

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 saṅgha*, recently, becomes the flagging topic almost throughout the world. It is because of the refusal of some *bhikkhu (Buddhist monk) saṅghas*, whether internationally or locally. Although there is the refusal of some *bhikkhu saṅgha*, in Indonesia, the *Sangha Agung Indonesia* fully appreciates the revival of *Theravāda bhikkhunī saṅgha*. 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 saṅghas* deny the revival of *Theravāda Bhikkhunī saṅgha*.

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) saṅgha* who believes that it is not possible to re-establish the *Theravāda bhikkhunī saṅgha* according to the ‘*Dharmavinaya*’ the doctrine of the Buddha as the *Theravāda bhikkhunī saṅgha* 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 s* has disappeared (Vajirañāṇavarorasa, 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 *Dharmavinaya* 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 ‘*Dharmavinaya*’ 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 *bhikkhuṇī* 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 *Samānera* 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 bhikkhunīs* 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 Jinarakkhita 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 Jinarakkhita 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 Jinarakkhita as the head of *Sangha Agung Indonesia*.

In 2017, there were 123 *bhikkhus* and 21 *bhikkhuni*s 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 bhikkhuṇī saṅgha* in Indonesia. It may be said that the *Sangha Agung Indonesia* is the only monastic organization in Indonesia who re-establishes the *Theravāda bhikkhuṇī 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 bhikkhuṇī* 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 Jinarakkhita, in 1963, ordained a *samaneri* according to *Theravāda* tradition held at Vimaladharmā Temple, Bandung in West Java, Indonesia. The *Samaneri* was named Jinakumari, who was later on known as the first Indonesian *bhikkhuṇī* after asleep for more than 1,000 years. In 1966, because there was no any *Theravāda bhikkhuṇī saṅgha* at that time, however, *samanerī* Jinakumari and some other *samaneris* were sent by the late venerable Ashin Jinarakkhita to receive full ordination according to *Mahayana* tradition at Po Lin Monastery in Hong Kong (Silvita, 2015:8-14).

Furthermore, the late venerable Ashin Jinarakkhita also established women association named Wanita Buddhist Indonesia (Buddhist Women Council) and *bhikkhunī* association in the *Sangha Agung Indonesia* known as *Saṅgha Bhikkhunī Sangha Agung Indonesia (Bhikkhunī Saṅgha of Saṅgha Agung Indonesia)*. Dedications of Ashin Jinarakkhita 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 *pabbajja* to women on 14 February 2008 at the Veluvana Monastery Ampel, Boyolali, Central Java, Indonesia. Those women who received the *pabbaja* were *anagarinī* Sri Utami and *anagarinī* Julia Surya who later on known as *bhikkhunī* Dhammācārini and *bhikkhunī* Ṭhitācārini.

On May 12, 2012, based on his recommendation, just after four years of training as *samāneris*, *samaneris* Dhammācārini and Ṭhitācārini received full ordination as a *bhikkhunī* in Sri Lanka at “*Dekanduwala Dharma Centre*”. The venerable Kirama Vimalajoti *Mahāthero* led the ordination ceremony as *bhikkhu upajjaya* and the venerable Padukka Sumithra *Therī* as *bhikkhuṇī pavattinī*. Since then, in the *Sangha Agung Indonesia*, there are *Theravāda bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs*, *samāneras* and *samāneris* who have equal opportunities to practice the *Dhammavinaya* of the Buddha.

Bhikkhunī Dhammācārini and *bhikkhunī* Ṭhitācārini 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* Dhammācārini 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 Smaratungga 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 Ṭhitācārini 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 Smaratungga 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 *Dhammavinaya* 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 *samānerīs* 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 *Dhammavinaya*, 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 Bhikkhunī 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 seemly virtue 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 *Pāli*, sometimes in Sanskrit and Mandarin. On every full-moon day, dark-moon day, and Buddhist feast-day, they do *piṇḍapata* (alms round) together with the *bhikkhus*. Besides, on those days, the *samānerīs* rehearse *sikkhas* together with *samaṇeras*, and together request a senior *bhikkhu* to deliver *ovada*. On a particular occasion, the master sends them to meditation centers, local meditation centers or

oversea, 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 *pabbaja* 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 bhikkhuṇī saṅgha* becomes essential. Nowadays, Buddhist women in Indonesia are more active than men. By having *bhikkhunī saṅgha*, those Buddhist women have the opportunity to be guided intensively. There are some activities done by the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* 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 help them to have some 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 pabbaja*, 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 saṅgha* has given significant influences to the appearance of *Theravāda bhikkhunī* in the *Sangha Agung Indonesia*. By getting the equality and justice from the *bhikkhu saṅgha*, the revival of the *Theravāda bhikkhuṇī saṅgha* of *Sangha Agung Indonesia* has given a significant contribution to Indonesian Buddhism. That *bhikkhunīs* 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 *bhikkhunīs*.

Moreover, by contemplating on the message of Mahāpajapati *Therī*, 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 *bhikkhunīs*, 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 *bhikkhunī* ordination in the *Theravāda* tradition is not just a dream.

IV. CONCLUSION

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

Although there are some *bhikkhunīs* who face discriminative treatment from the *bhikkhu saṅgha*, on this paper, it might be seen that the *Theravāda Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* of *Sangha Agung Indonesia* is well-supported by the *bhikkhus*. The *Sangha Agung Indonesia* highly appreciates the revival of *bhikkhunī saṅgha* 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 *samsara* (cycle of rebirth) for the happiness of oneself and all beings.

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