

# Present

The Voices and Activities of Theravada Buddhist Women | Winter 2011

September 17, 2011

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  
New Turns Toward Ancient Paths: The Ordinations in California  
Bhikkhuni Education Today: Seeing Challenges as Opportunities  
Venerable Kusuma and the Power of Literacy Education  
Turning Back Towards Freedom  
Wearing White in the West ■ Bhikkhunīsaṃyutta



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# Present

The Voices and Activities of Theravada Buddhist Women | Winter 2011 Volume 4 Issue 1

## Features

### 4... If You Honor Me, Honor My Mother Gotami

*With the revival of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, it is enriching to look back at the stories of the early bhikkhunis. We start this issue of Present with a fresh look at the story of the mother of bhikkhunis.*

by Jacqueline Kramer

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### 9...The 1st Annual International Bhikkhuni Day September 17, 2011 Meditation Pledge-A-Thon

*FAQ on International Bhikkhuni Day.*

---

### 11...Honoring and Celebrating Bhikkhunis and Laywomen

*Why recalling the stories of laywomen and female monastics matters.*

by Susan Pembroke

---

### 13... New Turns Toward Ancient Paths: the Ordinations in California

*A kammacarini reflects on her experiences at two recent historic U.S. bhikkhuni ordinations.*

by Ven. Bhikkhuni Sobhana

---

### 16...Bhikkhuni Education Today: Seeing Challenges As Opportunities

*Education is essential if bhikkhunis are to become Dharma leaders.*

by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi

---

### 21...Venerable Kusuma and the Power of Literacy Education

*A pioneering bhikkhuni taps her education and language skills to reach across cultural differences and create the future for female monastics.*

by Janice Tolman

---

### 24...Turning Back Towards Freedom

**November 2007: The First Recitation of the Bhikkhuni Patimokkha within the Theravada Bhikkhuni Lineage in North America**

*Bhikkhunis who participated in this historic recitation talk about why the Patimokkha remains vital in this day and age*

by Roseanne Freese

---

### 33...Wearing White in the West

*An intimate recounting of how taking eight precepts and wearing white transformed a woman's practice.*

by Carudhamma Jo Ferris

---

### 37... Bhikkhunīsaṃyutta

*Connected Discourses with Bhikkhunīs*

## Departments

### 46...President's Letter

*To Do Our Work, We Need Your Help*

### 48...Noteworthy

*News in brief*

### 53...Poetry

*Gotami's Enlightenment Poem*

### 54... An Interview with Joan Sutherland, Roshi

by Jacqueline Kramer

### 58...Film Review of White Material

by Kathy Jean Schultz

### 60...Book Review of Dignity and Discipline

by Roseanne Freese



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## Letters

*Present invites your letters—reactions, responses, reflections, and whatever else comes to mind. All letters to are subject to editing. Please email editor@bhikkhuni.net, or send post to PO Box 1058, Santa Barbara, California, USA 93102-1058*



# If You Honor Me, Honor My Mother Gotami

The Buddha's Second Mother and First Mother of the Bhikkhunis

by *Jacqueline Kramer,*

Like two stars shining brightly at the auspicious birth of a great presence, the Buddha was blessed with two great mothers, Maya, who offered her body as his final vessel, and Pajapati, who nursed and raised him as her own. The two sisters were born in Devadaha 2600 years ago on the fertile land at the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains. As daughters of the Sakyan royal family, all their earthly needs were well met. The soothsayers foretold that the younger sister would grow up to be a leader of many people so they called her Pajapati, which means leader of an assembly of people. When Maya, the elder sister, came of age, she was sent to the neighboring region of Kapilavastu to be married to King Suddhodana, ruler of the Sakyan people. Twenty-five years

into her marriage, Maya, now forty years old, had still not conceived a child. King Suddhodana, needing to produce an heir to the throne, married Maya's younger sister, Pajapati.

The new marriage worked its magic. Both sisters became pregnant at the same time. Maya was the first to give birth. As was the custom at the time, Maya returned to the home of her father and mother to deliver the baby. While en route to her childhood home, she was drawn to a beautiful park, alive with green trees, scented flowers, wild birds full of songs and busy bees. It was here, on a full moon eve, supported by a sala tree, that Maya released the future Buddha into the world. The baby walked seven steps. At each step a pristine lotus rose out of the rich, brown soil. Mother, son

and retinue returned to the palace, to an overjoyed King. The soothsayers named the boy Siddhartha - he who accomplishes his aim. Shortly thereafter, Pajapati gave birth to Nanda. Seven days after the birth of Siddhartha, Maya passed away. Pajapati relinquished her own son to a wet nurse and, as the new first Queen, donned the responsibility of nursing and raising Siddhartha, the young crown prince. Later, she went on to give birth to a daughter named Sundari Nanda. The story of Pajapati then slips into oblivion only to reemerge at the time of the Buddha's return to Kapilavastu.

A lion's share of what we know about the Buddha and his life is in the form of story, lyrical vignettes laced with wisdom in the form of parables about his growing up and eventual enlightenment. There are many teachings sewn into

the brink of self-inflicted death by way of the middle path. Siddhartha discovers the middle path by going to excess. He is not born with this wisdom. We watch Siddhartha grow and develop throughout his awakening story. Siddhartha's learning process, and the fact that he is not portrayed as perfectly enlightened from the start, is an important teaching for all the unenlightened. It shows us that with enough wise direction, commitment and fire, we too can become Buddhas, we too can wake up. How did the young Siddhartha develop the high degree of compassion and wisdom necessary to leave the comfort of the luxurious palace and face the unknown in his quest for a path leading out of the thorns and brambles of suffering?

We each know, from our own experiences, how the pains

## *What would the Buddha's narrative look like if it included stories about how Pajapati guided him?*

the folds of Siddhartha's life story, such as the teaching on kindness found in the story about Devadatta and the swan. When Devadatta, Siddhartha's cousin, shot down a swan with his bow and arrow, the young Siddhartha found the swan in the brush, carefully removed the arrow and nursed the ailing bird back to life. Devadatta claimed that the swan belonged to him because he had shot it down. Siddhartha successfully argued the case before a jury of adults that the swan belongs to him who saves a life, not him who takes a life. In another story we watch a young Siddhartha spontaneously fall into meditation while sitting under a Rose Apple Tree during the annual spring plowing ceremony. Although there are numerous stories about Siddhartha's education and training as a young prince, there are no stories about what his father or his mother taught him, no glimpses of intimate moments shared between son and mother. The mother disappears from the story.

Our mother is our first spiritual teacher, a reality that is often overlooked in the stories of many great men, including the Buddha. This is not because of an assertion that Siddhartha emerged perfectly realized from birth. Although the seeds of Siddhartha's compassion were sown over many lifetimes, he returned to human form because he had further to grow in order to achieve full realization. The Buddha stressed that he was born a man, not a god. We watch him go to excess with self-mortification and bring himself back from

and pleasures of our early life have shaped the passions we carry into our adult life. We all grow up in environments where adults, usually our mothers and/or fathers, influence our character and worldview. If you think about your mother I'm sure you will find at least a few lessons that have led to your character today, whether it is a choice to emulate her actions or to oppose them. When I think about my mother, I remember how she valued impeccability in speech and action. She would not take a penny that did not belong to her and treated the people who worked for her with great respect and kindness. From this I learned about staying true to my values even when no one was looking. I also learned, from my mother's lack of confidence, the power of internalized disrespect. The disrespect for women I experienced in my family led to a great passion to support and honor women everywhere. The space in my heart carved out by my own pain now can hold the pain of others.

