

PRESENT

the Voices and Activities of Theravadan Buddhist Women



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["Open Letter to Ajahn Chandako"](#) by Jacqueline Kramer

Though one may
conquer
a thousand times a
thousand people in
battle,
yet one indeed is the
noblest victor
who conquers oneself.

Dhp 10.103

the Patimokkha

Is the ideal vehicle, not perfect, in the 21st Century West?



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'The Dhamma is well expounded by the Blessed One, to be seen here & now, timeless, inviting one to come & see, pertinent, to be seen by the wise for themselves.' (SN 11)



Present is requesting a volunteer with editing skills to help with editing and communications.

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[Alliance for Bhikkhunis](#)

PRESENT

the President's Letter

Susan Pembroke
President, [AB](#)

This edition of *Present* focuses on the Bhikkhuni Vinaya Pitaka which is the first division of the Tipitaka and is the covenant upon which the Bhikkhuni Sangha is founded. The Sutta Pitaka and the Abhidhamma Pitaka comprise the other two parts or "baskets" of the Tipitaka. The Theravada Bhikkhuni Patimokkha, with its 311 rules governing bhikkhuni conduct, training precepts, and procedural rules for resolving conflicts, is contained within the Vinaya.

The average lay practitioner knows little of the Vinaya. For the truly uninitiated, the mere idea of 311 rules sounds daunting, restrictive, punitive, and life-negating. In reality, the Patimokkha has the opposite intent. These training rules and directives are designed to create simplicity, ease in living, freedom to practice, and also serve as mindfulness and contemplative objects that deepen insight and hasten liberation. We may be slow in the West to accept rules as protective rails that keep us out of harm's way and point us in the direction of enlightenment. We cherish our independence and do not like being told what to do.

What the average person does when pursuing "freedom," though, is to indulge their senses in one way or another. Despite a fervent commitment to the pursuit of pleasure and feeling good all the time, our culture as a whole does not seem particularly happy or content. Regardless of the evidence that consuming endless variations of experience is not conducive to producing joy or peace, the typical person forges on anyway, equating happiness with pleasure — physical, emotional or mental. Even for a lay person who never plans to ordain, a study of the Patimokkha invites us to consider other ways of organizing our lives that might lead to increased well-being. The irony of renunciation is that the more we give up, the more contentment we know. For this and other reasons we are exploring the Vinaya in this edition.

One of the things the Patimokkha addresses is the obligation a preceptor has toward a novice or samaneri under her supervision as well as describing the stance the novice should adopt toward her upajjhayini or preceptor. Besides specifying what candidates may be appropriate, and when and how to ordain a woman, the Patimokkha restricts the number of aspirants a preceptor can ordain in a year and how frequently she may ordain.

A bhikkhuni may ordain only one samaneri a year and may not ordain novices in consecutive years. Additionally, only a Bhikkhuni Sangha can ordain a bhikkhuni. It falls to the preceptor, also called the pavaṇini, in conjunction with the larger community, to facilitate the candidate's *vuṇṇapeṇa* or "uplifting" or "raising up." Full ordination or *upasampada* refers to "full communion" or "entry into higher ground."

The implied intent of limiting how many novices a bhikkhuni can oversee is clear. The spiritual training of another person is a weighty responsibility which demands significant commitment, time and effort. A potential bhikkhuni preceptor must determine whether she has sufficient knowledge to guide a novice. If a bhikkhuni lacks the necessary development, the samaneri must be referred to a more competent bhikkhuni.

Though the novice obeys her pavaṇini and accepts her direction, the pavaṇini carries her own set of responsibilities. The preceptor must consistently display kindness and concern toward the samaneri entrusted to her care. Additionally, the bhikkhuni preceptor must follow the Patimokkha herself and must not benefit materially from having a novice. Taking on the training of another is a gift of compassion and generosity.

To protect all members of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, the Patimokkha creates a democratic, harmonious community in which all are held to the same code of conduct. Seniority does not result in exemptions or material privileges of any kind. Formal meetings are routinely held and conflicts, infractions or other matters are discussed openly. Everyone's vote counts equally. Rather than an autocratic, top-down organization, the legal monastic code levels the playing field and holds members equally responsible. All bhikkhunis are active participants in deciding outcomes. Over twenty-six hundred years since its inception, this model remains a remarkable example of how to manage conflict and construct an ideal society.

Every two weeks on Uposatha Days, new moon and full moon nights, if a minimum of four bhikkhunis are present, the Bhikkhuni Sangha recites the Patimokkha. This is a time of recalling what binds them as a community, remembering their promises to themselves and each other, admitting any failures, and vowing to practice restraint and compliance with these rules in the future. Bhikkhunis, in short, makes a fresh start individually as well as re-committing themselves to the community. The Buddha did not intend his

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Noteworthy

Navugala Bhikkuni Aramaya

Bhikkunies at Navugala Bhikkuni Aramaya in Galigamuwa are in desperate need of a new Aramaya, however, they are unable to afford the cost. The current Aramaya building is in very poor condition: the roof is leaking, walls are wearing out, etc (see the photos below).

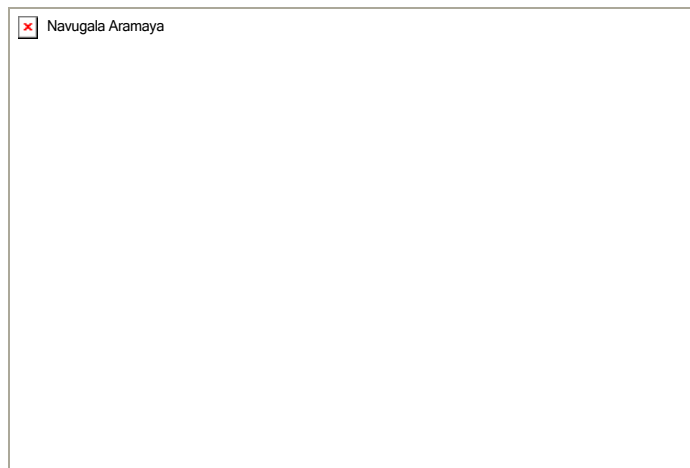
This is to kindly request for your generous tax deductible contributions toward United Lanka Association, to help Bhikkunies re-build the Aramaya building.

