Theravāda Bhikkhunī of Sangha Agung Indonesia: Equality and Justice in Education, Spiritual Practice and Social Service

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Abstract—This article discusses the equality and justice in education, spiritual practice and social service of Theravāda Bhikkhunī (Buddhist nun) of Sangha Agung Indonesia. The fact reveals that the revival of Theravāda bhikkhunī sangha, recently, becomes the flagging topic almost throughout the world. It is because of the refusal of some bhikkhu (Buddhist monk) sanghas, whether internationally or locally. Although there is the refusal of some bhikkhu sangha, in Indonesia, the Sangha Agung Indonesia fully appreciates the revival of Theravāda bhikkhunī sangha. Methodologically, this research utilized a qualitative approach through phenomenologist research design as well as a theoretical approach with socio-cultural and education theory. The techniques used in collecting the data were thorough interviews, observations, literature reviews, with the researcher as the key instrument. The data were analyzed through interactive analysis model and paradigmatic theory analysis. This research brought out several findings: first, in the education field, the Theravāda Bhikkhunī of Sangha Agung Indonesia are well-educated. Second, Theravāda Bhikkhunī of Sangha Agung Indonesia has the same opportunity to train themselves as well as the Theravāda Bhikkhu of Sangha Agung Indonesia. Third, the Theravāda bhikkhu and Bhikkhunī of Sangha Agung Indonesia work together in providing social services to the laity. This finding may prove that not all bhikkhu sanghas deny the revival of Theravāda Bhikkhunī sangha.

Keywords: Sangha Agung Indonesia, bhikkhu, bhikkhunī, equality, justice

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most debated issues in the present-day in Buddhism is the access of women to get full ordination as bhikkhunīs (Buddhist nun) in Theravāda tradition. This is because of the refusal of some bhikkhu (Buddhist monk) sangha who believes that it is not possible to re-establish the Theravāda bhikkhunī sangha according to the ‘Dhammavinaya’ the doctrine of the Buddha as the Theravāda bhikkhunī sangha has disappeared since around the 11th century during the period of political turmoil in Sri Lanka. Even a long time before the full ordination of Theravāda bhikkhunī was restored at Saranath-India, the well-known author of ‘Vinayamukha’ has mentioned that the Theravāda bhikkhunī has disappeared (Vajrānāṇavarorasa, 1983:269). Therefore, the situation has brought forth many discussions to the revival of the full ordination ceremony.

The revival movement has induced special attentions of several technical questions regarding monastic discipline (Vinaya), such as atthagarudhamma, bhikkhunī Pacittiya 83, and the authenticity of upasampada procedure. Regarding give answers to these matters, lots of works have been done by well-known scholars. Some works are still biases and based on assumptions, and some works carefully go through deep the understanding of the canonical texts.

In 2012, Sri Lankan national newspaper ‘Ceylon Daily News’ published an article issued by the Concise Tripitaka Editorial Board, which discusses whether the Dhammavinaya allows the re-establishment of the Bhikkhunī Order. The Most Venerable Mahā Nayaka Theras have informed the Commissioner-General of Buddhist Affairs that it is not possible to establish a Bhikkhunī Order according to the ‘Dhammavinaya’ the doctrine of the Buddha (Bodhi, 2013).

In another case, bhikkhu Thanissaro has written a letter on November 13, 2009, concerning the formal procedure on the validity of the bhikkhunī ordination held in Western Australia on October 22. His argument concerns the bearings that bhikkhunī
Pacittiya 83 has on the legitimacy of the proclamations proposing the candidates for admission to the saṅgha (Bodhi, 2009).

In 2001, there was a statement declared by the bhikkhus of Sangha Theravāda Indonesia mentioned that: “At present, there is no longer a religious way of life called bhikkhunī according to Dhammavinaya in the implementation of the Theravāda tradition (Mutual Agreement of Sangha Theravada Indonesia no.: 031/STI/VI/2001). It is supported by an article written by the former Samāñera Indasilo, who described the issues about the ordination of bhikkhunīs and its validity (Indasilo, 2016). This statement has influenced most of Indonesian Buddhist people’s views regarding the revival of Theravāda bhikkhunī. They believed that the lineage of Theravāda bhikkhunī has been extinct.

The statement made by the bhikkhus of Sangha Theravāda Indonesia is because, in 2000, there were some bhikkhunīs, who formerly belonged to their group when they were anagarinīs, received higher ordination without their admission. After receiving higher ordination and coming back to Indonesia, those bhikkhunīs faced significant problems. They all were banned and cast out from the saṅgha by the Sangha Theravāda Indonesia.

