

# Bhikkhuni Today

## The Joys and Challenges of a Pioneer

*By Amma Thanasanti Bhikkhuni*

I am blessed to be an American-born bhikkhuni living in the United States, blessed to be part of a society that insists on equality, celebrates pioneers, and encourages living according to one's values. My vision of how the laity and monastics can evolve as an integrated community to support each other to awaken would not be possible in many other contexts. For a variety of reasons, the United States is a highly favorable container in which Buddhism can flourish in our postmodern world.

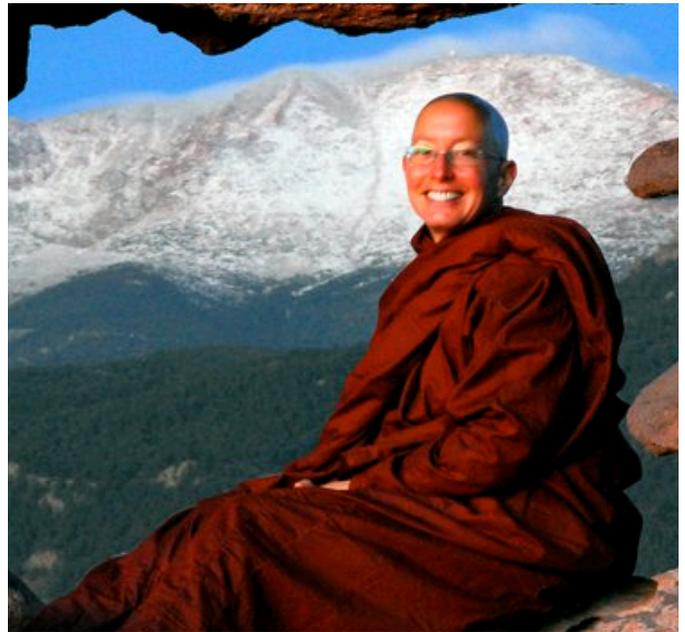
I am also aware that we live at a unique and pivotal time in history. In numerous places around the world where I have taught, I experience a deep readiness to see women come into fullness and maturity, to find their voices and lead. This is particularly true here in the U.S. At a bhikkhuni ordination in Northern California in 2011, the renowned scholar Venerable Anālayo remarked that full ordination for Theravada bhikkhunis is the single-most important event in the Buddhist world these last hundred years. He is not alone in recognizing the inestimable value of women monastics.

Other blessings of establishing the Dhamma in America include the opportunities produced by its entrepreneurial ethos in which hard work, clear vision, and the right contacts make projects blossom. As Americans, we know how to innovate, how to make things happen. This culture's commitment to social justice is another precious gift. America's dedication to equity makes it far easier to develop leadership structures that support not only women but others who have been marginalized. Perhaps even more significant is that we are free to teach what we know from our own experience rather than having to fit into a prefabricated model of how things are supposed to be. We are able to teach in a way that is applicable to the global challenges we are facing today.

### **Snapshots from My Daily Life**

In offering the following glimpses of my life, I hope to convey a sense of what it is like to be a bhikkhuni in today's America. As one example, I regularly take my alms bowl onto streets and make myself available for receiving food offerings from passers-by. Recently in Manitou Springs, a small town next to Colorado Springs, a middle-aged woman came up to me and offered some food for my noon meal. I checked with her to see if she would welcome the traditional blessing. Before chanting, I asked her to place her attention on her own goodness. This simple suggestion elicited tears. Standing on the sidewalk, tears and chanting flowing together, we touched something timeless. The exquisite tenderness of the moment was accentuated by the circumstance of having only just met and being so public.

Though being moved to tears happens infrequently to those I interact with on alms round, almost always someone



who has just met me and offered something for my meal leaves saying "Thank you." When I think of the reversal from our consumer-driven, greed-based society—whereby someone I don't know and who isn't familiar with monastics and what they bring to the world thanks me for being able to make an offering—I am touched by the power of the monastic form and the way it brings out the goodness in others. Being willing to stand in my own vulnerability as an alms mendicant, I become an emissary reminding others of their own goodness.

Just last week someone else invited me to her deathbed. To be allowed into the deepest intimacy of sharing without pretense and touching what is tender and true with another is an honor and privilege. Time and again this deep intimacy is a feature of the contact I have with others.

Living with renunciation, we are trained to relinquish suffering. My hermitage was in the evacuation zone from the recent Waldo Canyon fire in Colorado. When I realized that the hermitage was at risk of going up in flames, I felt the vulnerability of the situation and my own powerlessness to protect it. Opening to my feelings, including gently embracing my wish it were otherwise, meant that I could be present with the pain of the possible loss. As I attended in this way, the ache softened and then released. With acceptance, I felt much more peaceful. As I touched my own sorrow, I felt greater compassion for others, a blessing from decades of practice.

