

Buddhist Nuns: Perspectives for the 21st century

BY GABRIELA FREY

Ordained women have shaped the Buddhist tradition in teaching and practice. Nevertheless, through the centuries they have lacked support and recognition.

A generous donation has now made it possible to establish the "Brambosch-Schaelen Foundation of the German Buddhist Union".

The new foundation will support projects for ordained women in Germany on many levels. Gabriela Frey on the situation of Buddhist nuns since the time of Buddha and on reform perspectives.



Members of the board and advisory board of the Brambosch-Schaelen Foundation of the German Buddhist Union. From left to right: Ven. Doko Waskönig (Zen Buddhism), Ven. Thubten Choedroen (Tibetan Buddhism), Ven. Miaoshiang (Chinese Buddhism), Dr. Carola Roloff (Bhiksuni Jampa Tsedroen), Gabriela Frey (Sakyadhita France)

At the time of Buddha, nuns were esteemed teachers and reached the highest spiritual levels. This is beautifully illustrated by the Therigāthā, a collection of over 500 songs by experienced nuns, most of whom lived at the time of the Buddha. The songs of Therigāthā narrate the life stories of the first nuns. They shed light on the deep humanity of these extraordinary women and testify to their realizations on the way to awakening. Thus they not only present a living memory to later generations, they also encourage women today to follow the path of pioneers and develop their own potential. Already 2,500 years ago, many passages of the Therigāthā show that women were in no way inferior to men in their spiritual achievements. With their brilliant teachings they shaped the Buddhist tradition and with their dedicated practice they contributed - often in total simplicity - to the continuation of the Buddha teachings.

Discrimination against women

However, Buddhist nuns (and lay women) have not received and continue not to receive adequate support and recognition. How did this happen? Many Asian Buddhist countries are strongly patriarchal. For centuries, women in Theravada Buddhism, but also in most Mahayana movements, were denied full ordination, although this possibility was once established by the Buddha himself.

This discrimination was and is justified by passages in the Buddha's teachings, which are interpreted as evidence of the inferiority of women. A famous passage can be found in the Pali Canon, in the Anguttara Nikaya collection. Chapter 8, verse 51 deals with the foundation of the Order of Nuns. The text reports that the Buddha, at the request of his disciple Ananda, agreed to the admission of women to the sangha only on one condition: that the nuns should observe eight so-called "heavy rules" (garudhamma) and subordinate themselves to the monks - similarly as in ancient India daughters were subordinate to their fathers, wives to their husbands and mothers to their sons. Mahapajapati, Buddha's aunt and foster mother, is said to have questioned this subordination for some time. However, the Buddha is said to have rejected her request by pointing out that equality for women would not be accepted by society outside Buddhist communities.

"Born free and equal in dignity and rights."

In the more than 2,500 years that have passed since the Buddha's lifetime, social conditions have changed considerably. In the 20th century, women were able to fight for more and more equality against massive resistance. Among other things, they invoked the human rights that have been internationally valid since 1948, where Article 1 states: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights". Article 2 grants these rights to every human being regardless of gender.

Even in the Buddhist world, engaged women in the 1970s no longer accepted the obvious discrepancy between Buddha's teachings and living reality. Among other things, they addressed the discrimination of nuns worldwide. The ordination of women introduced by the Buddha was a pioneering act both in the history of religion and in India at that time - this makes it all the more important to fall back on it again today.

In recent decades, several important organizations have been established to advance the cause, such as Sakyadhita International (Association of Buddhist Women), Sakyadhita France/Network of Buddhist Women in Europe, the Committee of Bhikshuni Ordination (CBO) and the Bhikkhuni Alliance.¹

Their representatives emphasize that for nuns of all Buddhist schools to be able to lead a self-determined life according to the Vinaya in their own monasteries, full ordination is indispensable.

Only then can nuns complete the whole spectrum of a monastic education and training and develop all the opportunities of a monastic life in independent monasteries. The desire for monastic life itself will also only grow among women if they have an appropriate infrastructure at their disposal.

Although today there are fully ordained nuns in China, Vietnam, Korea and since a few years ago also in monasteries in Sri Lanka and Thailand again - nevertheless much educational work remains to be done, so that a rethinking can take place and the patronizing of women by men finally also comes to an end in Buddhism. The disregard of equal rights for men and women could, also this has to be considered, endanger the recognition of Buddhism as a religious community equal to the Christian churches. Buddhists should therefore pay special attention to the equality of women and men in their communities and not wait until the obvious discrimination of ordained women becomes the subject of public criticism or even legal disputes.