Please mail your checks made payable to United Lanka Association. In memo section, please mention: Navugala Project

Please mail your donation to :
United Lanka Association, Suite #105
390 Spar Ave., San Jose, CA 95117

Contacts :
Mala Wijekoon : 650-565-0010
Sarath Kirihennedige : 510-828-2108

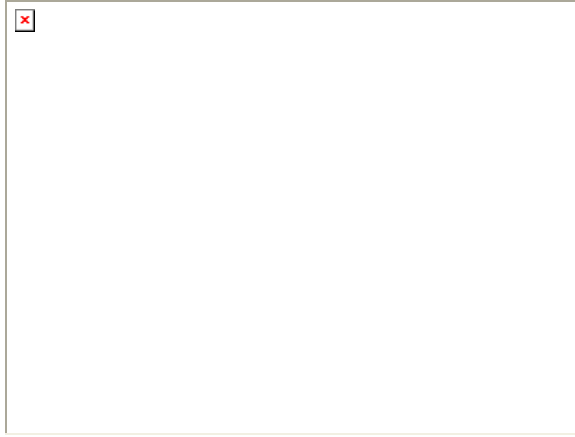
AfB can receive secure donations online. Be sure to include the destination: "Navugala Aramaya" with your gi .



Dear Friends,

We are happy to send you a link to our new website: www.satisaraniya.ca

It is a simple free Google site which we hope will keep you up to date with teaching events, contact information and updates on the search for a new hermitage.



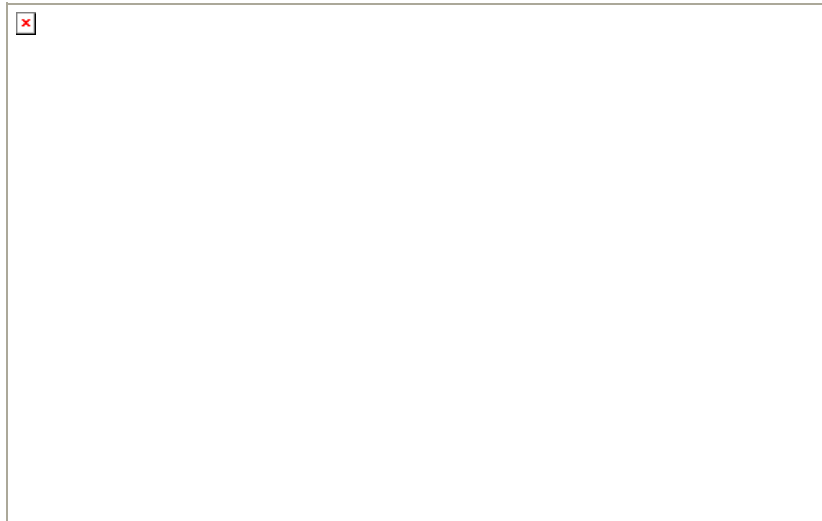
Please use our **new** email address: hermitage@satisaraniya.ca as our primus account is being retired in the next few days.

Wishing you much peace,

Ayya Medhanandi

[Sati Saraniya Hermitage](#)

The 15th Western Buddhist Monastic Conference participants at the Sagely City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, Ukiah, California, Oct 5-9, 2009



Ayya Tathaaloka writing on AfB's Fall Bhikkhuni Tour

...I remember these intentions to be for local groups to have an introduction to the AfB and its work, together with the living contact with bhikkhuni teachers and practitioners that would make it real for them. That this contact would be inspiring to people and help them to know and understand more. That this would lead to a greater sense of connection and of supportiveness. Not only one-sided supportiveness, but mutual supportiveness, as the bhikkhunis may give the support of sharing Dhamma, as well as the support of seeding, watering and nurturing the monastic life aspirations that may lie dormant in those who are listening and watching. To meet monastics in person, and to discover that there are places of training and practice in monastic life, is one of the main proximate causes of a person's "going forth".

(At [the] Western Buddhist Monastic Conference one year we all shared our stories of entry into monastic life. about 90% of us had been directly inspired or "triggered" by actually personally seeing and meeting a monastic, myself included. It is a very powerful force.)



And karmically, it is often those who have strong monastic life potential, but are not quite ready yet, who are the greatest supporters of the monastic community. Such people pave their own way with good causes for the future.

In addition, the Buddha highly praised the merit and virtue of monastic Sangha members coming together in harmony. It is a merit in and of itself, independent of anything else accomplished.

Our NorAm bhikkhunis have so far been *highly* independent. Coming together and developing a wholesome appreciation for coming together is a key element or ingredient in developing the causes and conditions for women's monastic *communities* to be able to both spring up and "gel," to put down roots as well as grow and flourish in the West.

I want to encourage and support this and I see its essential importance and value. I understand the Alliance for Bhikkhunis also wants to encourage and support this and sees its value, not only for the women in monastic life themselves, but also for our greater society as a whole. This is part of its fundamental vision.

We cannot have *too many* communities inspired and dedicated to living in wisdom, peace and harmony.

Another reason is for the bhikkhunis themselves. Learning to support one another in many ways, including in teaching, is an important aspect of harmonious mutually uplifting community. It is the antithesis of competitiveness and fracturing or pulling one another down.

Most all of our bhikkhunis have admired and learned to support male teachers. Most of us are just beginning to know how to admire and support female teachers, and *each other* as female teachers. This time will be a great opportunity, a first and unique opportunity for such development amongst ourselves.

And seeing women doing this with one another, while still appreciating male Sangha members and male teachers, has an amazingly transformative wholesome effect on male members of the Buddhist monastic Sangha, both young and Elders. Whether in meeting, or even just the proximate rumor of such a happen should have transformative benefit.

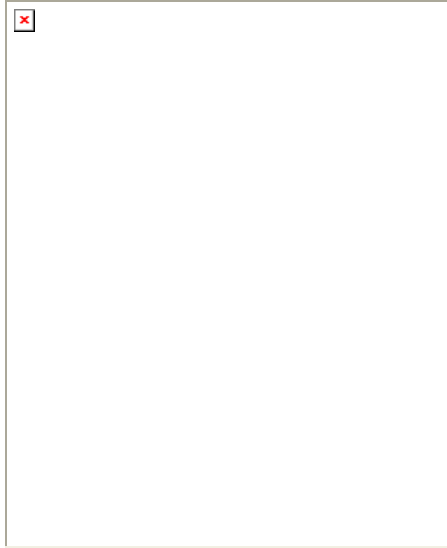
So, there are many benefits: for the communities that are visited, for the increased knowledge and benefit of the AfB and its purpose and projects, and for the bhikkhunis themselves. Not only for the short term, but especially for our longterm welfare and development.

I could go on, but these are the main inspiring reasons that I see.

Others may state it better, or see things that I have missed.

With a heart of peace
and loving kindness,

Ayya Tathaaloka Bhikkhuni



Ayya Sobhana speaking on tour

“Dhamma means the law of nature and we are manifesting this law of nature all the time. What can there be to get away from? We cannot escape the law of nature. Wherever we are, we are the Dhamma, we are impermanent (anicca), unfulfilled (dukkha), of no core-substance (anatta). It doesn't matter whether we sit here or on the moon. It's always the same.” Ayya Khema “Accepting Oneself”

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2009. Alliance for Bhikkhunis.

