

Shoyo Sensei's Dharma Message:

Examination of Misunderstandings of Buddhism – 13 Women and Buddhism – (6)

QUESTION: “Did the Buddha reluctantly establish the nunnery?”

ANSWER: “There is no evidence for such speculation. As Dr. Hajime Nakamura says, it seems to be a later contrived story.”

Question (1):

I've heard that when the Buddha was asked by his disciple, Ananda, three times to make a nunnery for Mahapajapati Gotami, the Buddha's mother-in-law, he only reluctantly accepted his request. If so, does the Buddha's reluctance reveal his discriminative view towards women?

Answer (1):

From all the previous accounts regarding the Buddha's solid affirmation of the equal potentiality of women, it is unthinkable that the Buddha had any reluctance to establish a nunnery. Indeed, Hajime Nakamura holds another opinion that the Buddha's so called "reluctance" is a later contrived story. Nakamura believes that although the establishment of the nunnery was the Buddha's original and true intention, after the Buddha's passing away, many practical and realistic difficulties in the maintenance and management of the nunnery occurred, therefore later disciples created the false story (See Nakamura, *Genshi Bukkyo no Seikatsu Rinri*, pp. 125-126). This is Nakamura's speculation and he does not provide any evidence for it. However, considering the fact that the Buddha did not take any discriminative stance towards women, this opinion seems credible.

Question (2):

Was the nunnery established at the same time that the monastery was established?

Answer (2):

No. The nunnery seems to have been established after the monastery, probably about five years later.

Question (3):

Why didn't the Buddha establish both the nunnery and the monastery at the same time? Why did the Buddha wait until someone asked (suppose someone asked)?

Answer (3):

One speculation is that it was because the Buddha was aware of the difficulties that might be encountered with the establishment of a nunnery in a society where women were entirely subjugated by men. The Buddha may have been aware of the evils of sectarianism which might likely humiliate and harass women if they were provided a separate accommodation for themselves. It is also imaginable that there were monks who were not comfortable with the Buddha's decision of accepting women into the Order, especially among those who were previously of high castes and never allowed women any status of their own. Some nuns were sometimes ill-treated by some monks and they had to render various services to them, such as, washing and dyeing robes, and cleaning up the hall. The Buddha was careful and concerned about the well-being of the nuns and set rules to protect them, forbidding the monks from such abusive practices. To prevent the monks' taking advantage of the nuns, the Buddha decided that things offered to both Orders should be divided equally between the Orders, though the monks actually outnumbered the nuns.