However, Dhamma works in beautiful ways. Although there are a lot of Theravāda bhikkhus against the re-establishment of Theravāda bhikkhunī saṅgha, in 2008, there is a bhikkhu of Sangha Agung Indonesia who fully supports the revival of Theravāda bhikkhunī in Indonesia. The Theravāda bhikkhunīs who belong to this group are well-supported.

According to the reflective meaningfulness contained in the background, it shows that practically and theoretically, there is a lack of intention about bhikkhunī upasampada (Buddhist nun ordination) and its development. In this case, the paper is going to expose the condition of saṅgha in Indonesia in general; to elucidate the emergence of Theravāda bhikkhunīs of Sangha Agung Indonesia; and to elaborate the significance of equality and justice gained by Theravāda bhikkhunī of Sangha Agung Indonesia.

II. METHODS

According to the research question proposed, that is about the equality and justice of the Theravāda Bhikkhunī of Sangha Agung Indonesia profoundly is the reason qualitative approach is needed. In a more operational method, the phenomenology research design is used, that is to understand deeper the meaning of phenomena in daily life, interpreting the experiences, and knowledge of research subject. The research design of phenomenology emphasizes more to the multi-perspective and inter-subjective — multi-perspective means to use various perspectives so that it will sharpen the discovery of the object. Meanwhile, inter-subjective means an attempt to be inside the conceptual world of all subjects researched.

The field data is gained through the in-depth interviews, observation and document study with the researcher as the vital instrument. The use of observation technique in this research is meant to observe the environment surrounding the Theravāda Bhikkhunī of Sangha Agung Indonesia. The use of depth interviews technique meant to various information in term of the characteristics of the influencing system. The interviewees referred are individual or community of the Theravāda Bhikkhunī of Sangha Agung Indonesia, leaders of Sangha Agung Indonesia, members of Sangha Agung Indonesia from three traditions (Mahāyāna, Theravāda, and Vajrayāna), and the related institution. The document study method is done to search for the written document and the archive about the revival of the Theravāda Bhikkhunī. Triangulation is used to guarantee the validity of the data; those are the triangulation of source, methodology, and theory. The analysis model used are (1) interactive analysis model, (2) interpretive analysis model, and (3) analysis model of the paradigmatic theory. The data analysis is done through the steps of data collecting, data reduction, data presentation, and the conclusion drawing/verification, as well as finding out concepts of equality and justice of Theravāda Bhikkhunī of Sangha Agung Indonesia using the theoretical analysis of paradigmatic.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Sangha Agung Indonesia (Sagin)

Sangha Agung Indonesia is the oldest monastic organization in Indonesia, which was founded by the late venerable Ashin Jinarakkhiita in 1959. He was the first Indonesian monk after 500 years of the Majapahit Kingdom came to an end and at the same time was the ruin of Buddhism in Indonesia. In the beginning, the Sangha Agung Indonesia was named Sangha Indonesia. The Sangha Agung Indonesia is a monastic group with the members of monks and nuns from three traditions, which are Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna. In this group, the members of these three traditions practice the Vinaya and the teaching according to which tradition they practice and live harmoniously.

In 1959, the late venerable Ashin Jinarakkhiita established the Sangha Indonesia consisting of bhikkhus and being ordained samāneras (novices) according to the Theravāda tradition. Later on, the Sangha Indonesia changed the name into Sangha Suci Indonesia. In 1968, again, changed the named into Maha Sangha Indonesia which consists of the bhikkhus of Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions.

However, in 1969, a dispute arose among the members of the Maha Sangha Indonesia because of
the different understanding of the Vinaya and Dhamma. Some bhikkhus willed the monk to not intervene on this split and stood alone as a role model. Because of the attempt was not successful, then the bhikkhus left the Maha Sangha Indonesia and formed Sangha Indonesia on January 12, 1972.

On January 14, 1974, on the initiative of the Hindu-Buddhist Societies Guides Customs, held a meeting between the Sangha Indonesia and Maha Sangha Indonesia. At the meeting, agreed to fuse the Sangha Indonesia and Maha Sangha Indonesia become Sangha Agung Indonesia with the late Venerable Ashin Jinarakkhiita as the head of Sangha Agung Indonesia.

In 2017, there were 123 bhikkhus and 21 bhikkhunis in the Sangha Agung Indonesia and the Most Venerable Nyanasuryanadi Mahāthero as the head. He is the first Indonesian Theravāda bhikkhu who re-established the Theravāda bhikkhunī saṅgha in Indonesia and who strongly supported the revival of the Theravāda bhikkhunī saṅgha in Indonesia.

