

Present

The Voices and Activities of Theravada Buddhist Women | Winter 2011

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The 1st Annual International Bhikkhuni Day

If You Honor Me, Honor My Mother Gotami ■ The 1st Annual International
Bhikkhuni Day ■ Honoring and Celebrating Bhikkhunis and Laywomen
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Turning Back Towards Freedom
Wearing White in the West ■ Bhikkhunīsaṃyutta



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Wearing White in the West

by Carudhamma Jo Ferris

“If, by giving up a lesser happiness one could experience a greater happiness, a wise person would renounce the lesser happiness to behold the greater.”

Dhammapada 290¹

Well, what about wearing white in the West? I look a little different or even strange. I’ve been called a snowman, an angel, and a priest. I do wear all white (or off-white) clothes and even robe kind of stuff. Have a shaved head or, as it grows between shavings, a bit of stubbly hair at times. Many a time I notice people, especially women, looking at me. And then I catch their eye and get a little embarrassed smile back. Wonder what they’re thinking? Chemo? Sinead O’Conner look? Maybe even some kind of religious convert. I neither fit in with the ordained monastic Sangha nor with the “normal” everyday world of living.

I am, technically, a layperson observing “Eight Precepts,” not an “anagarika,” a homeless one in white, but rather a “gari-ka,” a homed one, living with my Dhamma partner husband who is also observing “Eight Precepts.” Most Theravada Buddhists undertake “Five Precepts,” but the change in the Third Precept from “...abstaining from all sexual misconduct” to “abstaining from all sexual activity,” and the addition of three further precepts, alters them quite significantly, as seen below:

1. I undertake the precept to refrain from killing or harming living beings.
2. I undertake the precept to refrain from stealing, taking that which is not given.
3. I undertake the precept to refrain from all sexual activity.
4. I undertake the precept to not lie, to speak only the truth.
5. I undertake the precept to refrain from all intoxicating drinks and drugs.
6. I undertake the precept to refrain from eating at the wrong time (i.e., after noon).
7. I undertake the precept to refrain from dancing, singing, music, entertainment, and beautification of the body.
8. I undertake the precept to refrain from using high or luxurious beds or seats.

So why do I do this?

For me, the three-fold answer is to be protected, to be happy, and to be Free!

Continually throughout his teachings, the Buddha praised the Holy path of renunciation as being the most supportive path to freeing the heart from dissatisfaction and suffering and realizing the highest happiness. But what if you’re not yet ready to ordain, yet are no longer finding ordinary life in the world sufficient to satisfy your Dhamma heart? What other options are available? This is my journey and what I’ve discovered along the way.



Introduction to the Monastic Path

I had the wonderful blessing of coming into contact with the Buddha's renunciate monastic lineage early in this current rebirth/ life. My Dhamma benefactor (and cousin), Gerald, who introduced me to the Dhamma, had spent many years with Kapilavaddho Bhikkhu, Ajahn Chah and his sangha, and then later practiced with Mahasi Sayadaw. When Gerald first shared the Dhamma with me, he showed me photos of Mahasi Sayadaw and Ajahn Chah. I was very moved and knew that I had found the "Pure Ones" I had been looking for. This was back in 1987 and I had just turned 21.

The next year I had the opportunity to serve food for three months, during a silent retreat, to two Theravada bhikkhus and one Theravada nun—the nun being Sister Medhanandi. I am very happy that she is now Ayya Medhanandi Bhikkhuni.

Five months later I had the good fortune to attend my next retreat, led by Ven. U Pandita Sayadaw, the monastic who gave me the name Carudhamma. During that retreat there were temporary ordinations for a number of Western women and men, and I remember telling Ven. U Pandita Sayadaw that someday I would like to be a sister to Sister Medhanandi. Well, fast forward quite a few years and I am now starting to fulfill that aspiration of moving towards ordination.

Observing Eight Precepts on Retreat

Being offered the Eight Precepts while on retreats was my first introduction to them. Retreat is a good place to initially "try them on." The worldly temptations are limited and one's attention is directed to a more moment-to-moment existence. So the undertaking has a more seamless quality. The kilesas, the troublemakers of the mind, may rant and scream—"But I want ...," however there are few occasions and little opportunity to act them out.

Since the retreat with Ven. U Pandita Sayadaw, I have been able to attend quite a few two- to three-month meditation retreats. In many ways, a three-month meditation retreat practicing eight precepts can be similar to living as a monastic. In addition to celibacy and foregoing entertainment, from early morning to late at night one has the opportunity to live and meditate in silence, without social interaction with other people or with the world. Practicing in this way, and receiving food that is prepared and offered by others, the heart has the opportunity to experience aspects of the renunciate life. Through these retreats my heart has had a wonderful taste of renunciation and found protection, freedom and delight in this.