### **Challenges Created by American Culture**

Despite the many advantages of American culture, there are significant hurdles to overcome if we are to anchor Buddhist monasticism here. One such obstacle arises from the fact that contemporary Buddhists in the U.S. are taught mostly by lay teachers. Having had little contact with monastics, the average lay woman or man lacks the knowledge of what blessings arise from close association with ordained women

and does not know what monastics need to flourish. There is always much for me to explain and a great deal for the laity to learn.

The current culture is very different compared to the time of the Buddha. We are up against the American work ethic, where self-sufficiency is highly valued. To further complicate creating the needed infrastructures that would enable bhikkhunis to thrive, we live in a society chronically overcommitted, where individuals and families do not have enough time to take care of simple tasks in their own lives, let alone plan to be part of the regular support system of a monastic community. Providing daily support for monastics is often only possible if shared by a large group of lay supporters, when there are lay stewards in residence, or when the monastics make accommodations for their circumstances like storing or cooking food, handling money, and driving. Some monastics today are shouldering responsibilities that have traditionally been carried by the lay community.

The cost of health care and private insurance requires significant funds. An alliance that allowed separate communities to buy insurance for their committed monastic members would be very helpful. Establishing monasteries may be stressful for everyone involved. Leaders are often trying to balance and prioritize a huge number of details while they are often learning many things for the first time. In my own situation, I was regularly stretched beyond my capacity. If there are different levels of experience, the junior members as well as the supporting lay community may feel overextended with duties. The Board may be learning the ropes of a nonprofit and its application to monastics. The supporting lay community may also feel stretched by additional duties and by finding equilibrium while the community takes shape and unfolds. It takes skill and resources to balance building a community and developing a monastery with needed meditation and monastic training from which the Dhamma can take hold. As monastics set up places of practice, more collaboration would ease the need for each new community to reinvent the wheel.

Further, it is extremely supportive when retreat centers make accommodations for monastics to attend without charge so they can take essential time to recuperate and retreat themselves.

### **Challenges Generated by Buddhist Monastic Tradition and Institutions**

Our postmodern culture has significant implications on our values, the kind of leadership styles that inspire faith, and the way the teachings can either be received contextually or miss their audience altogether. Most of us wish to be part of a community that speaks to where we are at and addresses the issues meaningful to us. The very power structure itself must be compatible with our principles and reflect the Dhamma.

In the history of Buddhist tradition, there are stark contradictions between the ideal for all to awaken and the reality that disallowed women to participate with equal

access and legitimacy. This has been particularly true for monastics, and this painful split has resulted in many nuns and a few monks being marginalized, ostracized, or silenced in their communities because they spoke up about discrimination and its harmful effects. This widespread ambivalence toward women in general and nuns in particular has affected many different monastic as well as lay communities. While we have a collective challenge that must be addressed, we have yet to develop forums for healing. This adds to the load that is carried by a community and the leaders within it.

Many come to spiritual practice after being touched deeply by suffering. The Buddhist path of generosity, integrity, calm, inquiry, and insight addresses many kinds of suffering. But for many of us who have a personal background laced with trauma, more is needed. I was humbled to realize that the meditation I had done for twenty years hadn't allowed me to touch, let alone heal, some of the emotional upheavals and psychological issues that I carried. When I did attend to this level of my experience with appropriate support, my meditation went deeper. The insights I acquired have now integrated into many other aspects of my life as well.

When senior members have not attended to their trauma or their psychological issues, dysfunctional community dynamics are the inevitable result. This is often exacerbated by the internalized oppression that remains as a legacy of patriarchal power structures. Nuns are not exempt from using power dominance models of leadership with members of their own communities. Monastic life aspirants who enter a community may be completely unprepared for the kinds of suffering they may confront.

One aspect of the Amaravati and Chithurst nuns' community that I valued and feel really proud to have helped shape, along with the other sisters, was the willingness to painstakingly distinguish between what belonged to the individual and what was part of the collective—the myriad complex factors of not having a clear place in the patriarchal power structures and the way that it affected our minds and bodies as well as group dynamics. As we did this work, the nuns became more cohesive as group. It took about fifteen years since the nuns' community first began before we started working in this way and five years after we started for me to experience coherence and congruence in our community. By the time I left the community, the nuns had developed the ability to stay in empathetic resonance during times of adversity, respond compassionately to diverse views, and accurately name what was happening—all invaluable skills.

### **Where We Are Now in America and How to Move Forward**

More and more women are being offered the bhikkhuni ordination, and yet in North America there are not sufficient places providing basic requisites and training. This creates difficulties for lay women and men who wish to offer support for bhikkhunis as well as for the newly ordained monastics themselves. Part of this is due to the Bhikkhuni

Sangha only beginning to delineate agreed-upon standards about who may take the “going forth” and what minimal support needs to be provided by the preceptor. As pioneers, we are figuring things out as we grow.