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Bhikkhuni Ordination in Perth, Australia

Bhikkhuni Sobhana
[Bhavana Society](#)



On Thursday, October 22, 2009, four women received full Bhikkhuni ordination at Bodhinyana Monastery, Serpentine, Western Australia. Bodhinyana is a branch monastery in the Thai forest tradition based at Wat Pa Pong. Ajahn Brahmavamsa has had the goal of supporting bhikkhuni ordination for several years. It was no secret. Ajahn Brahm had thoroughly researched the vinaya issues, discussed among the sangha and lay supporters in Australia.

The Siladhara receiving full ordination are: Ajahn Bhikkhuni Vayama, Bhikkhuni Nirodha, Bhikkhuni Seri and Bhikkhuni Hasapanna. They are resident nuns at Dhammasara Nun's Monastery in Gidgegannup, Western Australia. Ajahn Vayama is the founding Abbess of Dhammasara and has taught under Ajahn Brahmavamsa for the past ten years.

The Ordination was done by an international group of Bhikkhunis. Ayya Tathaaloka was the pavaṇīni (preceptor). Ayya Sucinta and Ayya Sobhana were the two kammavacarinis, (questioning the candidates and making the motion of ordination) The ordaining sangha also included Ayya Santini and Ayya Silavati from Indonesia, Ayya Dhammananda from Vietnam, Ayya Satima from Minnesota, and Ayya Atapi from Sri Lanka and Australia.

On the bhikkhus side, The kammavacariyas were Ajahns Brahm and Ajahn Sujato (from Santi Forest Monestary near Sidney), and eight more monks from Bodhinyana: Bhikkhu Appicchato, Bhikkhu Brahmali, Bhikkhu Santu hi, Bhikkhu Pasadika, Bhikkhu Mahesi, Bhikkhūbhayaratana, Bhikkhu Jhanarato, Bhikkhu Lakkhana.

On October 23, Ajahn Brahmavamsa gave a wonderful talk celebrating this ordination. It is here

<http://www.bswa.org/modules/news/article.php?storyid=765>

Please [write a letter to support bhikkhuni ordination](#)

Bhikkhunis in History

Bhante Sujato

Santi Forest Monastery

From the Introduction of Bhikkhuni Vinaya Studies

1. The traditional story, found in the canonical scriptures of all existing schools, says that the bhikkhuni Sangha originated when Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, the Buddha's aunt and foster-mother, approached him to ask for ordination. The Buddha repeatedly refused, but after being beseeched by Ānanda, he agreed. However, he laid down eight 'rules of respect' (*garudhamma*) for Mahāpajāpati as her ordination, which insist that the nuns must always pay respects to the monks.
2. I don't believe that story, and have discussed why at length in my *White Bones Red Rot Black Snakes*. But in any case, the bhikkhuni Sangha was established, and a code of conduct (Vinaya) was drawn up to regulate their conduct, paralleling the Vinaya for the bhikkhus. The bhikkhuni Sangha apparently thrived in the Buddha's time, with hundreds of women ordaining. They set up monasteries, wandered the country, taught, organized themselves and, most importantly, achieved Awakening. The songs of Awakening of the early bhikkhunis are recorded in the ancient verse collection, the Therīgāthā.
3. After the Buddha passed away, we don't hear all that much about the bhikkhunis, and there are no later literary works to compare with the Therīgāthā. But large numbers of bhikkhunis are said to have attended ceremonies in the time of Aśoka. Aśoka himself always mentions bhikkhunis alongside bhikkhus in his edicts, strictly adhering to politically correct usage. But the most famous contribution of bhikkhunis is in the story of how the Bodhi Tree was taken to Sri Lanka by Saṅghamīyā, Aśoka's daughter. She subsequently established a bhikkhuni Sangha in Sri Lanka, which flourished for over 1000 years. The same source – the Sinhalese Vinaya commentary, preserved in Pali and Chinese versions – says that the bhikkhuni Sangha was established in 'Suvaśabhūmi' (Lower Burma or Thailand) under the leadership of the monks Soṇa and Uṇṇa in the same period. Thus bhikkhunis have been intrinsic to Buddhism of South and South-east Asia since the beginning.
4. The texts say little about the bhikkhunis in later times. However, bhikkhunis are mentioned about as often as monks in ancient Indian inscriptions. They appear in positions of influence, as donors of large monuments, as teachers, as learned students of the scriptures.¹
5. But the most momentous turn of events in bhikkhuni history came in 433 ce, when a shipowner called Nandile left Sri Lanka bound for China. He took with him some bhikkhunis, led by Ayyā Sārā.² When in China, they conferred ordination on Chinese nuns, thus establishing the bhikkhuni lineage there. The rites were evidently carried out using the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya. Presumably the Vinaya masters of the time decided that the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya was essentially similar to that of the Sinhalese Theravadins of the Mahāvihāra, an opinion that is shared today by scholars who have done comparative work on the matter. The bhikkhunis flourished in China, and subsequently spread to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Buddhism was well established in Vietnam long before the period of Chinese domination, and it seems likely that they had their own bhikkhuni Sangha, perhaps of the Mūlasarvāstivāda lineage, before adopting the Chinese system still in use today. The bhikkhuni Sangha was never established in Tibet and related areas.
6. It seems that the bhikkhuni Sangha flourished in southern Asia for around 1500 years. Around 1200 ce, Sri Lanka underwent a period of turmoil, at the end of which the bhikkhunis were no longer. It is impossible to determine the exact circumstances that led to their disappearance. It is possible that small numbers continued in later years, but there is no evidence that I know of.
7. In those regions known today as Burma and Thailand, it is difficult to trace the history of the order established under Soṇa and Uṇṇa. There are occasional scraps of evidence – an inscription here, a painting in a temple there. In colonial times, a few travel records mention seeing women in the ochre robes. Conventional wisdom has it that there were no bhikkhunis in these lands until the modern period, but it is premature to conclude this. Taking all the little hints together, it seems possible that the bhikkhunis did maintain a quiet presence. One of the latest and clearest mentions of bhikkhunis in Burma is discussed by Maung Paw:
8. In January 21, 1788, the kings made another proclamation stating that:

any kind of female who are of age 17 and who are:

