entrenched gender hierarchies and offered an alternative vision of human potential.

Early canonical texts provide abundant evidence of women attaining advanced stages of realization. Numerous suttas describe women who achieved stream-entry, non-return, and full arahantship. These accounts demonstrate that women were not merely passive recipients of religious instruction but active practitioners who realized the highest truths of the Dhamma. Such narratives form a crucial textual foundation for women's spiritual authority within Buddhism.

Among these sources, the *Therīgāthā* occupies a particularly important place. As a canonical collection of verses attributed to early Buddhist nuns, the *Therīgāthā* offers unparalleled insight into women's lived spiritual experiences. The verses articulate themes of suffering, impermanence, renunciation, and liberation with remarkable depth and emotional intensity. Many of these verses are grounded in women's personal struggles, including loss, social marginalization, and existential despair, which are transformed through insight and

meditative practice into wisdom and freedom. The inclusion of the *Therīgāthā* in the Pāli Canon itself signifies institutional recognition of women's spiritual achievements. These verses establish early bhikkhunīs not only as enlightened practitioners but also as authoritative teachers whose experiences serve as exemplars for the broader Buddhist community. In this sense, the *Therīgāthā* functions as both a doctrinal and narrative affirmation of women's spiritual authority, demonstrating that enlightenment is not conditioned by gender but by insight and practice.

### 3. Establishment of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha

The institutional foundation of women's monastic life in Buddhism is traditionally traced to Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha's foster mother and maternal aunt. According to canonical accounts, Mahāpajāpatī approached the Buddha with a request for ordination on behalf of herself and other women who wished to renounce household life and pursue spiritual liberation. This request directly challenged prevailing social norms that denied women autonomy in religious matters. Initially, the Buddha is said to have refused the request, reflecting concerns about social stability and the challenges of maintaining a mixed-gender monastic community within a patriarchal society. However, through the intervention of Ānanda—who argued that women were fully capable of attaining enlightenment—the Buddha ultimately granted permission for women's ordination. This decision led to the formal establishment of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha and marked a significant expansion of the Buddhist monastic order.

The creation of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha allowed women to pursue spiritual training within a structured institutional framework. Bhikkhunīs undertook the same foundational practices as bhikkhus, including adherence to ethical precepts, engagement in meditative discipline, and study of the Dhamma and Vinaya. Monastic life provided women with opportunities for education, contemplation, and communal support that were otherwise unavailable in lay society. However, the institutional structure of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha was shaped by specific Vinaya regulations that distinguished it from the Bhikkhu Saṅgha. These regulations governed ordination procedures, disciplinary practices, and hierarchical relations between male and female monastics. While ordination itself conferred religious legitimacy and access to the path of renunciation, it also introduced asymmetries that would have lasting implications for women's authority within the monastic community.

These asymmetries were most clearly articulated through rules that placed the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha in a position of dependence on the Bhikkhu Saṅgha for ordination and formal acts of discipline. Such arrangements reflected broader socio-cultural assumptions about gender roles and authority, even as they existed within a doctrinal framework that affirmed spiritual equality. Over time, these institutional distinctions became a central factor shaping debates about women's status and authority within Buddhism.

#### **4. Tension Between Spiritual Equality and Institutional Hierarchy**

The establishment of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha thus embodies a fundamental tension within Buddhist history: the coexistence of doctrinal equality and institutional hierarchy. On the one hand, Buddhist teachings unequivocally affirm that women are capable of achieving the highest spiritual goals. On the other hand, the monastic structures governing women's participation often reflected patriarchal assumptions that limited their autonomy and authority. This tension has had far-reaching consequences for the historical development of women's monastic life. While early Buddhist women were recognized as enlightened beings and authoritative teachers, their institutional roles were often constrained by rules that prioritized male authority. As Buddhism spread across different regions and cultures, these constraints were further shaped by local social norms and political conditions.