A new foundation for Buddhist nuns

Ursula Brambosch-Schaelen worked at the Albert Einstein Grammar School in Kaarst, North Rhine-Westphalia. She was an individual member of the German Buddhist Union from the 1980s onwards. It was probably there that she learned about the difficult situation of Buddhist women and especially Buddhist nuns. As a director of studies she was very interested in the situation of women: She not only supported the publication of a standard work on feminist theology, a "Compendium of Feminist Bible Interpretation"², but in the 1990s she was also involved in a women's shelter in Koblenz for victims of domestic violence. When Ursula Brambosch-Schaelen died in 2015, she left 500,000 euros to the German Buddhist Union for Buddhist nun projects. After a two-year preparatory phase, the "Brambosch-Schaelen-Stiftung der DBU" (Brambosch-Schaelen Foundation of the German Buddhist Union) was able to officially start its work on April 1, 2019.

The purpose of the foundation is to promote Buddhist nun projects and to support Buddhist women on their way to ordination. The foundation will provide public information about the living conditions of Buddhist nuns in different traditions and promote the integration of Buddhist nuns in European society. In concrete terms, it can support Buddhist nuns and candidates for religious orders in the following areas:

- Establishment and expansion of nunneries in Germany
- Education, training and further qualification programmes for nuns and monastic aspirants
- Initiating and supporting basic scientific research on the ordination of Buddhist nuns and the position of women in Buddhism.
- Cooperation with research institutions with similar objectives at national and international level

- Promotion of Buddhist nunneries (in the sense of helping people to help themselves) as well as legal advice on issues relating to the status of the order, such as old-age pension provisions and other social insurances.
- Public relations work in Germany and beyond to improve the situation of Buddhist nuns in the long term
- Promoting a contact point for Buddhist nuns and women who aspire to become nuns
- Promotion of events (congresses) and publications on the subject of nuns and women in Buddhism

Already at the time of Buddha and during the many centuries that followed, women have proven that they are mature human beings who can take their spiritual development into their own hands without restriction and attain the highest realizations. With her generous legacy Ursula Brambosch-Schaelen has set an example and created the financial basis to sustainably promote and improve the monastic life of Buddhist women. The benefactress certainly wished for one thing: Not the conservation of tradition should be the focus of the work, but modern perspectives should be provided for Western Buddhist nuns, who in the 21st century wish to live self-determinedly according to the Vinaya.

The Brambosch-Schaelen Foundation of the German Buddhist Union - Organization and Next Steps

The external responsibility of the Foundation of the lies with its board of directors:

Dr. Carola Roloff (Bhiksuni Jampa Tsedroen),
Gabriela Frey (Sakyadhita France), Rev. Vajramala,
Honourable Councillor of the DBU.

The advisory board of trustees, which oversees the board of directors, consists of three fully ordained nuns: Ven. Miaoshiang (Chinese Buddhism), Ven. Doko Waskönig (Zen Buddhism) and Ven. Thubten Choedroen (Tibetan Buddhism). In order to best achieve the foundation's goals, the board of directors and the advisory board decided at their first joint meeting in December 2018 to invite nuns and knowledgeable laypersons to a brainstorming workshop

from 18 to 20 October 2019. For information or interest in participating in further workshops, please contact: gabriela.frey@bs-stiftung.de. Applications to the Foundation can be submitted until 30 June each year. Details can be found on www.brambosch-schaelen-stiftung.de. Around 25,000 euros will be awarded annually for 20 years. Please note that only applications for projects in Germany can be considered. In the spirit of the Founder, it should be taken into consideration that the proposals are not primarily about preserving the tradition, but above all for a reform movement, about the future of Buddhism in Germany and about concepts for a life as a Western Buddhist nun in the 21st century.



With their work in the foundation they wish to advance the cause of ordained Buddhists in Germany.

From left to right:

Ven. Miaoshiang (Chinese Buddhism),
Rev. Vajramala, honorary councillor of the German
Buddhist Union & Gabriela Frey (Sakyadhita France)

Annotations

¹ www.sakyadhita.int, www.buddhistwomen.eu, www.bhiksuniordination.org, www.bhikkhuni.net

² L. Schottroff u. a.: Feminist Interpretation. The Bible in Women's Perspective, Minneapolis 1998. The books of the Bible are re-read from the perspective of women, the contemporary history in which the two parts of the Christian Bible were created is reconstructed, the history of canon formation is critically questioned.