- free of any incurable disease
 - free from any criminal offenses or fugitive from law
 - free from financial indebtedness – not bankrupt person
9. Those free of the above could be permitted to be ordained as Bhikkhu for male and Bhikkhuni for female. There is another proclamation forbidding any king's slave from taking ordination as Bhikkhu or Bhikkhuni. Who ever so monk ordained the king's slave will be harshly punishable by law. (March 30, 1810).
 10. In the same month, the king made another proclamation stating that all legally ordained Bhikkhu or Bhikkhuni be monitored by the king's men to check on the legal status of their Sangha life and their orderly observation of the rules of the Monks.³
 11. If our source does not mislead us, until recent years the bhikkhunis were present in Burma, and possibly in Thailand as well. Buddhism in those lands was diverse and often did not have a strong central control. Local customs flourished, and many regions owed little allegiance to the putative government. It was not until the challenges of the colonial era that cohesive nation states in the modern sense were formed. And as these states were formed under western influence, western models lay behind the new forms that Buddhism was shaped into.
 12. In Thailand, for example, the modern reform movement was shaped by the towering figures of King Mongkut and his son Vajirañāvararasa.⁴ As a Prince, Mongkut ordained as a bhikkhu in 1824 and went to practice meditation. However, he was disappointed that the monks did not understand what they were doing and could only repeat what had been passed down by the tradition. He criticized this attitude, calling it *iñci akappikavāda*. This term harks back to the Second Council, where one of the contested issues was whether it was allowable to follow what had become customary. Mongkut became convinced that contemporary Thai Buddhism had become a mass of superstition and was in need of reform. Mongkut had an incisive, analytical mind, and he embarked on a detailed study of the Buddhist texts, always pointing back to the rational teachings of original Buddhism as found in the Pali Canon. During his time in the Sangha he was zealous in his study of western knowledge. He developed a friendship with a certain Bishop Pallegoix, who lived nearby in Bangkok, and they exchanged lessons in Pali and Latin. He had many discussions on religion with western missionaries, who he impressed with his skeptical and questioning attitude. Later, as king, he corresponded with Pope Pius IX, emphasizing the spirit of religious tolerance found in Thailand. Mongkut began to re-envision Thai Buddhism along the western lines of the Vatican hierarchy.
 13. Following on from the reforms instituted by Mongkut, Thailand eventually adopted a Sangha Act in 1902, under the guidance of Vajirañāvararasa, then head of the Dhammayuṭṭika Nikāya. Thailand thus became the first Buddhist country to attempt to control the Sangha using a modern, western-style legal instrument. A Council of Elders was established as the ruling body of the Sangha; their decisions were absolute and could not be appealed or disputed. The Sangha Act was modeled on the structure of secular Thai society, and successively remodeled to reflect the changes as Thailand went from being a monarchy to a democracy (1941), then in 1962, a military dictatorship. Subsequent democratic reform has failed, however, to result in a democratic reform of the Sangha Act.⁵
 14. The current Sangha Act defines the Sangha as male-only, and sets up a Vatican-style system of titles, positions, and bureaucratic administration, all with the avowed intent to protect the Vinaya and serve the Sangha.⁶ It may be more than simple coincidence that both the Vatican and the Thai Sangha have a problem accepting ordained women within their ranks. In insisting that bhikkhunis can have no place within the Thai Buddhism, the Sangha is placing more emphasis on the modern legal structures derived from western models, rather than the Buddhist scriptures which their tradition, and the modern reform of that tradition, is supposed to be based. And while bhikkhuni ordination is sometimes decried as a western, feminist interpolation in the Asian tradition, the reality is that the four-fold community, including the bhikkhuni Sangha, is the authentic heritage, while the insistence on a male-only Sangha is a modern, western-derived innovation. History, it seems, is not without a sense of irony.

¹Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*, p. 249.

²The Chinese accounts are at T50, no. 2059, p. 342, b11-c7; T50, no. 2063, p. 939, c6-p. 940, a3; and T50, no. 2063, p. 941, a8-b2. English translation at <http://santipada.googlepages.com/thefirstchinesebhikkhunis> Sārā's name is often reconstructed as Devaśārā or Tessarā. She is not mentioned in Sri Lankan sources, so any reconstruction is tentative. But the first element in her name as found in Chinese is the character 鐵, which is never used as a phonetic element, but only in its meaning of 'iron'. The Pali for 'iron' is *ayas*, and the honorific for bhikkhunis is *ayyā*. It seems likely, then, that she was referred to as Ayyā Sārā (Venerable Sārā), and the Chinese translator misheard the name as Ayassārā (Iron Sārā).

³Maung Paw, pp. 36-37. Paw cites his source as Dr. Than Tun, *The Chronicle of King's Proclamation* (excerpt from 'Ideas and Views'), August 2001.

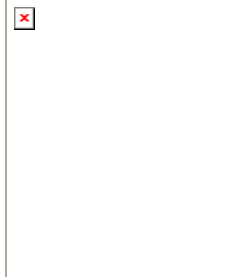
⁴For the Burmese experience see Guēr.

⁵A succinct summary of this process is found in Puntarigvivat.

PRESENT

Restraint in Accordance with the Patimokkha

Upāsikā Sabrina Sujata



What we today know as the Buddha's teaching, is called the Dhamma-Vinaya in the scriptures; and not only in the scriptures do the two have to stay together. The Vinaya is not only relevant to monastics. For lay people also there are many discourses, as inspiring and rich in meaning as we find in the Sutta Pitaka. When we decide to "venture" on the path that Buddha passed on, we implicitly decide to live according to the Dhamma-Vinaya.

We do not interpret the Vinaya in any way we might want; awareness is given that our interpretation doesn't give nuances or grades to our restraint. In that sense, as practitioners of what Buddha taught, our practice not only has to be nourished by our own inspiration to attain Nibbana in a simple way, or by what we learn reading Suttas, but nourished also through our deepest wish to practice according to the rules that the Buddha laid down.

We cannot or should not agree with shortening the rules, or agree with only rules that give us some mental satisfaction and comfort. We cannot act as tasters of the Dhamma but we have to "drink" the Dhamma till the last drop. As it is appropriately written "Dhamma which is lovely in its beginning, lovely in its middle and lovely in its ending, in the spirit and in the letter, and he displays the fully-perfected, thoroughly purified holy life." [1]

There are many passages in which Buddha invites one to live in accordance with the Patimokkha. There He warns us to protect the doors of the sense bases and to commit ourselves to restrict their associated faculties. This is the training of the monastic; the way of the holy life. Not half restraint, not with excuses, not with exceptions.

The Buddha tells us in the Pañña Sutta about the conditions to reach wisdom and, without surprise, to live according to the Patimokkha is the fourth. There, He says:

"He is virtuous. He dwells restrained in accordance with the Patimokkha, consummate in his behavior & sphere of activity. He trains himself, having undertaken the training rules, seeing danger in the slightest faults. This is the fourth cause, the fourth requisite condition that leads to the acquiring of the as-yet-unacquired discernment that is basic to the holy life, and to the increase, plenitude, development, & culmination of that which has already been acquired" [2].