Understanding this tension is essential for appreciating both the achievements and challenges of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha. It highlights the need to distinguish between Buddhism's core ethical and doctrinal commitments and the historically conditioned forms through which they have been institutionalized. By examining the doctrinal foundations alongside the historical realities of monastic organization, one gains a more nuanced understanding of women's spiritual authority in Buddhism.

#### **4. Vinaya Regulations and the Question of Authority**

Central to scholarly discussions on women's spiritual authority in Buddhism is the role of the *Vinaya*, the monastic code governing discipline, hierarchy, and institutional conduct. While the *Dhamma* emphasizes liberation through ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom irrespective of gender, the *Vinaya* establishes formal structures that have historically shaped the lived realities of monastic life. Among the *Vinaya* prescriptions, the *garudhammas*—eight so-called “weighty rules” imposed upon bhikkhunīs—remain the most controversial and contested elements in debates concerning gender and authority within Buddhist monasticism. The *garudhammas* require bhikkhunīs to show deference to bhikkhus in matters of seniority

and institutional authority, even when a bhikkhunī is senior in ordination. They also mandate that bhikkhunīs depend upon the Bhikkhu Saṅgha for ordination, confession, and disciplinary acts. These rules effectively institutionalize a gender-based hierarchy that places women in a structurally subordinate position within the monastic order. While the stated purpose of these rules has traditionally been understood as preserving harmony and safeguarding the monastic community, their implications for women's autonomy and authority have been profound.

From a doctrinal standpoint, the *garudhammas* appear incongruent with core Buddhist teachings. The doctrine of *anattā* (non-self) undermines essentialist distinctions based on gender, while the path to liberation is presented in the early texts as universally accessible. The Buddha's acknowledgment of women's capacity for enlightenment—clearly affirmed in texts such as the *Therīgāthā*—stands in tension with institutional rules that restrict women's authority irrespective of spiritual attainment. This dissonance has led many scholars to question whether the *garudhammas* truly reflect the Buddha's original intent. Modern textual and historical scholarship has raised serious doubts about the authenticity of the *garudhammas*. Comparative studies of Vinaya traditions suggest inconsistencies in their formulation and placement, leading to the hypothesis that they may represent later interpolations shaped by patriarchal social norms prevalent in ancient India. Scholars such as Bhikkhu Anālayo and Rita Gross argue that the rules reflect a compromise between the radical spiritual egalitarianism of early Buddhism and the conservative social structures of the time. Nevertheless, regardless of their historical origin, the *garudhammas* have exerted a lasting influence, frequently invoked to legitimize the subordinate institutional status of bhikkhunīs.

The enduring authority of these rules illustrates a broader tension within Buddhism between doctrinal ideals and institutional realities. While the Buddha's teachings promote liberation beyond social distinctions, monastic institutions have often mirrored the gender hierarchies of their surrounding cultures. The question of women's spiritual authority thus cannot be examined solely at the level of doctrine; it must also account for the regulatory frameworks through which authority is enacted and maintained.

## 5. Decline of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha in Theravāda Traditions

Despite the early establishment of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha during the Buddha's lifetime, its institutional continuity was not uniformly sustained across Buddhist regions. In Theravāda countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand, the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha gradually

declined and eventually disappeared. This decline cannot be attributed to a single cause but rather to a convergence of historical, political, and structural factors. In Sri Lanka, the Bhikkhunī lineage flourished for centuries, enjoying royal patronage and playing a significant role in religious and educational life. However, repeated invasions, political instability, and the erosion of state support weakened monastic institutions. Similar patterns emerged in Myanmar and Thailand, where monastic survival was closely tied to royal sponsorship. When political upheavals disrupted these systems, the already vulnerable Bhikkhunī Saṅgha suffered disproportionately.

