

WOMEN UNDER
THE BŌ TREE

Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka

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Introduction
The tradition of Buddhist female renunciation
in Sri Lanka

This is a book about Buddhist women in Sri Lanka who have “renounced the world,”¹ or exchanged their lay identity for monastic life. The sources indicate that an order of nuns, a *bhikkhunī saṅgha*, played a significant role in the development and spread of Buddhism in its early history in the island.² Though there is not an officially sanctioned order of nuns in Sri Lanka today, there are women who set themselves up in the role of the ordained nun, the *bhikkhunī*, without changing formal status. These I shall call “lay nuns.” Whether they renounced lay life in the third century, BCE, or in the twentieth century, CE, female renunciants – both lay and ordained – have faced hardships unknown to men. Primarily, this is because for the most part Buddhist Sri Lankans throughout history have been ambivalent about women who renounce conventionally accepted social roles. For instance, the Pāli *Dīpavaṃsa*, which chronicles the formative years of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, records that women who entered the monastic community became great Buddhist teachers, and even became *arahants*, or enlightened beings. It also claims that they were renowned for their scholarly acumen and that kings honored them.³ In short, the *Dīpavaṃsa* values nuns and their contribution to the establishment of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. However, according to the Pāli *Mahāvaṃsa*, Buddhists considered monks more worthy of support than nuns. Though the *Mahāvaṃsa* mentions that nuns attained enlightenment,⁴ references to them are sporadic; rather, the *Mahāvaṃsa* is replete with references to monks, and especially to the beneficence on the part of many kings to the order of monks. In the *Mahāvaṃsa*, when kings make donations to the monastic community, the largest share goes to the male order.⁵ Aside from the story of the founding of the female monastic order in the island, nuns are never mentioned unless in conjunction with monks. Essentially, the order of nuns is an appendage to the order of monks.⁶

Thus, implicit in the *Mahāvamsa* is the message that men are more suited to the monastic life than women. Paradoxically, that same text tells us that women can and did become *arahants*.

This ambiguity is presaged in many Indian canonical Buddhist texts, such as the Pāli Canon.⁷ Some texts suggest that women are equal to men in their abilities to progress along the Buddhist path to enlightenment. Others imply that women are incapable of doing little else except tempting men away from that very path. This paradox is illustrated by the Buddha's proclamation in the canonical *Samyutta Nikāya* that women are able to attain *nibbāna* (Pāli; *nirvāṇa*, Sanskrit), the soteriological goal of Buddhism: "Whoever has such a vehicle, whether it is a woman or a man, by means of that vehicle shall come to *nibbāna*."⁸ Many passages, however, belie the egalitarian message of the Canon; instead, they bespeak misogyny. For instance, the *Anguttara Nikāya* records that the Buddha directed his monks to beware of women, and to be ever vigilant of the women who may try to entrap them:

Monks, I see no other single form so apt to rouse excitement, so desirable, so intoxicating, so apt to bind, so distracting, such a hindrance to winning the unsurpassed peace from effort⁹... as a woman's form. Monks, whosoever clings to a woman's form – infatuated, greedy, enslaved, enthralled – for many a long day shall grieve, snared by the charms of a woman's form.

Monks, a woman even when going along, will stop to ensnare the heart of a man; whether standing, sitting, or lying down, laughing, talking or singing, weeping, stricken or dying, a woman will stop to ensnare the heart of man... Truly one may say of womanhood: "it is wholly the snare of Māra."¹⁰

How do we reconcile such passages? Allan Sponberg has argued convincingly that this ambiguity about women in the early Buddhist texts reflects "the multiplicity of voices" that express "a different set of concerns current among members of the early community" of monks.¹¹ Many of these concerns arose after the death of the Buddha, when the male dominated monastic order had to cope with regulating a lifestyle suitable for both monks and nuns in cenobitic communities.