Although the teaching of gratitude towards one's mother is deep in the Buddhist tradition, as we see in the story of the Buddha ascending to heaven to teach his birth mother the dharma, we are not provided with any intimate moments between Pajapati and Siddhartha as he is developing his character. In Judaism the opportunity to fill in missing pieces of a story is called Midrash. An example of midrash is the story of Abraham smashing idols in his father's shop though not found in the bible. Yet this story has become common

knowledge. What would the Buddha's narrative look like if it included stories about how Pajapati guided him? We know that great compassion comes from the transformation of great pain. What was the pain young Siddhartha felt that led to his great compassion? How may his foster mother have guided the young boy towards the transformation of his pain into compassion? I would love to listen in as Pajapati instructs and guides this exceptionally bright, receptive child. Did she comfort him with stories of great things coming from small sorrows when he experienced cruelty at the hands of other children? Did she hold him when he cried, did she help him understand that the biting words and deeds of others are born from their own sorrow, that their words and deeds are an expression of what is left unhealed in their hearts, that unkindness can never diminish that which continues to shine brightly within both the giver and the receiver, that what unkindness calls for is not retaliation but love? The powerful moments between a mother, or father, and child are often simple moments. Because the teachings that lead to deep habits are usually repetitive rather than dramatic and spoken in whispers rather than shouted, they often go unacknowledged. What if we could reclaim some of those missing moments in the Buddha story?

*Gotami's tenacity is a wonderful model of a consciousness ready to put everything on the line for enlightenment.*

Seven years after Siddhartha left home to seek the end of suffering for all beings, he returned to the palace gates of his childhood, thirty-five years old and having found what he had sought. He left as Siddhartha and returned a Buddha. Pajapati, now in her seventies, re-enters the Buddha's story. After hearing, seeing and feeling the transformed presence of the boy she had raised, both Pajapati and her husband are so deeply moved by their son's teachings they become his students. One by one, the men in Gotami's life decide to follow the esteemed teacher. Her son Nanda and her grandson Rahula both leave the palace to join the monastic sangha. Shortly thereafter her husband dies leaving Pajapati as Head of State. It was not an easy time for her. There was a major dispute over water rights between the Sakyans and their neighbors and the best and brightest of the tribe were abandoning leadership roles to join the Buddha's sangha. As more and more men left to follow the Buddha, many of the women came to the great woman of the Gotama clan, Gotami, now a stream enterer, for spiritual support and advice. Five hundred women, a number signifying a large amount, urged Gotami to petition the Buddha to allow women to join the monastic sangha.

The story most of us have heard, the story passed down about how Gotami becomes the first bhikkhuni, typically begins

with her begging the Buddha to let her, and 500 other women from his former life, join the sangha. The story shows Gotami following an all male sangha barefoot, coming to Ananda in tears, entreating him to plead her case to the Buddha, to allow women to join the sangha and, basically, not taking no for an answer. This story about asking three times has been interpreted as a reflection of the Buddha's disregard for women. But we can glean a deeper meaning to the story about asking three times. In the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, Mara, the tempter, challenges the Buddha soon after his enlightenment by insinuating that his time to pass away has come. The Buddha proclaims that, "I will not pass away until I have bhikkhuni disciples who are wise, well-trained, self confident and learned." We need to ask, if the old texts show the Buddha making such a strong commitment to include women in his sangha directly after his enlightenment, why would he hesitate to allow women to become bhikkhunis when asked by his beloved foster mother?



Asking three times shows up again and again, both in Buddhism and in other cultures. I am reminded here of how Rabbis will not take a non-Jew as an applicant for conversion until they have asked for this training a number of times. This form of testing an applicant's resolve is not limited to Buddhism and, in Buddhism, is not limited to the inclusion of Gotami into the sangha. When the Buddha was in Rajagaha, he came upon the naked ascetic Kassapa who said, "If the honorable Gotama would permit me, if he would give me an opportunity to hear his answer, I would like to question him about a certain matter." Kassapa had to ask for this audience three times before the Buddha said, "You may ask whatever you like." Three appears to be a number signifying resolve. The Buddha believed in the value of tenacious adherence to a good cause, as have many spiritual teachers before and

after him. To this day ordination procedures have three fold repetitions, as does recitation of the three refuges. In vipassana practice we are taught to repeat the name of whatever sense the mind alights on three times, such as “seeing, seeing, seeing” or “hearing, hearing, hearing,” in order to let the awareness set in. It takes firm resolve, also known as right effort, to walk the spiritual path through all the ups and downs, year after year. Gotami’s tenacity is a wonderful model of a consciousness ready to put everything on the line for enlightenment.

But, the time was not yet right to bring so many women into the newly forming sangha. There were many real and practical concerns that the Buddha faced while setting up his new

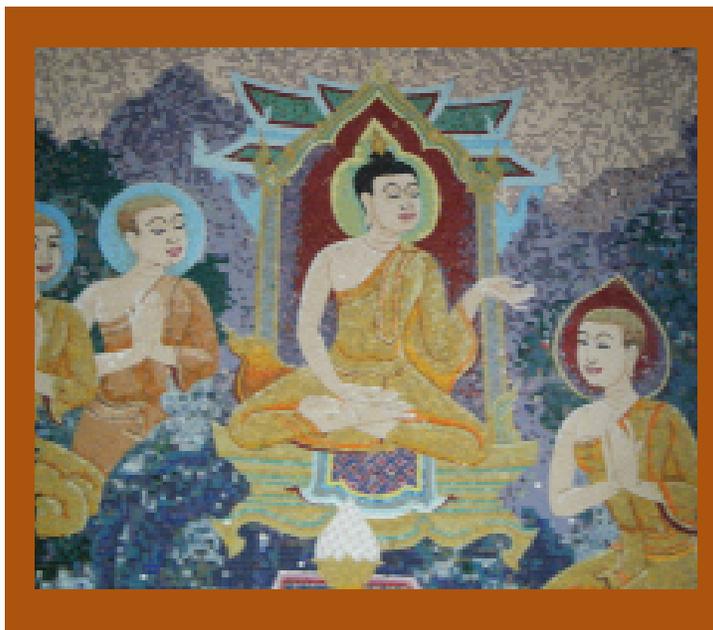
monastic order. If he did not firmly establish the male sangha first, he may not have had enough support from the laity to physically maintain the two sanghas. The laity might have questioned the integrity of a sangha where men and women lived together or where women lived independently. Even though there were already female wandering ascetics at the time and an existing Jain bhikkhuni order, ordaining women in great numbers could be problematic. Also, some scholars have noted the