In the first sentence, the Buddha offers us the elixir, essence, seed that one has to cultivate: virtue. The Buddha describes clearly who can be called virtuous in Kalyanasila Sutta: "And how is a monk a person with admirable virtue? There is the case where a monk is virtuous. He dwells restrained in accordance with the Patimokkha, consummate in his behavior & sphere of activity. He trains himself, having undertaken the training rules, seeing danger in the slightest faults. In this way a monk is a person with admirable virtue. Thus he is of admirable virtue". [3]

And although it seems to be a formula that is repeated again and again, one [the monastic] must dwell in accordance with the Patimokkha. "He trains himself, having undertaken the training rules, seeing danger in the slightest faults".

This is a crucial point, one not only related to the present or to the new millennium. It is an often repeated exhortation to help overcome defilements.

The Dhamma-Vinaya must be taken for what **it Is** and with humility before the Buddha's wisdom. Do you see that any one of us has the authority to determine what should be modified or erased? The unscrupulous behavior of removing one rule of the Patimokkha or suggest it is not important for the training, is not for the welfare and the benefit of Dhamma-Vinaya and Sangha.

The Patimokkha that the Buddha laid down has been and will continue being essential to the world, because in present times as in past times, the purpose is one and the same and the training is well established. "For the welfare of the Sangha,... for the benefit of Vinaya,... for the restraining of the pollutions in this present life and for guarding against the pollutions liable to arise in a future life.

Only one who has lived according to the rule, can live beyond it.

[1] "Desanaa Sutta: Teaching" (SN 42.7), translated from the Pali by Maurice O'Connell Walshe. *Access to Insight*.

[2] "Pañña Sutta: Discernment" (AN 8.2), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight*.

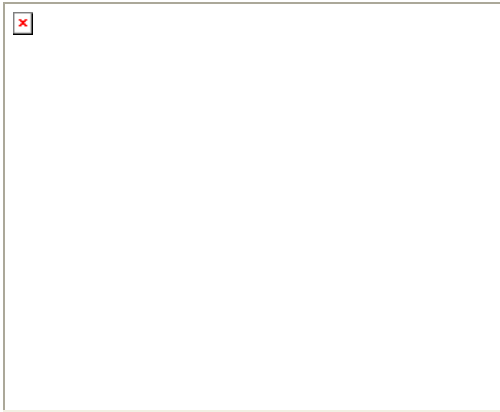
[3] "Itivuttaka", translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight*.

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2009. Alliance for Bhikkhunis.

Bhikkhuni Community-Building: An Interview with Ajahn Chandako

Jacqueline Kramer
Vice President, Alliance for Bhikkhunis
[The Hearth Foundation](#)
June 10, 2009



It was a nippy June morning when my granddaughter, Nai'a Rose, and I drove down the Sonoma coast to Dharma Creek. Dharma Creek is a beautiful piece of wild land tucked away in the mountains that press up against the Pacific Ocean. The land is owned and operated by Jill Rayna who has been a Buddhist practitioner for over 30 years. Trained by Ruth Denison in the Burmese U Ba Kin tradition, Jill has been teaching dharma on the land for years. The Bhikkhunis planned this June community building meeting on a portion of the mountain that was cleared and prepared for this purpose. Ajahn Chandako, a Western monk trained in the Ajahn Chah forest tradition, kindly offered to come support the Bhikkhunis. I was invited to interview Ajahn Chandako for *Presente*-magazine, published by the Alliance for Bhikkhunis.

Ajahn Chandako is the Abbot of Vimudi Buddhist Monastery near Auckland, New Zealand. He traveled all the way to Aranya Bodhi to support the nuns by offering a training in monastic etiquette. Although the gravity of this historic event was not lost on me- the first training of this kind for Bhikkhunis in the West, at the onset I felt skeptical as to why any woman would want to follow such strict and seemingly archaic rules. Added to that, the Western individualistic personality is prone to view these rules as repressive and even dangerous to true freedom. The fear many Westerners hold is that archaic rules may lead to blind obedience rather than true inner discovery. I drove up to Aranya Bodhi with the question, what exactly are these rules and why would a woman choose to take them on?

There were 5 saffron-robed women gathering on the land that week in June. They came from all over the United States. Ayya Tathaaloka and Sister Suvijanna came from Fremont California where they reside in the Women's Monastic Residence at the Bodhi House, the intown annex to the Aranya Bodhi Hermitage. The hermitage project as well as the monastic residence at the Bodhi House are supported by the religious non-profit Dhammadharini - aka the Dhammadharini Support Foundation together with the Western, Thai, Sri Lankan and multi-ethnic Buddhist community. Ayya Tathaaloka was the senior-most of the Bhikkhunis at the hermitage and it was at her request that this training came about. Ayya Sudhamma, the chief incumbent (or resident teacher) of Carolina Buddhist Vihara, came to the gathering from Greenville South Carolina, a strongly evangelistic Christian region. Ayya Satima was born in Sri Lanka and has been living in Minnesota since 1973, the only Bhikkhuni in the five state area. Ayya Maduka started in the Zen tradition and now lives as a Theravadin Bhikkhuni in Athens Ohio. Given that there are few, if any, other female monastics in their tradition where they live, this gathering was an opportunity for these women to share support with one another. Jill Rayna, Ruwinie Delgoda and Kemanthie Nandasena put in an enormous amount of time and energy feeding and taking care of the monastic's needs. They supplied the support that has traditionally been shouldered by an entire lay community.

We gathered together in a tepee deep in the folds of the northern coastal mountains. There we sat in a close circle, drinking tea and talking. The Tepee created an atmosphere reminiscent of the Native American council, which seemed to ground our discussion in an Earth-based sensibility. It brought to mind the earliest Buddhists living simply on the land, a sense of something ancient and bigger than any one of us, moving through this important meeting. As the interview progressed I watched as many of my questions about the wisdom of protocol were answered. The wisdom of the Vinaya, under sincere inquiry, became clearer and my respect for the Bhikkhunis and the Buddha's teachings deepened.

JK: Can you tell me about the Bhikkhuni training and what you are doing here? What inspired you to offer this training?

AC: Last year Ayya Tathaaloka and a few of her bhikkhuni friends came to visit me at where I was camped in the Santa Cruz Mountains. We had a discussion about the situation with bhikkhunis. It didn't take very long to be able to see that what I thought would be helpful for the bhikkhunis would be a training community because I know, just from experience in the male sangha, that to live a monastic life for decades, alone, without being part of a sangha is very, very difficult. In fact, the people who survived are very few. Most people can't do it alone even if they have a good Asian teacher, are really are inspired by the Dhamma and they've got talent for meditation. There just is something about it that without the support of the community it's just too difficult as a Westerner to do it alone.

So part of the idea is community building, and one of the practical aspects of community building, is doing things in the same way. There are a lot of just ordinary things that create a sense of sisterhood, brotherhood. You're all on the same page. Just basic things like having the same color robes or wearing the robes in the same way, or having the same type of monastic requisites, or approaching the requisites in the same way. So far in the bhikkhuni sangha we've just got scattered individuals and they've had to be very strong individuals to get where they are. The next step is to take strong individuals and form community. That's not always the easiest thing because strong individuals tend to be very individualistic. But for the long-term health of the bhikkhuni sangha we need to establish it, not just for one person for ten years or twenty years but as an institution that takes root. Then, forming the community, I think, is essential. And looking for ways to do that. Monastic training is one way you can do that.