Knowing these blessings and challenges, we are wise to move forward with care and attention to how things actually are. For any aspiring monastic, it is wise to carefully consider the experience of living in different situations and notice the effect it has on oneself. This will be much more telling than ideas about how it is supposed to be. Consider the way the community is structured in terms of basic requisites of shelter, food, robes, medicine, and support from the surrounding community, and whether teachers have the ability, interest, and time to train students in monastic codes of conduct and Dhamma. Take note that leadership styles vary. It is important to see whether what is offered in any specific community is a good enough fit for one’s needs and temperament. Ask questions and stay long enough so a decision is made from one’s own clear and direct experience.

I have never been in a community that was perfect, nor do I expect to be. While accepting this reality, I recommend assessing whether the basics afforded by a community are adequate for the heart and body to respond with ease before making a commitment to enter. As these are the early days for Theravada bhikkhunis in North America, few communities are solid and stable. Nevertheless, if the leadership and basic structure of the community inspires confidence, then consider making a commitment. As pioneers, we are paving the road, and those who follow will benefit from what we have done. It would be good to be prepared for the long haul. It would be wise during these decades when we are building monasteries to develop a practice that moves toward the goals we seek without compromising our basic needs. Our training is to see what is arising and where our desire and aversion are activated. As we let go of wanting things to be otherwise, as we release our resistance, we can find peace. It is also important to learn to identify and speak up for what we need and not allow the idea of renunciation to support choices where our basic physical needs and psychological well-being are compromised.

Since I returned to the U.S., I have had to navigate a lot of uncertainty as I wait to see how things will unfold. I also have had to live with self-doubt about my own capacity to meet the problems that arise. Grateful for the extended training in the Dhamma and Discipline, I know fundamental principles to return to. Again and again I have met what is arising. When my resistance to what I am experiencing releases, I am left with some simple truths: the joy and simplicity of living with precepts, valuing kindness, the peace and contentment that comes from resting in awareness, the effect of living with few needs, living in a field of generosity, sharing what I know and love with others, and watching others suffer less, awaken to joy, and find genuine meaning in their lives. When I feel daunted by the demands that lie ahead, I shift to what is happening in the present. I may not have a map for the next several years,

but for the next few days I can be content with what is, living as a bhikkhuni for now.

I have had to relinquish grandiose ideas of how things should evolve. Over time, I have learned to place a priority on simply moving forward, on working with what is given to me while simultaneously trusting that future growth for my community will develop when conditions are right. I have made mistakes and have needed to learn to reflect, make amends, forgive myself, let go, and move on. I now recognize that what needs to happen for a community to take root will require the coming together of many factors that largely depend on others coming forward and getting involved.

Seeing the ways things are unfolding reinforces my appreciation that, while the blessings to live as a monastic continue, we will flourish only if our interdependent relationship nourishes the many-fold Sangha, the Sangha that includes all genders, sexual orientations, and precept levels in the globally diverse cultural context in which we are now living. For monastics to thrive, we need to grow in ways that support all of us awakening.

The Buddha taught us to contemplate suffering and realize the end of suffering. No matter what we do, it has to come back to this. When attention rests on what’s left when things fall away, the multiplicity of our world ends and the many objects of attention shift to the awareness that knows. Attuned to the clear light of this knowing, the right questions are asked. Eventually what emerges from this awareness takes shape in ways that serve many.

Bhikkhunis today are pioneers filled with the joy of emergence and enriched by the traditions from which we have come while facing challenges unique to our time and place. I see a model of monasticism coalescing which has the intention and capacity to stay rooted in what is essential in the Dhamma and Discipline, embrace the best of our cultural legacy, attend to what is present, ask the right questions, and use these in the process of awakening. Where the many-fold Sangha feels committed and involved, it is possible for nuns to take root and bring the awakened mind, the truth of the ways things are, and the value of community to society at large. What an extraordinary time!

*(Amma) Thanasanti Bhikkhuni was born in California and first encountered the Dhamma in 1979. Since that time she has been committed to awakening. On a trip to Asia she met highly accomplished meditation masters Dipa Ma and Ajahn Chah. She went to England in 1989, where she joined the nuns’ community in the Ajahn Chah Forest Tradition and lived for twenty years. In 2009, she left her monastic community to return to the U.S. to pursue her vision of developing a bhikkhuni training monastery integrating ancient teachings of the Forest Tradition into the modern world. She founded [Awakening Truth](#), a tax-deductible religious charity dedicated to this vision. In 2010, after being a nun for nineteen years, she received ordination in the first Theravada dual-platform bhikkhuni ordination in North America with Ayya Tathaaloka as her preceptor. Currently she resides in Colorado Springs at the Shakti Vihara hermitage.*

**(Highlighted excerpts)**

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