Among these various attitudes toward women in the texts, Sponberg has isolated four. Though the four attitudes build upon one another, they are not mutually exclusive. The first is soteriological inclusiveness, or the view that one's gender "presents no barrier to attaining the Buddhist goal of liberation from suffering."¹² The texts record that the Buddha himself believed that women were capable of

attaining *nibbāna*. The second attitude is institutional androcentrism, or the belief that “women indeed may pursue a full-time religious career, but only with a carefully regulated institutional structure that preserves and reinforces the conventionally accepted social standards of male authority and female subordination.”¹³ The *Mahāvamsa*, with its emphasis on monks and casual reference to nuns, articulates this view. The third attitude is ascetic misogyny, or the condemnation of women “as a threat to male celibacy.”¹⁴ The *Anguttara Nikāya* contains a passage that exemplifies this tendency. The fourth attitude toward women in Buddhist texts is soteriological androgyny, or the “dramatic revalorization of the feminine, ... a reevaluation of all those qualities and expectations culturally ascribed to male and female.”¹⁵ In this view, qualities normally associated with the feminine are considered indispensable for the successful practitioner. I also include in this attitude the general glorification of the feminine.

Sponberg’s analysis of these four views in early Buddhist texts is a useful tool for assessing attitudes toward women and world-renunciation that have prevailed in Sri Lankan Buddhist history. In the pages that follow, I discuss the ways that these attitudes have influenced the choices women make, and the choices made for women, in relation to the monastic vocation. As much of the rest of this book is devoted to explaining why this is the case, I shall only outline the answer here.

Generally, in Sri Lankan history, women have either been allowed to fulfill their spiritual capabilities as renunciants, or they have been discouraged from it, depending on historical exigencies. Sri Lankan Buddhists have occasionally drawn on positive canonical images of female renunciation, images that reflect soteriological inclusiveness, and have encouraged women to preach and renounce lay life, despite the contradictory misogynous attitudes in those very texts. It is important to note at the outset of this study that in several periods of Sri Lankan history, the third century, BCE, the late nineteenth century, CE, and later in the 1940s, Buddhists have called upon women to rediscover their vocation as world-renouncers. They have done this by highlighting inclusive passages of the Pāli Canon. Encouragement of this type was most marked in the 1890s, a time when people such as Anagārika Dharmapāla encouraged women to play leading roles in the Buddhist revival.

During Dharmapāla’s day, Buddhists used positive canonical images of women to affect various religio-political agendas, such as

the re-establishment of Buddhist institutions that were deemed necessary for the welfare of the country. Women-centered religious activity became a striking feature of Sri Lanka and was hailed in the newspapers. To use Sponberg's term, the feminine was "revalorized;" drawing upon favorable images of women as nurturing mothers *and* as nuns, Dharmapāla argued that women were able to "reproduce" Buddhism by "going forth from home into homelessness."¹⁶ He himself became a celibate revivalist and advocated that some women should also remove themselves from physical reproduction and become nuns. In effect, he encouraged women to engage in the *social* reproduction of Buddhism by preaching and awakening others to their Buddhist heritage.¹⁷ At a time when the task of resuscitating Buddhism was of paramount importance for many Buddhists, women performed any service they could, including preaching in ochre robes. In Part I of this study, I recount this period of religious experimentation in which feminine institutions, such as the order of nuns, were to a large degree revalorized.

On the other hand, women have been discouraged from playing an active, visible role in religious life, such as in contemporary Sri Lanka. Many monks argue that women need not renounce the world in order to be exemplary Buddhists; this can be done while remaining a laywoman or a householder: an *upāsikā*. *Upāsikā* is a term that has many different meanings in contemporary Sri Lanka. I shall have more to say about the term in chapter 5. However, we should keep in mind that in its broadest use, *upāsikā* refers to all Buddhist laywomen; and in its more specific use, it refers to the pious women and female children who keep the Buddhist precepts on the full-moon days (*pōya*). Buddhists also use it to refer to females who keep the precepts for extended periods of time. The contemporary lay nuns of Sri Lanka fall into the latter category; because they are not members of the *saṅgha*, the monastic order, Buddhists often refer to them as *upāsikās*. I further discuss the lay nuns' status in Part II below. Here I need only say that many contemporary monks, referring to the great female lay benefactors of the Pāli Canon, pre-eminent among them, Visākhā, claim that it is more important for women to support Buddhism by cultivating their roles as laywomen, and nurturers.¹⁸ In other words, women are expected to conform to the stereotype of the loving, selfless female who worships, supports monks by offering alms, and acts as the foundation of the family. Related to this is the way in which these monks also claim that the female lay community