We're focusing on all aspects of things that take place in daily life. Some of them are mundane elements like monastic etiquette. But even though they're just small details the cumulative effect of that is a feeling of bonding. In Thailand Ajahn Chah has over 300 monasteries. He died years ago but there's still a thriving Ajahn Chah tradition in Thailand, as well as other forest monasteries. Even if you've never been to one of those monasteries and you show up and you don't know anybody there, there's almost always an immediate sense of connection, we're of the same family. You can just see it in the little things that are done, the way the robe is folded, the ways juniors relate to the seniors. All of those things, because there is a common training, creates a feeling of community that is international. I think that is very helpful psychologically. Even if one is on one's own; living alone, if you feel part of a larger web then there is real strength. You don't feel that you're totally alone. Although physically you might be the only monastic at a meditation center you're part of a greater family.

JK: That's a very interesting perspective. I think it would be helpful for people to hear about this. Is this true for monasteries besides Ajahn Chah's monasteries, do bhikkhus share the same rules?

AC: If you're in the forest tradition it's very similar. Generally, yes. After we've been trained in the Ajahn Chah tradition for five years, for example, and we go to one of the other forest masters' monasteries, because we've been well trained we are very quickly accepted. If you're coming from another monastery, say from another sect, then they'll be watching to see if they can take the other monk seriously. It doesn't take very long at all to really see how someone has been trained. If you've been trained in a particular way and have lived that life style for a while it's very clear how you've been trained, where you've been trained. One can recognize by the requisites, the bowl, the robe, the particular shade of the robe, everything. Also just by their deportment. The way they enter, the way they relate to senior monks, junior monks, all these little details. Within a day you really know. Those people who have been quite well trained are very enthusiastically accepted. If they're not well trained it's not that they're rejected it's just that they might be a bit more suspicious. This person may not really have put in the time and effort yet. Those are the forest monasteries. Then you have the city monasteries.

JK: So are you saying Ajahn that this training you're doing here at Dharma Creek enables the bhikkhunis to have greater acceptance in the larger community? Is it taking the level of acceptance to the next level or

have greater acceptance in the larger community: is it taking the level of acceptance to the next level after ordination, allowing them to show their seriousness and commitment?

AC: Exactly. And as I had mentioned to them before, even though there have been all these obstacles to bhikkhuni ordination, once you ordain you find out the ordination was the easy part. The actual training is the ongoing aspect. What I see is a yearning and a wish to be accepted as equals by the male sangha. One thing that will really help in this is if the bhikkhunis are well trained. Otherwise, if you're in an Ajahn Chah monastery and a village monk comes in and they're sloppy, their robes are baggy, they've got the bowl swinging back and forth on the shoulder like a pocket book, you just immediately know. On a personal level the monk may connect with them and find that they're a really nice people. On the level of a serious monastic training the initial response is, "Oh no. They need a lot of work." If a man came like that from a village monastery and they want to join the Ajahn Chah center they would say, "You have to stay with your robes on a probationary period." That's usually a period of about three months. If at that time they seriously take upon the training, engage it and fit in well with the community than they would be allowed to join the sangha.

I don't see that there's so much obstacle to the bhikkhuni ordination amongst Western monks. There are not that many people who are worried about the validity of the ordination. There is a concern that women get the bhikkhuni ordination but then not follow the Vinaya and the effect that this would have. In order to really be accepted as part of the family all these details of the training help with that. At meeting it is obvious the level and type of training a person has had. With a lot of the training it doesn't matter necessarily whether you do things this way or that way. That's conventional reality, but conventional reality has its place and has its effects. If, for example, there is a group of well trained forest monks and some of these bhikkhunis show up and ask if they can take part and it's obvious that they are well trained there is going to be an immediate sense of wanting to include them. To accept and respect them. The acceptance and respect is not something that can be demanded, like, "I'm a human being just like you are I deserve respect". We all know that's true but on a monastic level it's earned. In the forest monasteries, I don't know if the westerners could even handle it, especially in the older days. So we have to earn it by showing them that, yes, we can do it too.

JK: I think that's true in any field. I know that's true with jazz musicians. It's just part of the initiation.

AC: So, that being the case, the next obstacle was, even if everyone agrees on it, then what? A man can go to Thailand and there's already a whole system set up. There are senior Thai monks, there are senior Western monks, there's a whole gradual system for training people. Bhikkhunis don't have this. So how do you start it? A lot of the nuns have learned a bit here and learned a bit there, pieced it together. It's a lot harder. It will be preferable and easier for new women coming in if there is a bit more of a system. I would say the optimal thing would be to have an international training monastery for bhikkhunis. If that happens here, that's great. But it actually needs people living together. It needs bhikkhunis living here, at least a few of them so that when new women come it feels like there is somewhat of a community that they are joining, examples.

JK: What is it you intend to teach at this particular training?

AC: Obviously, we can only touch upon the training. One thing that is an important thing that goes through the training is what's called samana sanna. This is the perception of oneself having consciously made the decision to step out of the mainstream in order to practice the Dhamma. A seminarian can be translated as a renunciate or a recluse. You can also translate it as a peaceful one. The idea is that you have consciously chosen a different way of life. A lot of the details of the monastic life, the training, are designed to regularly remind us of that. We're both training in the details—hold it this way not that way, put on the robes this way not that way, but we're also training in the perceptions behind that—what these things symbolize. A bowl is the symbol for a lifestyle, being alms mendicants. The robes are traditionally called the Banner of the Arhants, the symbol of our deepest aspirations and values and developing a certain respect for the aspects of our daily life. Working with robes, bowls, lodging, our huts, these are just things we do on a daily basis. We try to do them not in a worldly way. It does take some pointing out and reminding that our life is oriented around different values.

Another thread that runs through monastic training is attention to detail. The monastic etiquette can be very detailed and refined. It's a great practice for developing mindfulness because you always have to be aware of what's going on.