The Sangha Agung Indonesia fully supports the establishment of Theravāda bhikkhunī saṅgha in Indonesia. It may be said that the Sangha Agung Indonesia is the only monastic organization in Indonesia who re-establishes the Theravāda bhikkhunī saṅgha from bhikkhu saṅgha side. The Theravāda bhikkhunīs who belong to this group are well-supported by the bhikkhus.

B. The Emergence of Theravāda Bhikkhunīs of Sangha Agung Indonesia

A long time ago before the first restoration of Theravāda bhikkhunī ordination took place at Saranath-India, Theravāda samaneri’s has come to the presence in Indonesia. The Founder of Sangha Agung Indonesia, the late venerable Ashin Jinarakkhiita, in 1963, ordained a samaṇerī according to Theravāda tradition held at Vimaladharma Temple, Bandung in West Java, Indonesia. The samaṇerī was named Jinakumari, who was later known as the first Indonesian bhikkhunī after asleep for more than 1,000 years. In 1966, because there was no any Theravāda bhikkhunī saṅgha at that time, however, samaṇerī Jinakumari and some other samaṇerīs were sent by the late venerable Ashin Jinarakkhiita to receive full ordination according to Mahāyana tradition at Po Lin Monastery in Hong Kong (Silvita, 2015:8-14).

Furthermore, the late venerable Ashin Jinarakkhiita also established women association named Wanita Buddhist Indonesia (Buddhist Women Council) and bhikkhunī association in the Sangha Agung Indonesia known as Sangha Bhikkhunī Sangha Agung Indonesia (Bhikkhunī Saṅgha of Sangha Agung Indonesia). Dedications of Ashin Jinarakkhiita never fade by the time. His compassion and wisdom inherited by his disciples and the other monks who join the Sangha Agung Indonesia, particularly concerning the progress of the Buddhist women in Indonesia.

The year of 2008 was the answer for those who thought that the Theravāda bhikkhunī would not appear. It was the gateway for a new history for Buddhist women in Indonesia who have effort and commitment to pursue life as a Theravāda bhikkhunī. The Most Venerable Nyanasuryanadi Mahāthero for the first time gave pabbajī to women on 14 February 2008 at the Veluvana Monastery Ampel, Boyolali, Central Java, Indonesia. Those women who received the pabbajī were anagarīni Sri Utami and anagarīni Julia Surya who later on known as bhikkhunī Dhammācārinī and bhikkhunī Thītacārinī.

On May 12, 2012, based on his recommendation, just after four years of training as samaṇerīs, samanerīs Dhammācārinī and Thītacārinī received full ordination as a bhikkhunī in Sri Lanka at “Dekanduwala Dharma Centre”. The venerable Kirama Vimalajoti Mahāthero led the ordination ceremony as bhikkhu upajīva and the venerable Padukka Sumitha Therī as bhikkhunī pavattini. Since then, in the Sangha Agung Indonesia, there are Theravāda bhikkhus, bhikkhunīs, samaneras and samaṇerīs who have equal opportunities to practice the Dhammavāna of the Buddha.

Bhikkhunī Dhammācārinī and bhikkhunī Thītacārinī could be considered as the first luckiest Theravāda bhikkhunīs in Indonesia because since the beginning they led the homeless life according to Theravāda tradition, the bhikkhus fully supported them. Bhikkhunī Dhammācārinī is the only child of the farmers who live in a remote village in Central Java. She traditionally learnt Buddhism by following religious activities taught by his father (because at that time, her mother was a Muslim). Then, she got religious education at school, from primary school and eventually continued the study at Smarutunga Buddhist College with Buddhist Studies as the major. After one year of work, then she decided to resign and came to the Most Venerable Nyanasuryanadi Mahāthero for his guidance and leading the life with a better mental attitude.

Bhikkhunī Thītacārinī was born to a Buddhist family on May 3, 1986, in Bengkalis, Riau Province, Indonesia. She was the fifth child of the seven children. Since at primary school, she has learnt and practiced Buddhism. The experiences of learning and practicing Buddhism since small-child prompted her to lead the spiritual life. In her spiritual quest, she met the most venerable Nyanasuryanadi Mahāthero and decided to lead the homeless life under his guidance. While leading the homeless life, the most venerable Nyanasuryanadi Mahāthero allowed her to study at Smarutunga Buddhist College. Because of her eagerness to explore, she completed her studies with a cum laude pass. In 2012, to pursue a higher degree, she went to Sri Lanka to further her education. Again,
she completed her studies with the satisfactory result, and she got a silver medal for the Postgraduate Diploma in Buddhist Studies and a gold medal for the Master of Arts degree at Kelaniya University, Sri Lanka.