has an important role to play in the life of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. They argue that the Buddha himself proclaimed that *upāsikās* – female householders – are among the four-fold community of followers that he envisaged.¹⁹ The other three are: pious laymen, or male householders (*upāsakas*); monks (*bhikkhus*); and nuns. These monks also argue that as women cannot become nuns, (a problem I explore in chapter 1), women should behave like Visākḥā. However, this nurturing householder is the antithesis of the world-renouncer who conducts worship services, receives alms, and leaves her family. In spite of such polarization, many women in Sri Lanka renounce lay life and argue that they have every right to do so. In Part II, I offer their life stories in addition to exploring why monks are opposed to the lay nuns' vocation.

While exploring the attitudes of Buddhist Sri Lankans toward women and world-renunciation, I ask the following question: how does contemporary female renunciation, as a movement, fit into the broader developments in Sri Lankan Buddhism that Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, Stanley Tambiah, and others have recently documented?²⁰ Among these developments are Protestant Buddhism, which “originated as a protest against the British in general and against Protestant Christian missionaries in particular. At the same time, however, it assumed salient characteristics of that Protestantism.”²¹ Though, as we shall see, this new ideological Buddhism that emerged in the late nineteenth century was a response to the British, it has continued to shape Buddhism to the present. Thus, there have been many expressions of that new ideology, all of which we can call Protestant Buddhism. I shall explore in the chapters that follow the nature of Protestant Buddhism, especially as it relates to the recent resurgence of female renunciation in Sri Lanka.

Another development that is related to the contemporary movement of female renunciation in Sri Lanka, is the claim that Buddhist Sri Lankans have an historical and sacred role to protect Buddhism from dangerous and alien forces. Though this point of view has created divisions between the various ethnic groups of the island, it has also fostered a positive valuation of female renunciation, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

A third development in Sri Lankan Buddhism that is connected to the revival of the nuns' vocation is the “rediscovery” of various traditional Buddhist paradigms. Among them are: the socially active, yet celibate layman, the *anagārika*; the forest monk; and the

lay meditator.²² While exploring these developments as they relate to the movement of contemporary female renunciation, I also ask other questions, namely: what is the relationship between sexual stereotypes and religious views? Do sexual stereotypes and religious views help to determine the roles that Theravādin Buddhist women play in Sri Lankan society? If so, how? In what ways, if any, are western women who become Buddhist world-renouncers influenced by traditional Buddhist images of the feminine? What is the relationship between Buddhist texts and behavior, especially with regard to female world-renunciation?

Like many major world-religions, Buddhism has been guided almost predominantly by men. Consequently in the Pāli canonical texts, women are frequently characterized as helpless, vulnerable, profane, and weak (both morally and physically). As such, they are not suited to the life of the world-renouncer. Nevertheless, in almost every corner of Buddhist Sri Lanka, at least one shaven-headed, ochre-clad woman, is part of the landscape. She may live in a village cloister with other women like herself, or choose to live in a cave and spend hours in solitary meditation. Whether she lives in a cave or in a village, she relies on alms for sustenance; she conducts worship services for the laity, teaches the Buddha's message, and hopes to attain *nibbāna*. According to the Buddhist canonical texts, many of the activities of contemporary female world-renouncers, or lay nuns, are reminiscent of the activities of the ancient ordained nun. Like her, the contemporary female renunciant has eschewed worldly luxuries in favor of a life of service or contemplation. However, unlike the *bhikkhunī*, the female renunciant such as Sudharmā who lives in Madivala, and Sumettā who lives in Dehivala, is technically a laywoman because Sri Lankan women are at present unable to enter the *saṅgha*. Nonetheless, lay nuns invariably base themselves on models of female renunciation found in the canonical texts, though their responses to those models differ widely.