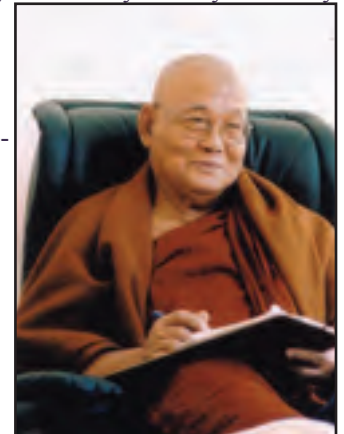
So over the years the motivation to support the heart through renunciation, both in retreat and in the world, has grown increasingly strong. I am also more and more seeing the ultimate unsatisfactoriness of what the world has to offer.

So why not take the next step in moving towards the complete freedom of renunciation and observe eight precepts continually—in daily life as well as on retreat?

Observing Eight Precepts in Daily Life

I have worked pretty much consistently with eight precepts since June of 2005. I took a few weeks off here and there during that time, for example when my parents would visit and we would eat together in the evenings.

I actually kind of tricked myself initially into my first foray into observing eight precepts in daily life. My Dhamma partner husband and I were driving to the monastery of Sayadaw U Kosala, in the Taungpulu Sayadaw lineage. (My Dhamma partner ordained back in the 1980s for five and a half years as a bhikkhu, with Taungpulu Sayadaw as his preceptor.) As we were getting closer to the monastery, I suddenly resolved to ask for eight precepts—like, "just do it!". So I did. I requested and formally took them from an ordained member of the Sangha, and Sayadaw U Kosala kindly officiated. (One can take the Eight Precepts from an ordained male or female monastic, from a Dhamma teacher, in front of a Buddha statue, or even just in one's heart by oneself.)



Venerable Sayadaw U Pandita

The drive back home from Sayadaw U Kosala's monastery was over two hours, and by the time we got home it was late at night and I was tired and very hungry. The thoughts arose, "Ah—all this taking of higher precepts is good and noble and, well, I did it, BUT, I have problems with low blood sugar levels and maybe it's not really for me and blah, blah, blah."

My Dhamma partner to the rescue: "No, you're fine—just go to bed and sleep and when you wake up in the morning you'll be able to eat!" Ha! A true kalyana mitta, good spiritual friend, helped overcome doubt and craving! So that's what I did—and got to eat the next morning. ("One day at a time."). And as a footnote, after two weeks of a grumbling tummy and blood sugar levels a bit yo-yo-ish, everything smoothed out, and I "cured" my hypoglycemic tendencies. "Grazing" throughout the day, my previous solution, wasn't the answer—mini-fasting in the afternoon turned out to be it.

A lovely way to introduce the Eight Precepts into one's life is to observe them on Uposatha days. These are the days when the moon cycle is full, new, and the two half moons. One can take these additional precepts and experience for a day the support they can give to mindfully watching the heart. Playing with one's comfort zones or edges, in a worldly context, is an

excellent practice.

In addition to being an incredible protection, my own personal experience of tasting the first steps of nekkhama (renunciation) has been such a joy and true learning of the heart in so many ways! So why not take yet another step closer to the best and most supportive conditions in which to continue my path to Liberation of the heart?

Wearing White

In December of 2009, my Dhamma partner and I were celebrating our twenty-first anniversary. When we were married, we wrote marriage vows intended to support us in the complete realization of the highest happiness—Nībbāna. I decided to make our anniversary the day to take the next step on my path to monastic living. Wearing white and a shaved head were good additions to the Eight Precepts.



Joanne (aka Carudhamma Jo Ferris) and Ron in California

White is the reflection of all colors. Before choosing the simplicity of just wearing white, I had a wardrobe of many lovely colors, shades, and styles. The simplicity of one color hugely simplifies one's daily clothing choices. It also truly helps to quiet the mind... except of course when I see a particular previous favorite color. I then sometimes feel the familiar movement of the mind, liking and reaching outward. The eye making contact with the desirable object giving rise to wanting mind. And if I'm not mindful at such times, the wheel starts rolling again – contact – pleasant feeling – craving – clinging – becoming. It is so easy when mindfulness lapses for the endless quest for happiness to roll onwards amidst pleasures that never last and are never enough to permanently satisfy the mind. Isn't that one translation of "dukkha," "un-satisfactory," unable to really satisfy?

My strong tendency when wearing regular clothes was to

have the right color, style, fit, fabric, etc. So much so that my partner had pretty much given up trying to buy anything for me in the clothes department. Easier to just let me choose, and then buy it for me! So it was a revelation when I first decided to wear simple white garments. He so wanted to support me in that choice that he found and bought white polar fleece tops and trousers, and presented and offered them to this new white being.

For me this was such an opening! To go from "only this exact style and color of clothing will do" to being open to anything offered. It was transformational and liberating! My heart was so moved and touched by the act of support, love, and generosity, and I experienced a wonderful freedom from the clutch of having to have the "right" clothes.