problem of timing in the story of Gotami asking Ananda to intercede and petition the Buddha on her behalf. Research shows that Ananda would not become the Buddha’s attendant until fifteen years after Gotami’s ordination. Many scholars even question whether Gotami was the first bhikkhuni. The history is unresolved here. There is the possibility that Bhadda Kundalakesa was the first bhikkhuni. Also, there is some evidence that an early group of bhikkhunis may already have been living at Vulture Peak. But Gotami was the first to come to him with such enormous numbers of female aspirants. Perhaps the story of Gotami’s ordination, making her the mother of bhikkhunis, could have been as simple as the Buddha, gazing lovingly at the woman who cared and nurtured him, extends his hand in gratitude and gives his beloved foster mother the most valuable gift he could possibly give, the gift of the dhamma. It is beautiful to think about this ordination as a simple exchange of precious gifts, one heart to another. However the initiation came about, whether the Buddha ordained Gotami with a simple gesture of his hand and the words “Come nun” or in some

other fashion, the Buddha’s second mother became foremost in seniority amongst the Buddha’s bhikkhuni disciples.

The Buddha was deeply respectful of women. He likened his teachings on loving kindness to the way a mother loves her only child, and encouraged us to extend this love to all beings. He pushed the envelope as far as he could, given the social situation at the time. So how did misogyny creep into such enlightened teachings? Some of the Buddhist teachings regarding women that have been passed down are not necessarily the work of truly enlightened minds. As with all organized religions, there are both enlightened and unenlightened among the ranks. It is a common phenomenon throughout

history for those who have the power to use stories to cause others to conform to their viewpoint. The victors write the history and the victors are not always the most enlightened within the ranks. In this respect, Buddhism is no different from other large organized institutions. This is why it is so important to look deeply into what an enlightened mind, the Buddha mind, sees rather than blindly stick to the stories as they are passed down. In sorting this all out, we are well advised to look at the moon rather than the finger pointing to the moon.



If we remember that most of what has been passed down about the Buddha is in the form of story, rather than history, we can be thoughtful about what lessons we choose to keep and which to let go. We can ask the question, does this teaching conform to the enlightened mind of a Buddha? And if it does not, we can release it.

In the age old tradition of story-telling, the stories that stay alive the longest are the ones that have the flexibility to change and morph yet retain their essential meaning in response to changing times and new cultures. There is already precedent of the Buddha’s story changing as it enters a new culture. An example of this is how the Buddha of compassion, Avalokitesvara, changed from a male deity to a female deity when Buddhism moved to China. The Chinese see compassion as a female quality so in order to transmit the teaching of compassion to the Chinese people the heavenly teacher became a goddess. As Buddhism now moves West, perhaps we can leave behind the traces of other cultures that view women as second-class citizens and import the vision of an

enlightened mind which has women sitting side by side with men, not better and not worse. I think this was the Buddha's original vision as is evidenced by his telling Mara directly after his enlightenment that he would not pass away until there were wise, enlightened bhikkhunis. Through this he made clear that both men and women are capable of attaining the enlightened state.

After her ordination, Mahapajapati received a meditation subject and, through her reflection on it, realized the state of perfection saying, "I have reached the state where everything stops." She continued on as an elder and teacher until the ripe old age of one hundred and twenty. When her time of death was drawing near, she requested to see her son one last time. Although it was against monastic regulation for a bhikkhu to visit a bhikkhuni this way, her wish was granted when the Buddha came to visit her on her deathbed. Her final words to the Buddha were



*nursed you with mother's milk, which quenched your thirst for a moment. For you I drank the dharma-milk and am now forever sated. You do not owe any debt to me for raising and nurturing you. Great sage, to have had a son, quenches all my desires."*

Gotami then put her head down on the Buddha's feet, feet that emitted the fragrance of lotuses in bloom. Upon his soles were marks in the form of radiating wheels like a young sun's shining rays. Realizing that there were foolish people who

would doubt that women could attain full enlightenment, the Buddha asked Gotami to perform many miracles to show the capabilities of a woman arahant. She bowed to the Buddha, then leapt into the sky. Having been one she became many, having been many she became one. She sank down deep into the Earth and walked over the water without breaking the surface. Sitting cross-legged she flew like a bird across the sky. She held great mountains as if they were tiny mustard seeds and finally, extinguished in a flash, like the flame in a lamp that has no more fuel.

*I nursed you with mother's milk  
Which quenched your thirst for a moment.  
From you I drank the dharma-milk  
And am now forever sated.  
You do not owe any debt to me  
For raising and nurturing you.  
Great sage, to have had you as a son,  
Quenches all my desires.*

The Buddha declared, "Now go Ananda, tell the monks my mother has reached nirvana. Dear Gotami, she who carefully raised me when I was helpless has gone to a deep peace, just like the stars at sunrise. If you honor me, honor my mother Gotami. Know this, she was most wise, with wisdom vast and wide." When the Buddha had thus honored his mother, the gods offered garlands scented with divine perfume and worshiped Gotami with song, music, and dance.

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Jacqueline Kramer, author of *Buddha Mom-the Path of Mindful Mothering*, has been studying and practicing Buddhism for over 36 years. Her root teachings are in the Sri Lankan Theravadin tradition and she is now studying Zen koans. She is the director of Hearth Foundation which offers classes and support for parents who wish to awaken at home. The website is [www.hearth-foundation.org](http://www.hearth-foundation.org)





# The 1st Annual International Bhikkhuni Day

September 17, 2011, Meditation Pledge-A-Thon

*Honoring and Celebrating Bhikkhunis and Laywomen*

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## *FAQ about International Bhikkhuni Day:*

What It Is and Why Your Participation Benefits You, Your Fellow Practitioners, the Bhikkhuni Sangha, and Future Generations

### *What is International Bhikkhuni Day?*

It is a day on which we pay respect to the Bhikkhuni Sangha and acknowledge its essential role in preserving and spreading the Dhamma. We remember prominent bhikkhunis and their unique achievements and contributions.

### *When is International Bhikkhuni Day?*

The 1st International Bhikkhuni Day, in 2011, is Saturday, September 17. In the future, the celebration will take place on the full moon Saturday in September or on the first Saturday immediately following the full moon.

### *Why this date?*

The first bhikkhuni, Bhikkhuni Maha Pajapati Theri, the Buddha's stepmother and aunt, ordained during a full moon in September, the occasion marking the start of the Bhikkhuni Sangha.

### *What do we do on International Bhikkhuni Day?*

We honor bhikkhunis and the women who have guided us, beginning with Bhikkhuni Maha Pajapati Theri, as well as rejoice in the continuance of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. Sharing stories about bhikkhunis and laywomen will help us recall that we are all a vital part of the Fourfold Assembly created by the Buddha.

## What else do we on this day?

- ❑ It is a time to raise funds to support ordained women.
- ❑ It is a time to meditate and study the Dhamma.
- ❑ It is a time to honor women and their spiritual accomplishments.
- ❑ It is a time to protect the history and spiritual legacy of bhikkhunis and laywomen.
- ❑ It is a time to send love and compassion to heal conflicts in our families, communities, and the world.
- ❑ It is time to re-dedicate ourselves to becoming the skilled, adept, learned, and purified disciples the Buddha intended us to be.