In contemporary Sri Lanka, women are not encouraged to renounce. Instead, as we shall see in Part II, they are expected to marry and nurture a family. However, in spite of societal pressures urging them not to renounce, lay nuns have created viable religious roles for themselves. Moreover, they are supported to one degree or another by Buddhist society, yet never in the same explicit manner as the monks. Among the lay nuns I interviewed, not one related that her family supported her decisions to leave home. They were all

expected to marry, have children, and abide by the precepts of the householder, the *upāsikā*. The precepts of the householder are a variation of the ten precepts of the *bhikkhu* and the *bhikkhunī*. For the monk and nun, the ten precepts consist of restraint from injury to creatures, restraint from stealing, restraint from unchastity, restraint from lying, restraint from the occasion of sloth from liquor, restraint from eating at the wrong time, restraint from seeing shows of dancing, singing and music, restraint from the occasion of using garlands, scents, and wearing finery, restraint from using high beds and large beds, and restraint from accepting gold and silver. Occasionally, very devout laymen and laywomen abide by the ten precepts for extended periods of time, though the way that the laity “takes” the ten precepts differs from the way the monks recite them. I shall have more to say on this in chapter four. What must be kept in mind here, however, is that most laity keep the first five precepts, while the particularly pious among them may keep the first eight. The majority of contemporary lay nuns, unlike most laity, abide by the ten precepts for life. Though the lay nuns have chosen to abide by the ten, each lay nun I interviewed told me that before her renunciation, her family expected her to conform to the stereotype of the pious Buddhist woman who keeps the five precepts and remains in-the-world. Nonetheless, it is estimated that in contemporary Sri Lanka 5,000 women, albeit as laity, have chosen to walk in the footsteps of the ancient *bhikkhunī*, who kept the ten precepts in addition to the 311 monastic rules.²³ Their life histories emphasize the deep contradictions and constraints under which many Buddhist women live in their dual role as *upāsikās* and world-renouncers.

The history of Sri Lankan Buddhist women who renounce the world without changing formal status is relatively recent. It can be traced to the late 1800s, a time in which the laity, both men and women, experimented with new roles, and in which the West became increasingly interested in Buddhism. The late nineteenth century witnessed great social change in Sri Lanka, or Ceylon as it was then called,²⁴ which fostered a Buddhist revival that continues to the present day. As a response to centuries of colonial rule, beginning with the Portuguese in 1505, the Buddhist revival was a seed-bed for experimentation and innovation.²⁵ Many Buddhist laypeople responded to the sense of decline in the island by attempting to return Buddhism to an “ideal” pristine, or pure, form. Michael Carrithers has documented the fascinating careers of monks and laymen whose

responses to such times revived and reformed the ancient practice of forest-dwelling asceticism;²⁶ much like the personalities who are the subject of Part 1 below, the forest monks asked themselves: “how can Buddhism be revived?”

During the 1890s, women engaged in activities that were to breathe new life into Buddhism. Women began preaching Buddhist sermons and, much to the dismay of many, they began wearing robes of ochre, the color associated with the *saṅgha*. Some Buddhists considered such activities revolutionary, yet necessary; for others, they were anathema. The sources from the period inform us that preaching in robes had traditionally been the prerogative of the monk only.²⁷ The sources also tell us that some women nonetheless donned the robe and became exemplars of religious enthusiasm. One such woman traversed the southern part of the island preaching and teaching, while others concentrated their activities in Colombo. I recount their activities in Part 1 below.