AC: Attention becomes immersed in our body because we have to be quite coordinated wearing the robes and not knocking things over. There's etiquette around being silent and you can only do that if you're in your body and being aware— not knocking things around, not being clumsy. It takes a lot of mindfulness to be neat and tidy, really paying attention to how things are set up. It takes a lot of attention to detail externally as well, taking in a whole scene or a whole situation. When we're talking about mindfulness we're not just talking

about mindfulness of our breath and meditation objects. We're talking about mindfulness which extends into whole social situations. So we're taking in the whole social situation, who's here, what level of seniority is there, what's the proper mode of behavior? That's a real art because it's constantly changing. Sometimes we end up being the most senior monk other times we might end up being the most junior monk in a particular group. So our behavior has to change accordingly. Otherwise it just becomes very awkward, we make a lot of faux faux. It's a real art to learn how to adjust and make quick adjustments, behaving in a respectful manner towards seniors. There are a lot of wholesome qualities which are developed in this. One is respect, in our culture respect for seniority, respect for authority. Sometimes respect in anybody is not as highly developed (in the West) as it is in other cultures. That's one thing that is good to work on and is a very good quality. Respect is a beautiful quality. So a lot of the ways we relate to juniors and seniors is based on this quality of developing respect.

JK: That is so interesting how in any given day you can be the junior, the senior or somewhere in between in a given interaction. It's not like you're always on the top. That's something for us in the West to understand. They just look like rules to us but when you explain it this way it makes sense. That's helpful. What benefit have you personally gotten from these teachings?

AC: The training we've been doing the last couple of days? I have been happy about the level of interest amongst the nuns, to take on my suggestion. We all come from different areas, from different backgrounds. There can be good reasons to say, "That is nice but I don't want to do that." What I've seen so far is that people are really interested and they are willing to make the adjustments and see a value in having a method of etiquette and what it represents. It represents being tied together. If I can play any helpful role in starting up the training in the bhikkhuni order then I feel very happy and honored to do that. The intention is to help start something that will then gather its own momentum. Because there isn't already a system set up of elders and mentors and examples. The Bhikkhuni Sangha may need a bit of help from the Bhikkhu Sangha, just to get the ball rolling. But you don't always want to be dependent on the Bhikkhu Sangha for training. Once a certain number of bhikkhunis have that and are living that and that's just normal then they can pass it on.

JK: Are the other bhikkhus in favor of this training?

AC: I think the majority of western monastics think that bhikkhuni ordination is fine, no problem. Even the ones that think Bhikkhuni ordination is fine they can see that it can go in different directions. Some directions would be beneficial and helpful, others maybe not. We're hoping that it goes in a good direction, meaning that well trained Bhikkhunis are following the Vinaya. There's no serious obstacle coming from Western monks. Amongst the Asian monastics it's generally the opposite. The whole idea is very foreign to them. We're used to, in our culture, change happening very quickly but in Asia they're not. Even when I was a young monk, up till about 10 years maybe, there was just the general idea that it's just impossible to have bhikkhunis anymore because the order died out. That was just assumed, at least in the Theravada lineage. The Asian monastics maybe have good reasons for being traditional. They're trying to protect something, which is important. So they may be hesitant when new change comes in. They may think, "Is this valid? Is this just some weird thing that Westerners have conjured up?" They want to know about it. Also, there's just cultural unfamiliarity with it. It's strange, it's new. When you've grown up in a culture where the only people who wear the robes are men then you see women doing it, just perceptually it's jarring. Even if intellectually and logically they may think it's fine. Perceptually it's a bit more difficult to embrace.

JK: These trainings would help with that I imagine. If the bhikkhunis are very well trained it adds another level of comfort for the established order. It shows that they are serious.

AC: It gives more credence if they can see that these people are serious, that they have integrity, they've done their homework, they know the Bhikkhuni Vinaya. And even if the respect doesn't come it's OK. We don't ordain to get someone's respect, we ordain to practice the dhamma. Sometimes if people respect us too much it can be an obstacle. Not having other people's respect is OK too.

JK: What about moving from the Asian culture to the Western culture? I would imagine that some of the vinaya rules are culture specific. How do you deal with wanting to stay with a tradition that was reasonable when it was set up but may not transfer?

AC: It's very easy to say, "That's great that you do that in Asia because it came out of Asian culture but you're in America now mate and you can't do that here. For example, in England even the people who invited the monks said, "You're not going to actually wear robes are you? Suits maybe, or something that blends in". What we've found over the last 30 years of experimentation in the West is that you can do almost everything that you do in Asia. Most things do transfer. A lot of our lifestyle is based on the Vinaya. Although it grew up in India we don't consider it something that is culturally based or something that is alterable. If we want

ordination than we have to take the vinaya rules seriously. It doesn't matter whether you're in India or Thailand, Sri Lanka or the United States. Even in Thailand, before the modern forest tradition came back again, there was a feeling that you can't practice in the modern age like they did in Buddha's time. There was a general agreement "We'll all just ignore a lot of these rules because that was over 2000 years ago and it's not practical to practice like that in Thailand, which is a lot closer to India. However, when Ajahn Mun and his generation of disciples came in, they showed that you can actually do it. Ajahn Mun was Ajahn Chah's teacher. He's considered the father of the modern forest tradition. His immediate generation of disciples just decided that they were going to go back to the oldest vinaya text and just try, as much as possible to live their lives in accordance with the way they lived in the time of the Buddha, out of a sense of faith and dedication and wanting to get back to the roots as much as possible. They found they could do it. They realized, "This is what they did and we'll do the same thing." So a whole different lifestyle grew up around the forest tradition which was very different than village monks.

We find ourselves in a similar situation when we come to the West. Obviously, it's different in many ways but in many ways, human beings are human beings. Monastic training is pretty much the same whatever situation they're in. The details may change such as, these days monastic etiquette around cell phones rather than...

JK: Where to park your Oxen?

AC: Yes, or bamboo cups. But the general principles still apply. We found that, with the Bhikkhu Sangha, it hasn't been a problem keeping all of the monastic rules. When the Buddha described his way of life he didn't call it Buddhism he called it Dhamma Vinaya. The Dhamma we know, the teachings we love. But he didn't just call it Dhamma, he called it Dhamma Vinaya. Vinaya is what relates to all of the monastic training, all of the precepts and so called rules. You can think of rules as lifeless things which restrict or control our lives but when you combine them with the dhamma you find a very fertile lifestyle which is a real art of life. You have the solid framework of the vinaya-we do things this way. It's a rule that that is given however, how we relate to that rule and the mind states it brings up is all about the Dhamma and not so much about ourselves. When we come up against the limitation of a rule or we accidentally break a rule then it's all in the realm of the interaction of the Dhamma and Vinaya. I think that is just as valid here in California as it is in India. There are obviously some situations where we make adjustments, according to time and place. In Thailand you'd never wear sleeves. In the West it would be pretty difficult in some cool climates not to add sweaters and sleeves. That's a cultural adjustment that we make. We can make cultural adjustments that are outside the usual vinaya rules. Instead of projecting, OK we want to create American Buddhism, or create Western Buddhism, we just try to do things, at least initially, the way we did them in Thailand and then see what fits. If a little while its obvious that it would be really helpful if we made this little change here because this is really different. It's usually things that are so obvious that everyone agrees.

JK: How about the 8 extra garudhammas?