## How you can raise money for bhikkhunis

- Be a part of organizing a retreat at your local temple, center, or sitting group.
- Ask family members, friends, and fellow practitioners to sponsor your day of meditation and sharing.

All donations to the Alliance for Bhikkhunis are 100% tax deductible. Visit the Alliance for Bhikkhunis website <http://www.bhikkhuni.net/> for information on registering for this event.



If your community is small, a handful of fellow practitioners gathering in someone's home and supporting each other in a day of practice is an ideal way to join us. A self-retreat is another option. Though meditating alone, you will simultaneously be part of a global community of fellow meditators. We invite individuals to register and ask for pledges from family and friends.

You may also direct donors to the Alliance for Bhikkhunis (AfB) website where they can donate online right now. Checks can also be made out to **Alliance for Bhikkhunis** and mailed to: Alliance for Bhikkhunis, P. O. Box 1058, Santa Barbara, CA 93102-1058.

## What to look for in 2011

Our website will have a link for making pledges as well as suggestions on fundraising ideas that will benefit your center or temple.

## What else can you do?

Please send us stories about the remarkable women who have inspired you. We will compile these stories into a book.

Also consider becoming an AfB volunteer.

## How the AfB will assist you in helping bhikkhunis

The AfB site will have downloadable brochures about the 1<sup>st</sup> Annual International Bhikkhuni Day for individuals and corporate sponsors, as well as an AfB brochure.

Pledging money will be easy and safe. Simply go to our website <http://www.bhikkhuni.net> and follow the directions.

There will be a real time feed as meditators from around the world share their experiences and stories.

The AfB site will offer downloadable guided meditations and talks.

Pictures of bhikkhunis, their biographies and teachings, and ways to reach them will be posted.

The site will suggest a list of questions any facilitator can use to lead a discussion about the extraordinary women who brought out the best in people.

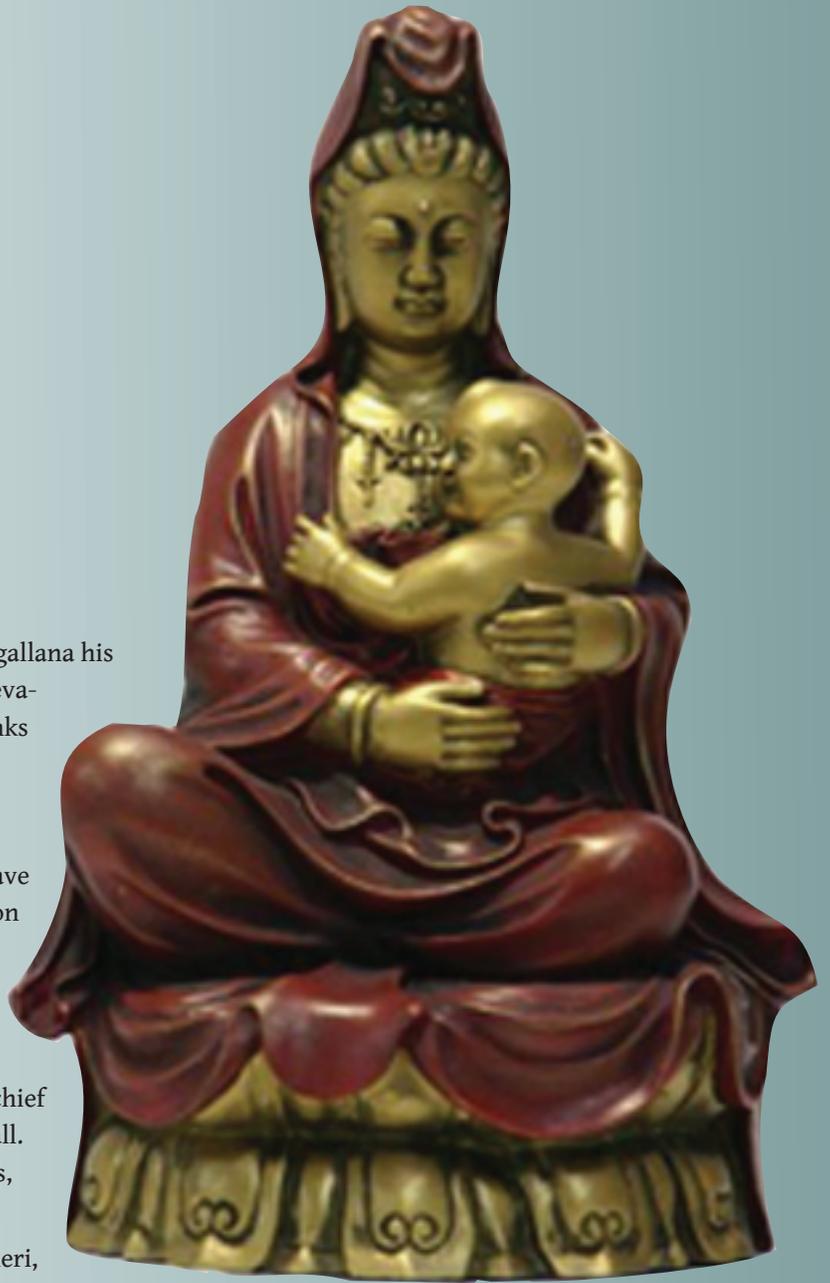
# Honoring and Celebrating Monastic and Laywomen

By Susan Pembroke

When the Buddha named Sariputta and Mahamoggallana his chief disciples, a number of monks objected to the elevation of these relative newcomers. The protesting monks argued that there were more deserving monks, such as the group of five who first received the Buddha's instruction. These initial arahants had to be worthier than those arriving later. The Buddha's reply must have come as a jolt. He explained that it was not his decision or preference. Sariputta and Mahamoggallana had formed the aspiration many lifetimes ago to take on these roles. When the conditions were right, when their efforts and training had ripened, they were able to realize their intentions and become his chief disciples. Their sudden ascension was not sudden at all. What they achieved made them the inevitable choices, not the Buddha.

If we apply this same template to Mahapajapati Theri, can we entertain the possibility that the Buddha, in ordaining Gotami and making her the founder of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, was merely acknowledging an aspiration Gotami had cultivated for many lifetimes, working as diligently towards this position as had Sariputta and Moggallana theirs? Perhaps like the chief disciples, her actions and unswerving commitment over eons placed her in this historic role. For the Buddha to deny her would go against the natural order of things, go against how people's actions over time create their destiny. If anyone knew this, it was the Buddha. When the Buddha's aunt and stepmother requested ordination, is it possible her mission was simply to claim what was rightly hers?

In the case of Sariputta, numerous anecdotes and legends about him have been handed down to us. The many examples of his wisdom, humility, concern for others, industry, and helpfulness motivate us to this day to achieve his level of purity and compassion. We even have some of the discourses he gave. But, for the founder of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, a fully enlightened woman with many attainments, including the ability to recall past lives, we have next to nothing. In the Pali Canon, there are many concrete examples of how skillfully Sariputta handled diverse challenges. We can only assume that Mahapajapati was equally adroit, but the solutions and strategies she deployed in the face of various conflicts and problems are lost to us.