Though it is impossible to tell how many there were – it is likely that their numbers were few – the lay nuns of the 1890s became the focus of numerous editorials and articles. At least one of them was ethnically Sinhala, while another was a Burgher, a descendant of the Europeans who colonized Sri Lanka in the seventeenth century. Two of these renunciants became students of Dharmapāla, who helped to direct the Buddhist enthusiasm of the late nineteenth century. Dharmapāla and an American woman he had recruited for Buddhist work, Countess Miranda de Souza Canavarro, organized female renunciants into a Buddhist cloister where meditation, service, and the revival of Buddhism were features of their daily life; however, they never gained entrance into the *saṅgha*. The “Countess,” as she was referred to in the press, renounced lay life herself, donned an ochre robe, and travelled around the island to raise money for Buddhist projects.²⁸ According to his diaries, Dharmapāla encouraged the Countess’s activities. In fact, he argued that the women of the 1890s should be more like the women in the Pāli Canon who had served Buddhism by renouncing lay life. For several years he entertained the idea of re-establishing the order of nuns in the island.²⁹ He worked closely with the Countess and dedicated his energies to establishing a cloister for religiously motivated women. In 1898, his dream came true. The history of the first cloister for lay nuns, or “lay nunnery,” of the modern period, and the social history that gave rise to it, are documented fully in Part 1. This episode of

Dharmapāla's life challenges assumptions that interest in female renunciation in the modern period was primarily the product of cultural exchange between Burma and Sri Lanka.³⁰ Rather, interest in female renunciation was one consequence of Buddhist cultural awakening in the island, which was precipitated by internal developments.

Since the 1890s, Sri Lankan women have continued to renounce the world, while western women have continued to be drawn to the vocation of the female Buddhist renunciant. Though there are marked differences between the practice of western female renunciants and their Sri Lankan counterparts, both groups renounce the world without changing formal status. They are not *bhikkhuni*s, yet they have established themselves in the role of this defunct order of nuns. As in the 1890s, contemporary female renunciants are the focus of many articles and editorials that center around their contradictory status as lay monastics. The newspaper debates do not take place between lay nuns and monks; rather, laypeople and monks challenge each other to counter charges of misogyny, on the one hand, and heterodoxy, on the other. Much of the controversy surrounding the lay nuns is over their lack of status in the *saṅgha*, as well as the feasibility of re-establishing an ordination lineage for them. As Gombrich has remarked, it is likely that many people would welcome the re-establishment of an order of nuns in Sri Lanka;³¹ however, as I learned during the course of my study, there are just as many who would not. Though monks and laity – both men and women – continue to debate the issue over the ordination of women, the majority of the lay nuns I interviewed would not choose to enter the *saṅgha*, even if it were possible. They argue that membership in the monastic order is not a prerequisite for leading a monastic life. I explore this and other reasons for their disinterest in entering the *saṅgha* more fully in Part II.

BUDDHISM FROM A DIFFERENT VIEW

This book is not only about female renunciants in Buddhist Sri Lanka; it is about Buddhism from the perspective of those women who have renounced the world. Although few words have been preserved of the women who renounced the world when the lineage was introduced to the island in the third century, BCE,³² or for that matter, in the nineteenth century, their voices echo throughout the

sources I have used. In addition to culling voices from historical documents, I offer contemporary lay nuns' opinions about their own tradition. Moreover, I discuss their attitudes about Buddhism in Sri Lanka in general, including attitudes about monks, especially political monks and their activities.

The vision of Buddhism that female renunciants offer – both ordained and lay – has been blurred throughout the centuries by both a patriarchal religion disinterested in women's views, and by scholars, ever since the pioneering days of Buddhist scholarship. If scholars explored the religious experience of Buddhist women in Sri Lanka, more often than not, it was as an afterthought, an appendix, or a footnote. Only recently have we begun to view Buddhist women's religious experience as something other than as a supplement to men's. This recent trend is long overdue.³³

Though Buddhist Studies have, for the most part, kept the religious experience of women on the periphery, there are notable exceptions. Any study of Buddhist women, such as the one I offer here, is indebted to I. B. Horner's classical study of women during the formative years of Buddhist history.³⁴ In this work, Horner not only analyzed the rules that governed the ancient order of nuns, but included the life histories of many of its members based upon their own poems: the *Therīgāthā*. In Horner's (1930) work, the religious experience of women does not provide supplementary information about the experience of men; rather it is seen as truly representative of Buddhism and the Buddhist monastic community. Horner's contemporaries had already paved the way for studies that are sympathetic to the woman's point of view. In the 1890s, Caroline A. Foley, i.e., Mrs. Rhys Davids, and Mabel Bode provided insights into the lives of the women leaders of early Buddhism. Bode explored the position of women in Buddhism as reflected in the *Manoratha Pūranī*, while Foley focused upon the condensed biographies of ancient nuns recorded in the *Paramattha Dipānī*.³⁵