A crucial structural factor contributing to the decline was the Vinaya requirement of dual ordination, which stipulates that a woman must be ordained by both the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha and the Bhikkhu Saṅgha. Once the Bhikkhunī lineage was broken, this requirement created a near-insurmountable barrier to restoration. In contrast, the Bhikkhu Saṅgha, which did not depend on a parallel female order for ordination, could be re-established more readily. Thus, a rule originally intended to ensure legitimacy and communal harmony became a mechanism of exclusion over time.

As the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha disappeared, women seeking a renunciant life were forced into alternative forms of religious practice. In Thailand, *mae chi* emerged as semi-renunciant women who observe precepts and live in religious communities but lack full ordination. In Sri Lanka, *dasa sil mātas* followed a similar pattern. While these women often lead disciplined and spiritually committed lives, their institutional status remains ambiguous. They typically lack access to advanced monastic education, formal teaching authority, and decision-making roles within the Saṅgha. This marginalization had significant implications for women's spiritual leadership in Theravāda Buddhism. Without institutional recognition, women's voices were largely excluded from doctrinal interpretation, ritual authority, and monastic governance. The absence of bhikkhunīs also reinforced the perception that full renunciation and authoritative religious leadership were inherently male domains. Over time, this exclusion became normalized, shaping both religious practice and popular understandings of gender roles within Theravāda societies.

## 6. Continuity of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha in Mahāyāna Traditions

In contrast to the Theravāda world, Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions in East Asia preserved an unbroken Bhikkhunī ordination lineage. Countries such as China, Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam maintained dual ordination systems, ensuring the institutional continuity of the

female monastic order. This historical continuity had far-reaching consequences for women's spiritual authority and leadership. East Asian bhikkhunīs have long occupied prominent roles within monastic and lay communities. They have served as abbesses of large monasteries, scholars of Buddhist philosophy, meditation masters, and educators. Access to full ordination enabled women to participate fully in monastic education systems, including the study of Vinaya, Abhidharma, and Mahāyāna sūtras. As a result, bhikkhunīs in these regions developed intellectual and institutional authority comparable to that of their male counterparts.

The presence of a continuous Bhikkhunī Saṅgha also facilitated the creation of robust educational institutions for women. In Taiwan, for example, bhikkhunī-led monasteries have become centers of academic excellence and social engagement. These institutions not only train monastics but also provide education and social services to lay communities. Such developments challenge assumptions that monastic discipline inherently limits women's leadership or public engagement. Moreover, East Asian bhikkhunīs have played an active role in adapting Buddhism to modern contexts. They have been involved in social welfare initiatives, disaster relief, environmental activism, and interreligious dialogue. Their leadership demonstrates that women's full ordination is not only compatible with Buddhist discipline but also conducive to the dynamic transmission of the Dharma in changing social environments.

The Mahāyāna experience provides an important comparative perspective in contemporary debates on bhikkhunī ordination. It illustrates that the marginalization of women in Theravāda Buddhism is not an inevitable outcome of Buddhist doctrine but rather a historically contingent phenomenon shaped by cultural and institutional factors. The flourishing of bhikkhunīs in East Asia underscores the potential for gender-inclusive monastic structures when supported by favorable social and religious conditions.

## 7. Modern Revival Movements and Contemporary Debates

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed renewed efforts to revive the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, particularly in Theravāda countries. These revival movements are driven by a combination of historical research, ethical reflection, and global Buddhist dialogue. Sri Lanka has been at the forefront of these efforts, with ordination ceremonies conducted using a combination of Theravāda monks and Mahāyāna bhikkhunīs to re-establish the lineage.

Supporters of revival argue that restoring the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha aligns with the Buddha's inclusive vision and rectifies historical injustices. They contend that the disappearance of the bhikkhunī order was not the result of doctrinal prohibition but of contingent historical circumstances. From this perspective, reviving the order is seen as an ethical imperative grounded in compassion, fairness, and fidelity to the spirit of the Dharma. Opponents, however, raise concerns regarding Vinaya legitimacy. They argue that ordinations involving Mahāyāna bhikkhunīs violate Theravāda Vinaya procedures and threaten the integrity of monastic discipline. For traditionalists, maintaining an unbroken and internally consistent Vinaya lineage is paramount, even if it entails the continued exclusion of women from full ordination.