**D**enied examples of the feminine expression of sila, samadhi, and panna, we are all limping along whether we know it or not. Men, as much as women, benefit from the infusion of feminine energies and qualities into their practice. There are times, for example, when adapting and receptivity are more skillful approaches than a rigid, blind determination, the latter more often than not triggering blowback and a more intense struggle.

In an interview in the Spring 2010 Buddhadharmā, Bhikkhu Bodhi speaks to this point. He states: “A significant aspect about Buddhism in the West is not simply the ordination and greater participation of women, but that the feminine presence is going to transform the expression, understanding, and presentation of Buddhism significantly. It strikes me that the classical presentation of Buddhism has a very masculine flavor. One struggles against defilements, to defeat them, cut them off. As the feminine aspect becomes more prominent, it’s going to soften the presentation, but not in a compromising way. It will bring to manifestation certain elements already embedded within the Buddhist tradition that have not yet come to full expression.”

When we neglect to recount stories about women, not only do we disrespect our teachers, mentors, and family, but we deprive future generations of the embodied wisdom of these exemplary women. We deny them their inheritance. International Bhikkhuni Day is a way of righting the minimization or exclusion of women in Buddhist history. Once a year, from this point forward, we set aside an entire day for the expressed purpose of telling stories about monastic and laywomen whose lives are instructive and inspirational. In honoring them, we replenish and cultivate the highest in ourselves, encourage our contemporaries to realize their loftiest spiritual potential, and leave to those who follow a rich and complex legacy.

Please unite with fellow practitioners in writing a history that has women and men equal partners in protecting and spreading the Dhamma. On September 17, 2011, join us in a day of sharing stories about women who taught us how to be moral, responsible, and contributing citizens of the world, women who opened our minds to truth and moved us to care about the welfare of others.

If you are organizing a retreat, design a day that combines meditation, quiet reflection, journaling, and a storytelling circle that focuses on the feminine in all its manifestations. The women you choose to discuss may be arahant bhikkhunis, enlightened bhikkhunis, found in the Therigatha and elsewhere in the Pali Canon. Or, they may be Dhamma teachers or women you have read about or study with now. They may also be family members and friends who shaped your character.

As I have written before, one of my first teachers was my

Czechoslovakian grandmother. She entered the country through Ellis Island, with suitcases her only belongings, and with English a foreign tongue. Her kitchen smelled from cinnamon and pastries on Saturdays and chicken soup on Sundays. I was happy to accompany her on her weekly shopping trip because I knew it would include a vanilla ice cream cone at Goldblatt’s. As we passed beggars on the street, she deposited a coin in every person’s cup or hat. In the many pilgrimages we made on those busy Chicago streets, I don’t recall her ever skipping a single person in need even though she suffered through the Great Depression and had little money herself. Equally remarkable, she never talked about why it was important to care for those less fortunate. She just did it. I can still see her in her babushka, smiling and having a kind word for everyone. Living simply, easily contented, soft-spoken, what little she had she generously shared. Before I heard of the Metta Sutta, she showed me how it was done.

Be a part of vowing to never forget the loving and noble deeds of women, monastic and lay alike. On September 17, 2011, please join with fellow practitioners in creating a history and tradition that acknowledge women and men as equal partners in protecting and spreading the Dhamma.

*But now I’ve seen the Blessed one!  
This is my last compounded form.  
The on-flowing of birth has expired.  
There’s no more re-becoming now.*

(Maha Pajapati, Therigatha 6.6, translated by Andrew Olendzki)

*Once a year, from this point forward, we set aside an entire day for the expressed purpose of telling stories about monastic and laywomen whose lives are instructive and inspirational. In honoring them, we replenish and cultivate the highest in ourselves, encourage our contemporaries to realize their loftiest spiritual potential, and leave to those who follow a rich and complex legacy.*



*Susan Pembroke*  
President, Alliance for Bhikkhunis



Dharma Vijaya Ordinees

# New Turns Toward Ancient Paths: the Ordinations in California

by Ayya Sobhana Bhikkhuni

As a result of these ordinations, two functional women's sanghas have arisen in California. They are communities of four or more bhikkhunis who agree to meet regularly for Patimokkha – the recitation and affirmation of the discipline. Those in the Los Angeles area are already meeting for Patimokkha. The Northern California group will regularly have a quorum during the three-month Rains Retreat.

As one of the Kammacarinis, the chanters who question the candidates for ordination and make the motion for approval by the assembled Bhikkhuni Sangha, I assisted in both ceremonies. Previously, I served as a Kammacarini at the 2009 ordination in Perth, Australia. Having joined with my colleagues at these ceremonies, I feel the emergence of strong and unified sisterhood from around the world. One can easily see, from my current dwelling in the redwood forest of Aranya Bodhi, that there is no better way to forge a clear path than by repeatedly walking it. Likewise, we bhikkhunis are travelers re-establishing the ancient bhikkhuni footpaths on new contextual geography. Together we are clearing the way for aspiring women who are called to experience the Buddha's plan for monastic life in the Theravada tradition.

What conditions are present now to make this possible?

## R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Some of the past bhikkhuni ordinations were questioned by Buddhist conservatives on technical Vinaya grounds. They claimed that the entire Bhikkhuni Sangha is not valid because its restoration in the 1990's relied on either bhikkhu-only or mixed-tradition ordinations. They said that it was impossible

for women to uphold the bhikkhuni Vinaya. Others, including progressive bhikkhus and virtually all academic scholars, believe the weight of Vinaya scholarship and Buddhist history supports the revival of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. But, as the recent ordinations demonstrate, respected elder bhikkhus participate and endorse bhikkhuni ordination. There is also wide support for bhikkhuni ordination from the lay community. Questions on technical Vinaya grounds have lost some of their potentially road-blocking characteristics and appear more like road signs we have passed along the way.

When I ordained in 2006, my teacher Bhante Gunaratana could not find a good facility for ordination in America. He sent me to Dambulla, where the Bhikkhuni Sangha was already firmly established and well-organized. Today, since the establishment and organization of Bhikkhuni Sanghas, women can now be ordained in the United States.

Additionally, the twelve-year hurdle has been scaled. There are now competent bhikkhuni preceptors who have been ordained for more than twelve years, as required in the Vinaya. Before this, ordinations had been performed in Sri Lanka by bhikkhunis with less than twelve years at the request of their ordaining Bhikkhu Sangha. These were senior nuns with decades of monastic experience living as ten-precept nuns. After the first mixed-tradition ordinations in 1996 and 1998, these women were asked to be preceptors in order to jump-start the creation of a viable sangha. Technically, this is a confessable fault for the preceptor but it does not invalidate the ordination. In the USA Ayya Sudarshana and Ayya Tathaaloka, each have over twelve years as bhikkhunis. They are qualified in both the letter and the spirit of Vinaya.