Both Bode's and Foley's accounts of the Buddhist nun in ancient Indian society offer valuable insights into women and renunciation in early Buddhism. D. N. Bhagavat's study of the early Buddhist legal system also provides a complete picture of the life of the woman who had renounced the world in favor of monastic life; it devotes an entire chapter to women and renunciation.³⁶ Along these lines, Meena V. Talim's study of the rules that governed the life of the nun places the Buddhist female renunciant in the context in which her tradition

arose. By suggesting that the Buddhist nun must be viewed as one expression of female renunciation among many in ancient India,³⁷ she paints a broad picture of the religious life of women in early Buddhism.³⁸ Among recent studies, Mi Mi Khaing's work is noteworthy because it offers a comprehensive account of Buddhist women in Burma.³⁹ Similarly, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh's study of Buddhist women in Thailand extends our knowledge of the contribution made by women to Buddhism in Southeast Asia.⁴⁰ Susan Murcott's work on the ancient order of Buddhist nuns in India is also commendable, for it fully explores the goals, aspirations, and lives of women who renounced lay life at the time of the Buddha.⁴¹ In addition, Mohan Wijayaratna's admirable exploration of the ancient order of nuns in India offers a comprehensive look at the "ideal" life of the ancient nun.⁴² It is my hope that what follows will complement Wijayaratna's book by offering instances of the "actual" state of female renunciation in Theravāda Buddhism.

While Buddhist female renunciants slowly move from the margins and the footnotes of scholarly works into the texts themselves, they continue to move from the periphery and boundary into mainstream religious life in Sri Lanka. Though female renunciants such as Sudharmā and Sumettā, whom we meet in Part II, have defied conservative monks by establishing themselves in the role of the ancient nun, they have also helped to create newer, more powerful roles for women in Buddhism. These experiments in new roles, no matter how much they are fashioned upon classical images, are a challenge to the orthodoxy and institutional conservatism of Sri Lankan Buddhism.

THE CONSERVATIVE BUDDHIST TRADITION OF SRI LANKA

The history of female renunciants in Sri Lanka provides a case study of religious revival and reform in a country that makes claims to Buddhist doctrinal purity. Many of the Buddhist monks I interviewed believe themselves to be the conservators of "true" Buddhism. They argue that their counterparts who have preceded them throughout Sri Lanka's Buddhist history have had a similar responsibility.⁴³ These monks claim that the Buddhist tradition in Sri Lanka, the Theravādin tradition, has understood itself to be conservative since its inception in the island.⁴⁴ For instance, by establishing an order of nuns shortly after Buddhism was introduced to the island, Buddhists

conformed to conservative notions of Buddhism. According to the texts the Buddha declared that there are four Buddhist communities, namely: monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. Thus, when the first Buddhist Sri Lankan king's female folk asked to enter the monastic order, the king acted conservatively by arranging the establishment of the order of nuns in Sri Lanka. The order attracted many women,⁴⁵ though it never prospered as much as the order of monks. Nonetheless, the nuns of the island contributed to the growth of Buddhism and, as we have seen, the chronicles claim that many achieved reputations as great teachers and religious adepts. However, the fortunes of *bhikkhunīs* changed in the turbulent decades of the eleventh century. References to them end at this time, thus bringing to a close the history of the ordained nun in Sri Lanka. Though it is impossible to reconstruct with any accuracy the demise of the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*, it is possible to reconstruct the controversy surrounding its re-establishment.