What I was offered was more beautiful than any cashmere, silk, or pashmina clothing. To me this was my first experience of being offered "robes." And it was felt exquisitely and profoundly in the heart, opening to the letting go of self and view of being a certain way. The touching on this part of the monastic lineage that the Buddha had created was very inspiring and faith producing!

A few weeks after changing costume color, it started to feel too familiar, or too "easy." Like, "Isn't this meant to be difficult or hard?" Was I faking it, or not really being authentic or up to the standard? In talking with my Dhamma partner, it became clear that this feeling of increasing ease was not being untrue to the path I had chosen, but rather I was learning to live in white and it was becoming my new skin. Shedding the old one was being accomplished and the new one was feeling like home. A more transparent home. It was a good thing.

I liken the kilesas, the defilements, to gremlins—always trying to trip one up, or argue their case like a good trial lawyer. They have stunningly brilliant arguments, but I've found that these particular lawyers are always wrong—these kilesas are never telling the truth! "But if I just have one little morsel more, no one will ever know." Or one of my favorites: "There's nothing wrong with pursuing sense pleasures. It's only the attachment to them that is a problem, so it's fine to go ahead and enjoy them." But we don't see that the pursuit of sense pleasures is an inherently endless pursuit, because they never last and they're never enough.

Dhamma Learning and Awakening

For me, the path of renunciation in white is a path of simplicity and letting go. I've found the taste of Dhamma to be the sweetest taste! From the practice of Dhamma and meditation, I inherently know that getting more, better, or different sense pleasures or worldly accomplishments will never really satisfy the craving mind. It will not lead to lasting happiness. It's a kind of a "No Thru Road" experience. A "Dead End" pursuit. "Do Not Enter." But again and again, over and over, my mind has gone

down that road. One popular definition of madness: doing the same thing over and over again expecting a different result. Or the Sufi story about Nasrudin, eating one hot chili pepper after another, tears streaming down his face, but still “waiting for a sweet one.” As wisdom grows, it sees that there are no lasting “sweet ones” in Samsara. Do I get it?! The Buddha teachings in the Magandiya Sutta (MN 75) the Potaliya Sutta (MN 54) and the Dantabhumi Sutta (MN 125) leave no doubt about the nature of sense pleasures of the six senses. Yet I see how deeply conditioned my mind is by the “four distorted perceptions.”



Ayya Gunasari, Ayya Satima, Anagarika Aloka, & Carudhamma Jo

Distortions of Perception

Viparita-sanna is distorted perception. The sanna-vipallasas refer to four types of distorted perceptions. They are: seeing the impermanent as permanent; the painful as pleasurable (or the unsatisfactory as satisfactory); the selfless as self; and the unattractive as attractive (or the unbeautiful as beautiful).

It is interesting and very sobering to see why I have wandered endlessly on these rounds of rebirths. These distortions of perception are one reason, the seeing of delight in worldly attractions, mesmerized by the glitter and sweetness of the desirable.

“Bhikkhus, what one intends and what one plans and whatever one has a tendency towards, this becomes the basis for the continuance of consciousness.” (SN 12:38; II 65)

Whatever the mind goes after, enjoys, and makes much of will bring us back again and again to the rounds of samsara, the rounds of suffering.

And these keep the mind cycling in samsara. Samsara literally means, “wandering on.” When asked, “What is a bhikkhu (or bhikkhuni)?” A wise and venerable elder bhikkhu replied, “One who sees the danger in samsara.” What a powerful and

profound answer. So ultimately for me, the path of renunciation in white is a path to freedom. And it’s really possible. When asked by Vacchagotta, “...is there any one man/woman lay follower, Master Gotama’s disciple, clothed in white and leading a life of celibacy, who...will...attain final Nibbana...? The Buddha replied, “There are not only one hundred, Vacca, or two or three or four or five hundred, but far more men/women lay followers, my disciples, clothed in white and leading lives of celibacy who...will...attain final Nibbana.” (MN73)

This humble and precious path I am stumbling along is

turning out to be one of incredible protection from the wanting mind. I had some ideas of what it would look like, but truth be told, the sights and scenery are unfolding unlike any I could have imagined.

*Carudhamma
Jo Ferris*

For this present life, she reports having the wonderfully good kamma to be born in 1966 on the beautiful Channel Island

of Guernsey, UK. Grew up with fabulous parents, three great siblings and the best dogs, cats, horses, chickens, ducks, rabbits, hamsters and more :) At twenty-one, introduced to the Dhamma by her brilliant cousin Gerald. Came to a Y-junction, and taking the road less travelled, left a B.A. degree course at university to pursue meditation retreats in the USA... and that has “made all the difference!” Her wish: May all beings be free.



Carudhamma Jo with Arabella & Wildman

1 Dhammapada verse 290 translation by Gil Fronsdal

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