## STRENGTH IN DIVERSITY

It is a boon that the Aranya Bodhi and the Dharma Vijaya ordinations each had their own unique character. These ordinations can inspire and serve as examples for future ordinations across many communities.

The Aranya Bodhi ordination was typically Western in its emphasis on re-viving Buddhist monasticism based on the early texts. Ayya Tathaaloka, in consultation with Bhikkhu Bodhi, Bhante Gunaratana, Ajahn Brahm and other elders, aimed to discard more recent traditions that are in conflict with the earliest Dhamma and Vinaya. This ordination emphasized the autonomy of the Bhikkhuni Sangha in that it was initiated and organized by bhikkhunis.

The ordination ceremony itself had a feeling of intimacy and reciprocity between the ordaining candidate and her bhikkhuni preceptor. The candidate was surrounded and enclosed by the Bhikkhuni Sangha. Each time she knelt down, stood up, or bowed, there were hands to protect her from any slippage of the alms bowl or robe. One of the sangha members sometimes jogged failing memory with a whispered prompt, or corrected a mistake in recitation of the lines. Reflective of the intimacy and reciprocity of this ceremony, the candidate requested dependence on her preceptor concluding with the phrase, "From today onwards, the elder is my burden, and I am the elder's burden." The preceptor then quietly explained the basic requisites, touching the alms bowl and each of the five garments. "This is your bowl, this is your outer robe, this is your upper robe, this is your lower robe ..." There was a feeling of tenderness and support.

The Dharma Vijaya ordination reflected the diversity of immigrant Buddhist communities in Los Angeles. In form, it was reminiscent of my ordination in Sri Lanka, where a dynamic bhikkhu elder was the key organizer. Los Angeles is one of the most diverse and dynamic Buddhist communities in America, and Bhante Piyananda has long been a leader in this mixing bowl. The ordaining sanghas on both sides included both Ther-

avadan and Mahayanan monastics. The ordaining sanghas, and the newly ordained bhikkhunis, included natives of many nations: Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Myanmar, Bangladesh, China, Korea, and the United States. The bhikkhu and bhikkhuni upajjhayas each had dynamic roles in organizing and rehearsing the ordinations but, during the ordination itself, the speaking parts

went to the Kammacarinis and the candidates. This presented a nice balance between the two sides of the ordination.

At both ordinations, the two Kammacarinis took the candidate off to the side for preliminary questioning, exhorting her, "Listen, this is your time of truth, the time of facts... Do not be embarrassed; do not be confused." After being examined,

the candidate came in among the sangha and requested the ordination three times, saying "May the Sangha raise me up out of compassion." The motion for ordination is given at the most formal level, by means of a statement with three repetitions, and ending with the declaration: "The Sangha has acted, so it is silent; thus I will remember it."

The second half of the ceremony, with the Bhikkhu Sangha, is more formal. Now "ordained on one side," the candidates go as a group before the Bhikkhu Sangha and declare their qualification and purity. Traditionally, the second ordination would occur in a separate place. However, during the ordinations at Aranya Bodhi and Los Angeles they were both performed in the same room. This way, the bhikkhus could see the bhikkhuni ordination themselves and have confidence in the bhikkhunis' procedure.

At Aranya Bodhi, Bhante Gunaratana mentioned that in over 60 years as a bhikkhu, [and more than 30 years as an advocate for bhikkhuni ordination] this was the first time he had ever personally witnessed a Theravada dual ordination. Each of the venerables who participated had a similar heart-opening experience. By following the ancient forms laid out by the Buddha we heal the mistakes of the past and revive the unity of the sangha, for the benefit of all.



Dharma Vijaya Participants



## Let History Record and Remember the Names of the Ordaining Sanghas as Well as Those Ordained

### **At Aranya Bodhi Hermitage, August 29, 2010**

**Bhikkhu Sangha:** Ven. Henepola Gunaratana Mahāthero (Presiding Elder and Ovādakācariya), Ven. Shantarakshita Mahāthero (Kammavācācariya), Ven. Amarabuddhi Mahāthero (Kammavācācariya), Ven. Paññasara Mahāthero, Ven. Passano Mahāthero, Ven. Yatiko Thero, Ven. Wimalaratana Bhikkhu, Ven. Puññananda Bhikkhu, and Ven. Varoṇano Bhikkhu

**Bhikkhunī Sangha:** Ven. Tathaaloka Theri (Pavattinī/Upajjhāyini), Ven. Sudhammā Bhikkhunī (Kammavācācarinī), Ven. Sobhanā Bhikkhunī (Kammācarinī), Ven. Gunasārī Bhikkhunī, Ven. Satimā Bhikkhunī, and Ven. Madikā Bhikkhunī

**Newly ordained Bhikkhunīs:** Ajahn Thanasanti, Adhimuttā, Suvijjanā, and Phalañānī

### **At Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara, October 10, 2010**

**Bhikkhu Sangha:** Ven. Dr. Walpola Piyananda Nayaka Maha Thera (Upajjhaya), Ven. Dr. Udagama Sumangala Maha Thera (Upajjhaya), Ven. Dr. Karunananda Maha Thera, Ven. Subhuti Shibuya Maha Thera, Ven. Dehiwala Vajira Maha Thera, Ven. Dr. Jin Sun Nam Sunim, Ven. Muruthamure Pannaloka Maha Thera (Kammacariya), Ven. Wathogala Saranasiri Maha Thera (Kammacariya), Ven. Bogolle Sumana Maha Thera, Ven. Gajanayakagama Kassapa Thera, Ven. Walpola Anuruddha Thera, Ven. Kalabululande Dhammajothi

**Bhikkhuni Sangha:** Ven. Peliyagoda Sudarshana Theri (Upajjhaya), Ven. Chan-Kwang Bhikkhuni (Upajjhaya), Ven. Zu Zai Bhikkhuni, Ven. Cintamani Bhikkhuni, Ven. Dr. Il A Bhikkhuni, Ven. De Te Bhikkhuni, Ven. Gunasari Bhikkhuni (Kammacariya), Ven. Sobhana Bhikkhuni (Kammacariya), Ven. Satima Bhikkhuni, Ven. Fu Hei Bhikkhuni

**Newly ordained Bhikkhunīs:** Lakshapathiye Samadhi (born in Sri Lanka), Cariyapanna, Susila, and Sammasati (all born in Vietnam), and Uttamanyana (born in Myanmar)

Also, Anagarika Santussika and Anagarika Dhammapali received Samaneri ordination; and Brenda Batke-Hirschmann received Anagarika ordination.