As I have noted above, many Theravādin Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka understand themselves to be *the* conservators of Buddhism; this is also true of the lay nuns and much of the laity. They are heir to what H. L. Seneviratne calls the Sinhala-Buddhist or "Mahāvamsa-view" of history that "defines the world-historical role of Sri Lanka as the stronghold of Buddhism and Buddhist civilization."⁴⁶ Based on the fifth-century *Mahāvamsa*, but in many respects the product of the nineteenth century, this view has been bolstered by research "mingled freely with the revivalist-inspired restoration of ancient monuments and the re-discovery of the splendour of the lost cities ..."⁴⁷ The Mahāvamsa-view thus legitimates the idea that Sri Lankan Buddhists have had a sacred mission: to maintain the purity of the Buddha's message and teachings in a world that is constantly changing. Although the *Mahāvamsa* does not suggest that Sri Lanka is uniquely the defender of Buddhism, many contemporary Sri Lankan Buddhists claim that their island was destined to be the bastion of orthodox Buddhism and that the history of their island is, therefore, a sacred history. In short, my informants tell us that there is an irrefutable connection between Buddhism and Sri Lanka.

How does this idea of Sri Lanka as sacred Buddhist isle and its Buddhist inhabitants as the conservators of "true" Buddhist tradition relate to the discussion of the controversy over the re-establishment of the order of nuns? When the order of nuns disappeared in the eleventh century, it was not resuscitated by bringing ten nuns from

Burma – the quorum of nuns required by monastic rules to ordain a woman into the *saṅgha*⁴⁸ – even though such an action would have been possible. (There is not at present an order of nuns in any Theravādin Buddhist country.⁴⁹ However, there was an order of nuns in Burma in the eleventh century that Buddhists could have called upon to aid in the re-establishment of the nuns' lineage in Sri Lanka. According to the sources, it became defunct roughly two hundred years after the demise of the order of nuns in Sri Lanka.⁵⁰) The order of monks was similarly affected in the eleventh century, yet the king revived it by bringing Burmese monks to Sri Lanka to re-establish the lineage; the order of nuns, however, was never revived.

Attempts to revive the order of nuns in the present are quashed by monks who argue that in order to do so, monastic rules would have to be broken. Because they see themselves as heirs to the Theravādin tradition, which they argue has not condoned altering or amending the rules that govern the monastic community,⁵¹ they are opposed to the ordination of women. According to their rationale, as it is impossible to assemble the requisite quorum of Theravādin nuns to ordain a woman into the *saṅgha*, they cannot ordain women without abrogating the rules. The majority of the Sri Lankan monks I interviewed, therefore, represent a conservative tradition that they claim has traditionally endeavored to protect Buddhism from change and any divisive threats to its preservation.⁵²

Despite their belief that they walk in the footsteps of the *bhikkhunī*, the lay nuns represent change. Though they carry out the traditional services of the ordained nun, and though they are for the most part conservative in respect to their practice,⁵³ they pose a challenge to orthodoxy. Chapter 1 explores more fully the tension between orthodoxy and the tradition of female renunciation, with special reference to the establishment of the order of nuns in Sri Lanka in the third century, BCE. In chapter 2, I present the rise of the unordained nun in the nineteenth century, within the context of the social, political, and religious climate of the period. I also make special reference to ambiguous models of the laity in the canonical works, models that have served as springboards for innovation, and include the category of the lay nun. In chapters 3 and 4, I examine Dharmapāla and the Countess's attempts to re-establish and institutionalize the tradition of Buddhist female renunciation in Sri Lanka. The early twentieth-century institutionalization of the unordained female renunciant is the subject of chapter 5, while the effort to

reinvigorate the institution is the focus of chapter 6. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 are concerned with contemporary Sri Lanka. In these chapters, I offer biographies of many lay nuns and explore: their reasons for choosing the monastic lifestyle, the problems that they face, their goals and aspirations, as well as their own interpretation of their vocation.⁵⁴ Their life histories demonstrate that though the lay nuns face hardships, they do have access to power which is normally not within the realm of rural laywomen from whom they are drawn. It is the power to chart their own destinies. In order to understand the contemporary scene, we must first turn our attention toward the story of the formation of the ancient order of nuns in Sri Lanka, for it is often invoked in the present.