The efforts which have been done by the Mahāthero to provide the more significant opportunities for women is for the benefit of Buddhism in the future to build up the characters and develop the mental quality of the people, especially of the Buddhist women rather than for the benefit of the particular organization, pride, fame and building up the power for specific purposes.

The samanerī pabbajja which has been done by the Mahāthero was good news for women who want to be a bhikkhunī and practice Dhammavinayā according to Theravāda tradition. This news has raised the willingness of two Mahāyana bhikkhunīs of the Sangha Agung Indonesia to join and together practice the Buddha’s teaching based on Theravāda tradition. And, later on, there were an additional two samāneris ordained as bhikkhunīs. Thus, there are six bhikkhunīs in the Saṅgha Bhikkhunī Sangha Agung Indonesia

C. Equality and Justice

Every human being, male or female, has the equal potentiality to achieve spiritual attainment. 2,500 years ago, the Buddha has told Ānanda that the women, having gone forth and practicing Dhammavinayā, can realise perfection ( Cv.X.1, 2-3). It was also the reason why the most venerable Nyanasuryanadi Mahāthero admitted the women to lead this homeless life as Theravāda bhikkhunīs. Once, he was asked the reason he admitted the women to lead this homeless life as Theravāda bhikkhunīs whereas there are Theravāda bhikkhus against the re-establishment of Theravāda Bhikkhuni Saṅgha. His answer was: “Women has the same potentiality as men and are capable of achieving what achieved by men.” He stressed that women have the strength to develop moral behaviour, spiritual and mental qualities following the teachings of Buddha.

Seeing there are equal potentiality and achievement among male and female, he never discriminates his disciples as bhikkhus or bhikkhunīs. He treats his disciples equally by giving the same opportunity as he provides to the bhikkhus in leading this holy life. The equality and justice that gained by those bhikkhunīs can be classified into four categories, e.g., education, spiritual training, and social services.

D. Education

Venerable Nyanasuryanadi is also the chairman of "Yayasan Buddhayana" which supervises one Buddhist college in Indonesia, named Smaratungga Buddhist College located in Ampel, Boyolali, Central Java. This college has also become one of the benchmarks that represent an interest in learning the Dhamma of Buddhist women. Within 24 years, a female student (including laywomen and samānerīs) reached 70%. It is undoubtedly one consideration in term of providing an opportunity for women to gain equality in terms of education.

Recently, in Sangha Agung Indonesia, there are six bhikkhunīs and twelve Theravāda samānerīs. They all have a good education in Buddhism. One bhikkhunī has master degrees in education program and Buddhism and is reading for Doctoral degree as well, currently serves as deputy chief of Smaratungga College and a lecturer there as well; one bhikkhunī holds a PhD and serves as Secretary of the Post-Graduate Program in Buddhist Educational Program, and one bhikkhunī is reading for PhD degree in Buddhist Studies in Sri Lanka; the other two bhikkhunīs have BA degrees in Dharma Achariya. The samānerīs, some have completed their BA degree, and some are still studying at Smaratungga Buddhist College. Besides, they also get non-formal education. On some special occasions, they arrange Dhamma discussion with some bhikkhus. By understanding the excellent knowledge, some of them are lecturers, invited to be a speaker on seminars and television programs, giving guidance to the students at schools, etc.

The excellent education is essential because of the need for Buddhism in Indonesia. In Indonesia, as bhikkhus or bhikkhunīs, we must be able to teach Dhamma to the laity. Before we teach others, the first thing that should be done is that “learn” as it is said in the Dhammapada: “One should first establish oneself in the seemingly virtuous and then instruct another. A wise one would thus be not defiled” (Dh.158).

The primary purpose of education is to improve the qualities of the bhikkhunīs and the laity, especially the conditions of Buddhist women. By having well-educated bhikkhunīs, it would be easier to transform the knowledge to the laity. Of course, the knowledge transformation not only given to a particular group or gender but beyond genders and groups. So, Buddhism in Indonesia can be learned and practiced by all Buddhist and flourish from time to time.