*Ayya Sobhana is the Prioress of the Aranya Bodhi Hermitage on the Sonoma Coast in Northern California. In 1989 she became a student of Bhante Henepola Gunaratana ("Bhante G"), of the Bhavana Society in West Virginia. She served on the Board of Directors of the Bhavana Society during the 1990s, and took novice ordination at the Bhavana Society in 2003. She was ordained as a bhikkhuni at Dambulla, Sri Lanka, in 2006.*

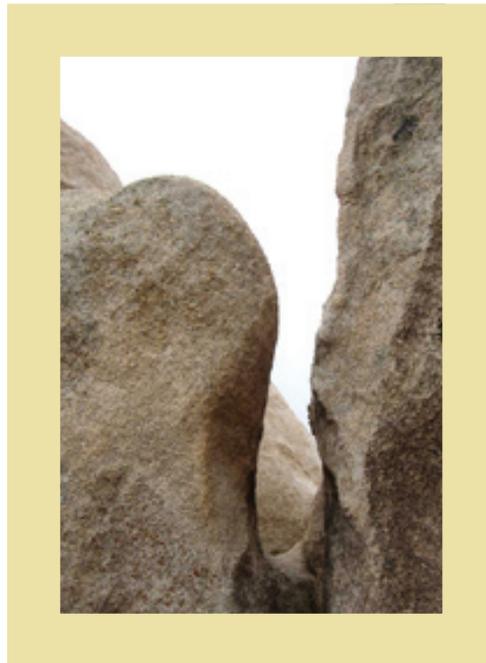
# Bhikkhuni Education Today: Seeing Challenges As Opportunities

Text of a lecture given by video at  
the International Conference on Education for Contemporary Female Sangha,  
Luminary Buddhist Institute, Chia Yi, Taiwan, Republic of China

May 25, 2009

*Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi*

The Buddha's teaching is known as *Buddhavacana*, the "Word of the Buddha." Words are meant to be heard, and in the case of the Buddha's words, which reveal liberating truth, they are meant not merely to pass through the ears, but to be listened to attentively and clearly understood. From its origins, Buddhist monasticism has thus been intimately involved with education. Education plays such an important role in Buddhist monastic life because Buddhism teaches that the root cause of suffering is ignorance. The antidote to ignorance is wisdom, which is acquired through a systematic program of education. The Buddha's discourses often describe five stages in learning the Dharma.



Photos courtesy of  
Andrea Sender

According to a formula often found in the suttas: "A monk is one who has heard much, retains in mind what he has learned, repeats it, examines it intellectually, and penetrates it deeply with insight." Since, in the Buddha's days, the teachings were not written down in books but were transmitted orally, to learn

the Dharma one had to approach erudite teachers, listen closely to what they taught, retain it in mind, and review it by repeating it out loud. One then examines the meaning, which leads to conceptual understanding. Finally one penetrates with insight the principles one has understood conceptually, thereby seeing the truth by direct experience.

## 1. The aims of classical Buddhist education

Wherever Buddhism took root and flourished, it has always emphasized the importance of study and learning. The Vinaya obliges newly ordained monks and nuns to spend several years living under the guidance of their teacher, during which time they learn the fundamentals of the Dharma and Discipline. In India, during the golden age of Buddhist history, Buddhist monasteries evolved into major universities, such as Nalanda and Vikramashila, which attracted students from all across Asia. As Buddhism spread from India to other Asian lands, its monasteries became centers of learning and high culture. From the Mahavihara, Abhayagiri, and Jetavanarama in Sri Lanka, to the Sera, Ganden, and Drepung monasteries in Tibet, Buddhism made a monumental contribution to global education. These great monasteries developed rigorous programs of Buddhist studies where Buddhist scriptures and philosophical systems were discussed and debated, giving birth to a culture of high intellectual sophistication.

Always, however, in the long history of Buddhism, the study of the Dharma was governed by the purpose of the teaching. Both the teachers and students were mostly monastics, and their curriculum had a monastic orientation. Learning was pursued, not as a self-sufficient discipline, but as an integral part of spiritual cultivation. The motive for study was faith and the aims with which one studied were the aims that the Dharma set for its followers. And what were these aims?

The first was simply to know and understand the texts. Buddhism is a religion of books, many books: scriptures passed down directly from the Buddha and his great disciples; sayings of enlightened sages, arahants, and bodhisattvas; treatises by Buddhist philosophers; commentaries and sub-commentaries and sub-sub-commentaries. Each Buddhist tradition has given birth to a whole library filled with books, and a primary aim of traditional Buddhist education has been to learn these texts, which are often memorized and then used as a lens for seeing into the ultimate meaning of the Buddha's teaching.

Since study of the texts is part of a process of self-cultivation, a second aim of Buddhist education is to transform ourselves. Acquisition of knowledge, in classical Buddhism, is quite different from the acquisition of factual knowledge by an academic scholar. The secular scholar aims to acquire objective knowledge, which does not depend on his character. A secular scholar can be dishonest, selfish, and envious but still make a brilliant contribution to his field. In Buddhism, however, knowledge is intended to mold our character. We learn the Dharma so that we can become better persons: people of moral integrity, virtuous conduct, and upright character. We use the principles of the teaching to transform ourselves, to make ourselves suitable "vessels" for the Dharma. We have to mold our character to become kind, honest, and compassionate human beings. By studying the Dharma we learn the guidelines that enable us to bring about

this self-transformation.

On this basis of a moral character, we investigate the teachings that serve as the basis for personal insight and wisdom. Therefore, a third aim of classical Buddhist education is to develop wisdom, to understand the real nature of things. It is said in the texts that whether or not a Buddha appears in the world, the essential nature of things remains ever the same. A Buddha is one who discovers the ever-subsisting laws of actuality and proclaims them to the world. The truth is simply the nature of phenomena, the true nature of life, which is hidden from us by our distorted views and false concepts. Through education, we straighten out our views, correct our false concepts, and by cultivating our minds, attain realization of the truth.

Finally, we use our knowledge of the Dharma—gained by study, practice, and realization—to teach others. Thus a fourth purpose of Buddhist education is to prepare us to transmit the Dharma. As monastics, it is our special responsibility to instruct others in ways that will promote their own moral purification and insight, to help them walk the path to happiness and peace. We thus study the Dharma to benefit the world as much as to benefit ourselves.

## 2. The challenge of academic learning

In the modern era, the traditional model of Buddhist education has met a rival in the Western academic model of learning. Western education has quite a different agenda than traditional Buddhist education. It does not seek to advance spiritual goals. Its purpose is not to help the student travel along the path to liberation. The aim of academic Buddhist Studies is to transmit and acquire objective knowledge about Buddhism, to grasp Buddhism in its cultural, literary, and historical settings. Academic Buddhist Studies turns Buddhism into an object detached from the inner being of the student, and in this respect it constitutes a departure from the traditional Buddhist model of education.

The academic approach to Buddhist Studies poses a challenge to traditional Buddhism, but in my view this is a challenge we should accept. There are two unwise responses we can make to this challenge. One is to reject the academic study of Buddhism and insist exclusively upon a traditionalist approach to Buddhist education. A traditionalist education might make us learned monks and nuns who can function effectively in a traditional Buddhist culture; however, we live in the modern world and in our interactions we have to communicate with educated people who've been nurtured on the ways of modernity. By taking a strictly traditionalist approach we might wind up as dinosaurs with shaved heads and ochre robes, analogous to the Christian fundamentalists who reject such modern sciences as geology and biological evolution merely because they clash with a literal interpretation of the Bible. The second unwise attitude would be to reject the traditional aims of Buddhist education and adopt the academ-

ic model, making objective knowledge about Buddhism the whole purpose of one's education. As monastics, this would mean that we abandon the religious commitments we make when we become monks and nuns. Adopting this approach could turn us into learned scholars, but it might also make us skeptics who regard Buddhism as just one among other interesting fields of study.