These debates reflect broader tensions within contemporary Buddhism between tradition and reform. They raise fundamental questions about scriptural interpretation, the authority of historical precedent, and the adaptability of monastic institutions in response to changing ethical sensibilities. The controversy surrounding bhikkhunī ordination thus serves as a microcosm of wider discussions on authority, legitimacy, and inclusivity within global Buddhism. Importantly, the revival movement has also reshaped the discourse on women's spiritual authority beyond institutional boundaries. Bhikkhunīs and female practitioners increasingly participate in academic scholarship, international conferences, and public teaching roles, challenging long-standing assumptions about gender and leadership. Even where full ordination remains contested, the visibility and agency of Buddhist women continue to expand.

## 8. Contemporary Challenges Faced by Bhikkhunīs

Even in contexts where full ordination for women has been restored or formally recognized, bhikkhunīs continue to face a range of structural, social, and cultural challenges that limit their effective exercise of spiritual authority. These challenges demonstrate that ordination alone does not automatically translate into equality or institutional empowerment. Rather, authority within Buddhism is shaped by complex networks of economic resources, educational access, cultural attitudes, and governance structures that often remain gendered.

One of the most persistent challenges is unequal access to material and institutional **resources**. In many Theravāda and even some Mahāyāna contexts, bhikkhunīs receive significantly less financial support than bhikkhus. Lay donors frequently prioritize male monastics, believing that offering to monks generates greater religious merit. This perception,

deeply embedded in popular religiosity, affects the sustainability of bhikkhunī communities by limiting their ability to maintain monasteries, support education, and engage in social outreach. Economic marginalization thus translates directly into restricted institutional authority.

Closely related to this issue is unequal access to education and training. Although some countries now offer advanced Buddhist education to bhikkhunīs, opportunities remain uneven. In traditional monastic universities and scriptural examination systems, bhikkhunīs are often underrepresented or excluded from higher-level study. This restricts their participation in doctrinal interpretation, scholarly production, and authoritative teaching roles. Since textual mastery has historically been a primary basis for religious authority in Buddhism, educational disparities reinforce gender hierarchies within the Saṅgha.

Bhikkhunīs also face **limited representation in monastic decision-making bodies**. Governing councils, disciplinary committees, and national Saṅgha organizations are frequently dominated by bhikkhus, even in regions where bhikkhunī ordination is recognized. As a result, policies affecting monastic life—such as ordination procedures, disciplinary norms, and allocation of resources—are often decided without meaningful input from women monastics. This exclusion perpetuates a cycle in which bhikkhunīs are subject to institutional authority without possessing commensurate power to shape it.

Beyond institutional barriers, **social and cultural attitudes** continue to pose significant obstacles. In many Buddhist societies, monastic authority remains strongly associated with masculinity. Bhikkhunīs may be viewed as secondary, provisional, or even controversial figures, particularly in conservative communities. Such attitudes can lead to social resistance, public criticism, or lack of recognition for bhikkhunīs' spiritual accomplishments. Even when women demonstrate deep meditative attainment or scholarly expertise, their authority is sometimes questioned or minimized due to ingrained gender norms.

Despite these challenges, contemporary bhikkhunīs are actively redefining spiritual authority in innovative ways. Many engage deeply with **socially engaged Buddhism**, addressing pressing issues such as education, healthcare, environmental ethics, gender justice, and peace-building. By integrating contemplative practice with compassionate action, bhikkhunīs embody forms of authority rooted not merely in institutional rank but in ethical integrity and social relevance. Their leadership challenges narrow definitions of authority based solely on

hierarchy and highlights the transformative potential of Buddhist practice in the modern world.