E. Spiritual Training

In spiritual training, those bhikkhunīs and samānerīs also get the same opportunity. Although they are busy with our studies, they never forget their primary duties as nuns. Every day, they have morning and evening chanting. They chant not only in Pali, sometimes in Sanskrit and Mandarin. On every full-moon day, dark-moon day, and Buddhist feast-day, they do piṇḍapāta (alms round) together with the bhikkhus. Besides, on those days, the samānerīs rehearse sīkkhas together with samānerīs, and together request a senior bhikkhu to deliver ovada. On a particular occasion, the master sends them to meditation centers, local meditation centers or

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overseas, to learn and practice intensive meditation.

F. Social Services

As bhikkhunīs in Indonesia, besides training oneself, on the other hand, they also have to train and teach the laity. With the knowledge they have, they go from temple to temple to train and teach them. Mostly what they do is that giving Dhammatalk; arranging temporary pabbajā for children, teenagers and elders; leadership training for teenagers; chanting; etc. They go not only to the temples, but also to the prisons, orphanage houses, nursing homes, and hospitals. On doing these social services, they often do it together with bhikkhus.

Besides, they also provide particular services for Buddhist women. Therefore, the revival of the Theravāda bhikkhunī sangha becomes essential. Nowadays, Buddhist women in Indonesia are more active than men. By having bhikkhunī sangha, those Buddhist women have the opportunity to be guided intensively. There are some activities done by the bhikkhunī sangha to improve the qualities of those Buddhist women, such as: delivering seminars about pregnancy, how to be a successful mother and wife, how to manage their financials; giving workshop to improve their skill to increase their family income, such as cooking, making cakes, and sewing; leadership training, etc. Meanwhile, for spiritual development, the bhikkhunīs hold temporary samaṇerī pabbajā, celebrating Vesak day together, delivering Dhammatalk, guiding meditation and retreat, etc.

The efforts of the most venerable Nyanasuryanadi Mahāthero to re-establish the Theravāda bhikkhunī sangha has given significant influences to the appearance of Theravāda bhikkhuni in the Sangha Agung Indonesia. By getting the equality and justice from the bhikkhu sangha, the revival of the Theravāda bhikkhunī sangha of Sangha Agung Indonesia has given a significant contribution to Indonesian Buddhism. That bhikkhunis can be freely learned and practice Dhammavinaya, and then spread the Dhamma to the laity. Thus, Buddhist women in Indonesia have the opportunity to be guided intensively by the bhikkhunis.

Moreover, by contemplating on the message of Mahāpajapati Theri, Buddhist women should not be hesitated to bring up the same efforts while training themselves and developing the quality of life following Dhammavinaya.

“If you have any sympathy for me, and if you have any gratitude, then make a substantial effort, all of you, for the continuation of the true doctrine; The Fully Awakened One gave women the going forth when I implored him. Therefore, just as I would delight in it, so should you practice it” (ApA.146).

It is very fortunate to live in an era which is free from the unfortunate conditions, such as “to be born in the border regions among foolish barbarians where there is no access for bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, or upāsakas and upāsikās” as mentioned by the venerable Sariputta in Saṅgīti Sutta of Dīghanikāya (D.iii.264). Thus, it may be interpreted that to live in an era when the revival of bhikkhuni ordination in the Theravada tradition is not just a dream.

IV. CONCLUSION

The revival of Theravāda bhikkhunīs has appeared in Indonesia. There are two groups of Theravāda bhikkhunī sangha in Indonesia, namely Persaudaraan Bhikkhunī Indonesia (Perbhiktin) (in English can be translated as the Unity of Indonesian Theravāda Bhikkhunī) and Theravāda Bhikkhuni Sangha of Sangha Agung Indonesia.

Although there are some bhikkhunīs who face discriminatory treatment from the bhikkhu sangha, on this paper, it might be seen that the Theravāda Bhikkhuni Sangha of Sangha Agung Indonesia is well-supported by the bhikkhus. The Sangha Agung Indonesia highly appreciates the revival of bhikkhunī sangha in the Theravāda tradition. They allow women to lead the life as bhikkhunīs, to learn and practice Dhammavinaya as well.

This paper perhaps will open our minds and eyes to see that not all bhikkhunīs in Indonesia, especially Theravāda bhikkhunīs of Sangha Agung Indonesia, are discriminated. None of the bhikkhus in Sangha Agung Indonesia discriminates the Theravāda bhikkhunīs of Sangha Agung Indonesia. Even though they are different in tradition, gender, and robe, but they have the same aim. They are striving together to get rid of samsāra (cycle of rebirth) for the happiness of oneself and all beings.

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