AC: It really depends on individual bhikkhunis. We need to do more research into them. Like most things, my inclination is to try the traditional way first and see if that works. If it clearly doesn't then consider changing it. The key factor with the gaurudhammas is, is it actually the word of the Buddha or not. That's why more research would be helpful. If we determine that it is the words of the Buddha then we still have a choice whether we follow it or not but it has a lot more weight behind it. If we determine that it's not the word of the Buddha then we can still make a choice whether we follow it or not but there would be a lot of weight to not follow it. Personally I don't know exactly how they're going to determine it in a precise, reliable way. It may be possible, by looking into it deeply, to figure out where they came from.

JK: I'm grateful to you for taking the time to illuminate me on this. I'm a typical American and you have shared my thoughts about the subject. I'm also moved by the generosity of you coming all the way to Northern California to offer this training to the Bhikkhunis. It's great that you're supporting the Bhikkhuni Sangha like this. Thank you. Do you have anything to say about the historic quality of this bhikkhuni training?

AC: While it's very rare in history that you have the opportunity to be involved with establishing Buddhism in a new country, bhikkhus and bhikkhunis are also all involved with the re-establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha in Theravadin Buddhism as well. It's has been happening at lightning speed, in historical terms. Even ten or fifteen years ago a Theravadin Bhikkhuni Sangha was unheard of. Suddenly it's all over. The fact that there haven't been bhikkhunis for centuries and suddenly it's starting up again is big news. From the individual perspective we're just doing what we're doing and helping each other. But if you look at it from a perspective of 2500 years this is actually quite unique

JK: Thank you for taking the time to share this with us. I know it's been a long day.

This is the original interview from the oral transcript. Ajahn Chandako revised his responses in a longer interview which can be found at the library [here](#).

Ajahn Chandako is the abbot of [Vimutthi Buddhist Monastery](#) near Auckland, New Zealand.

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2009. Alliance for Bhikkhunis.

PRESENT

An Open Letter to Ajahn Chandako

Jacqueline Kramer
Vice-President, Alliance for Bhikkhunis
[The Hearth Foundation](#)

Dear Aachan Chandako,

I was heartened by your support of Bhikkhunis at the Dharma Creek gathering and saddened by your lack of support for the ordination of bhikkhunis in Australia. It is a well-established fact that all beings have Buddha nature, and that all beings, including women, are capable of enlightenment. As you know, there are many stories of enlightened women, not 8 or 10 precept nuns but bhikkhunis, from the Buddha's time and onward. Given that women are capable of enlightenment the kindest action of any Buddhist teacher would be to make the path available to them in every way possible.

As we both noted during the Dharma Creek interview Buddhism is at an historical crossroads. In some countries, notably Thailand, women have not been given equal access to the teachings. Things are changing, and with change there are always those who fight to hang on to their position of power, those who sit back and let them do that and those who move the change forward. Oftentimes movement requires breaking of the old rules just as Rosa Parks sat down in the bus breaking the Jim Crow rules and Gandhi proceeded with his form of non-violent protest against British inequities. Change does not always come easily and it rarely comes from following the rules set up by the powers that prefer the status quo.

This is the age of women standing side by side with men for the betterment of all. I hope you will stand beside us.

Blessings,

Jaqueline Kramer

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Buddhism and women: calling for Bhikkhuni ordination and gender equality in the Forest Sangha

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Dear petitioners, this petition was closed to further signatures at 8am, Monday 21 December 2009 GMT/UTC. Thank you for signing. If you have given your consent, we will contact you shortly with an email update on the petition. See fourfoldsangha.org for more.

In the spirit of respect and gratitude for the Venerable Elders and Bhikkhu Sangha, we bring our considered and heartfelt reflection for your consideration.

This petition is a means for members of the four-fold sangha to express our deep concerns to the Forest Sangha of the late Ven. Ajahn Chah about the events surrounding and challenging the Bhikkhuni ordination in Perth, Australia, in October 2009, and the placement of women in the tradition.

The Forest Sangha has roots in the Wat Pah Pong (WPP) community in Thailand and includes its branch monasteries in the West, among which are: Amaravati (UK), Cittaviveka (UK), Abhayagiri (USA), Bodhinyanarama (NZ), and all its associated monasteries around the world.

- **We who have signed this petition are disheartened by and disagree with** the expulsion of Ven. Ajahn Brahmavamso and Bodhinyana Monastery (AUS) from the Ajahn Chah community as a consequence of his participation in a recent Bhikkhuni ordination in Australia.
- **We are disheartened by and disagree with** the Sangha's lack of acknowledgement regarding the legitimacy of Bhikkhuni ordination in this tradition.
- **We are disheartened by and disagree with** the recent legislation of 5 points created at Amaravati (UK) and Cittaviveka (UK) by Ven. Ajahn Sumedho and the monks of the Elders' Council, which imposes on nuns a two-tier discriminatory power structure favouring monks over nuns in these and associated monasteries.
- **We are disheartened by and disagree with** the continued gender inequity played out in the monastic form, particularly in Western cultures where this is a direct affront to prevailing social and legal standards of equality and mutual respect between men and women.
- **We request that** the WPP community, particularly those members in leadership positions in the Western monasteries, consider their position and responsibility to the four-fold sangha and initiate dialogue to mend the split that has been caused in the fabric of this larger community.
- **We request that** the Elders of the Forest Sangha of the Ven. Ajahn Chah make efforts to address the issues of Bhikkhuni ordination, recognising that there are many well informed members of the four-fold sangha who see this as a real possibility and wish to see it happen. We particularly urge the Western Elders of the Forest Sangha to work openly and honestly within its own cultural context, inviting and listening to feedback from the four-fold sangha, as the Buddha modelled.
- **We request that** the new legislation imposed upon the nuns of Amaravati and Cittaviveka be revoked and a new dialogue be

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This petition was developed by a number of concerned Buddhist practitioners in Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, South Africa, United Kingdom, USA, in the hope that expressing our concerns may lead to the change that we believe, without doubt, is right for our times: Bhikkhuni ordination. Not one minute more should be wasted.

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Links

Other places to show your support:

[Support Bhikkhunis website](#)

[Women & the Forest Sangha](#) (on facebook)

[Sujato's Blog — Buddhism for a small world: views and opinions](#)

See fourfoldsangha.org for links to more information on these issues.

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initiated to discuss what would mutually support the monks' and nuns' orders to thrive in their Western communities.

- **We request that** a dialogue be initiated, including representatives of all four components of the four-fold sangha in the West, which directly addresses gender inequity within the monastic form and how it impacts on people in this tradition, ordained or lay, with the aim of finding a way to move forward in mutual respect as members of this sangha in a Western context.

We hereby express our dissent and make these requests in the spirit of the Dhamma — that the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha may find a healthy ground to grow and flourish in the world for the benefit of all beings.

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