In this sense, contemporary bhikkhunīs are not merely seeking inclusion within existing structures but are also expanding the very meaning of spiritual authority. Through teaching, activism, scholarship, and community service, they demonstrate that authority in Buddhism can emerge from lived practice, moral credibility, and commitment to alleviating suffering—core values at the heart of the Dharma.

## 9. Reconsidering Authority: Text, Tradition, and Ethics

The ongoing debates surrounding women's spiritual authority in Buddhism invite a deeper reconsideration of how authority itself is understood within the tradition. At its core, Buddhism emphasizes impermanence (*anicca*), non-self (*anattā*), and compassion (*karuṇā*), teachings that challenge rigid hierarchies and fixed identities. Yet, as Buddhism developed into institutional forms, these egalitarian principles often became entangled with the patriarchal structures of historical societies.

This tension raises fundamental questions about the relationship between textual authority, institutional tradition, and ethical responsibility. Canonical texts affirm women's capacity for enlightenment, while Vinaya regulations have frequently constrained women's institutional roles. Rather than viewing this contradiction as a failure of Buddhism, many contemporary scholars interpret it as evidence of the dynamic interaction between spiritual ideals and social realities. Authority, from this perspective, is not a static inheritance but a negotiated and evolving construct.

Feminist and critical Buddhist scholars argue for a context-sensitive re-examination of Vinaya interpretations. Such an approach does not seek to discard monastic discipline but to interpret it in light of the Buddha's broader ethical vision. Compassion, non-harming, and liberation from suffering are central to Buddhist ethics, and any institutional practice that systematically marginalizes a group warrants critical reflection. Re-evaluating rules that limit women's authority is thus framed not as a modern imposition but as an act of fidelity to the Dharma's transformative intent.

This ethical hermeneutic approach also challenges the assumption that tradition must be preserved unchanged to remain authentic. Historically, Buddhism has demonstrated

remarkable adaptability as it moved across cultures, languages, and social systems. From India to East Asia, and later to the modern global context, Buddhist institutions have continuously evolved. Recognizing this historical adaptability allows for a conception of authority that balances continuity with ethical responsiveness.

Understanding authority as dynamic rather than fixed has important implications for the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha. It opens space for inclusive interpretations that honor both textual foundations and contemporary ethical insights. The Bhikkhunī Saṅgha becomes not merely a site of gender reform but a living example of how Buddhist traditions can engage critically with their own histories while remaining grounded in core spiritual values. Moreover, this reconsideration of authority has relevance beyond gender issues. It invites broader reflection on how Buddhism responds to questions of power, hierarchy, and justice in the modern world. In this sense, debates about bhikkhunī ordination are not marginal concerns but central to understanding the ethical future of Buddhism as a global tradition.

## 10. CONCLUSION

Women's spiritual authority in Buddhism, as embodied in the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, represents both a profound affirmation of spiritual equality and a historical narrative marked by institutional exclusion and struggle. From the early recognition of women's enlightenment in canonical texts to the imposition of restrictive Vinaya rules, from the decline of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha in Theravāda regions to its continuity in Mahāyāna traditions, the history of bhikkhunīs reveals enduring tensions between doctrine and practice.

Despite centuries of marginalization, bhikkhunīs have consistently asserted their spiritual authority through disciplined practice, teaching, scholarship, and compassionate service. Contemporary revival movements and socially engaged initiatives demonstrate that women's leadership within Buddhism is not only possible but vital to the tradition's ethical and spiritual vitality. Bhikkhunīs today stand at the intersection of tradition and transformation, embodying both continuity with the past and responsiveness to present realities.

Recognizing and strengthening the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha is therefore not merely a matter of gender justice. It is a crucial step toward realizing the broader Buddhist vision of liberation grounded in wisdom, compassion, and ethical responsibility. A Buddhism that fully acknowledges women's spiritual authority affirms its own foundational commitment to the alleviation of suffering for all beings, without distinction. In this way, the future of the

Bhikkhunī Saṅgha is inseparable from the future ethical credibility and spiritual depth of Buddhism itself.

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