### 3. Adopting a middle way

As in many other aspects of Buddhist practice, the most fruitful response to this situation is to adopt a "middle way" that can reconcile the best features of traditional Buddhist education with the positive values of the modern academic approach to Buddhist studies. As I mentioned above, the traditional approach to education is intended to help us cultivate our character and conduct, to develop wisdom and deep insight into the Dharma, and to equip us to assist in the transmission of Buddhism from one generation to the next.

And what are the positive values of the modern academic approach? I will mention four.

First, the academic study of Buddhism helps us understand Buddhism as a historical and cultural phenomenon. Through the study of Buddhist history, we see how Buddhism arose against a particular historical background; how it responded to cultural and social forces in India during the Buddha's time; how it evolved through intellectual exploration and in response to rival philosophies and changing historical conditions. We also see how, as Buddhism spread to different countries, it adapted to the prevailing social norms, cultures, and worldviews of the lands where it took root.

Second, this historical overview helps us to comprehend more clearly the distinction between the essence of the Dharma and the cultural and historical "clothing" that Buddhism has had to wear to blend in with its cultural environment. Just as a person might change clothes according to the season while remaining the same person, so too, as Buddhism spread from country to country, it retained certain features distinctive of Buddhism while adjusting its outer forms to conform to the prevailing cultures. Thus, through the study of Buddhist history and of the different schools of Buddhist philosophy, we can better grasp the core of the Dharma, what is central and what is peripheral. We will understand the reasons why Buddhist doctrines took the forms they did under particular conditions; we will be able to discriminate between those aspects of Buddhism that were adapted to particular situations and those which reflect the perennial principles of the Dharma.

However, by the above statement, I don't intend to propose that we settle for a scriptural fundamentalism, taking the most archaic Buddhist teachings alone to be of lasting value and seeing later developments as mere cultural adaptations. I believe that human consciousness itself undergoes historical evolution, setting the appropriate stage for corresponding

transformation in cultural forms, whether in art, philosophy, literature, or religion. Thus, in my understanding, different



phases in the historical evolution of human consciousness evoked and nurtured tendencies in Buddhism either implicit in the basic principles or in some way consistent with or derivable from them. These tendencies could not blossom into explicit teachings until the evolving consciousness of human beings reached a level suitable for their manifestation. In my view, this fact, just as much as cultural adaptation, explains the diversity of Buddhist schools and the wide variety of discrepant and apparently contradictory teachings we find under the rooftop of Buddhism.

Third, the academic study of Buddhism sharpens our capacity for critical thinking. What is distinctive about modern academic learning is the premise that nothing should be taken for granted. All assumptions are open to questioning; every proposition should be examined closely and rigorously. Whereas traditional Buddhist education often emphasizes unquestioning acceptance of texts and traditions, modern academic education invites us to argue with every Buddhist belief, every text, every tradition, even those supposed to come from the Buddha himself. While such an approach can lead to fruitless skepticism, if we remain firm in our faith the discipline of modern education will strengthen our intelligence until it becomes like a knife well tempered in a fire. Our faith will emerge stronger, our intellect will become keener, our wisdom will be brighter and more luminous. We will also be better equipped to adapt the Dharma to the needs of the present age without compromising its essence.

Fourth, and of special importance: the academic study of Buddhism fosters creative thinking. It does not merely impart objective information, and it often does not stop with critical analysis. It goes further and encourages us to develop creative, original insights into different aspects of Buddhist history, doctrine, and culture. The academic study of Buddhism can thus generate new insights into the causal factors that underlie the historical evolution of Buddhism; it can help us discern previously undetected relationships between the doctrines held by the different Buddhist schools; it can bring to light new impli-



cations of Buddhist thought and new applications of Buddhist principles to the resolution of problems in such contemporary fields as philosophy, psychology, comparative religion, social policy, and ethics.

The interplay of critical thought and creative insight is actually how Buddhism itself has evolved through the long course of its history. Each new school of Buddhism would begin with the criticism of some earlier stage of Buddhist thought, uncover its inherent problems, and then offer new insights as a way of resolving those problems. Thus, the academic study of Buddhism can contribute to the same process of creative growth, innovation, exploration, and development that has resulted in the wide diversity of Buddhism in all its geographical and historical extensions.

#### 4. Buddhist education and the encounter of traditions

This brings me to the next major point. Ever since Buddhism left India, different Buddhist traditions have flourished in different geographical regions, with only minimal contact. Early Buddhism, represented by the Theravāda school, has flourished in southern Asia. Early and middle-period Mahāyāna Buddhism spread to East Asia, giving birth to new schools suited to the East Asian mind, such as Tiantai and Huayan, Chan and Pure Land. And late-period Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism spread to Tibet and other Himalayan lands, where it has reigned in splendid isolation from the rest of the Buddhist world. For centuries, each tradition has remained sealed.

Today, however, modern methods of book production, communication, transportation, and transmission of knowledge give scholars from each tradition the opportunity to study all the major Buddhist traditions. We now have, almost liter-

ally, the entire universe of Buddhism, from the Pali Canon to the Vajrayāna, at our fingertips. Of course, each tradition can involve a lifetime of study, but with the growing connections between people in different Buddhist lands, any program in monastic education should expose students to teachings from the other traditions. This will give students an appreciation of the rich diversity of Buddhism. It will enable them to grasp its transformations throughout history; to learn about its splendid heritage of philosophy, literature, and art; to understand its ability to profoundly influence people in different cultures as determined by their own backgrounds and dispositions. Perhaps a complete program of monastic education should give monks and nuns from one tradition the chance to spend a year or two in a monastery or university connected with another Buddhist tradition, just as secular universities often permit students to spend their junior year abroad. Learning and practicing in a different Buddhist tradition will help to widen their minds, enabling them to understand the diverse range of Buddhism as well as its common core.

It is quite likely that the encounter of Buddhist traditions taking place today will transform the face of Buddhism itself. It may lead to cross-fertilization and even hybrid formation, whereby new forms of Buddhism emerge from the synthesis of different schools. At the minimum, it will serve as a catalyst encouraging adherents of each tradition to give more attention to aspects of their tradition that have generally been neglected or under-emphasized. For example, the encounter with southern Theravāda Buddhism has stimulated interest in the Agamas and Abhidharma among followers of East Asian Buddhism. As Theravāda Buddhists study Mahāyāna Buddhism, this can stimulate an appreciation of the bodhisattva ideal and the pāramīs in the Theravāda tradition and thus create a closer bond between them.

## 5. Engaging with the modern world

Buddhist monastics do not live in a vacuum. We are part of the modern world, and an essential part of our monastic education should teach us how to relate to the world. From its origins, Buddhism has always been closely entwined with the cultures in which it found itself. Because monasteries are often situated in quiet places remote from the bustle of normal life, we sometimes imagine that Buddhism teaches us to turn our backs on society and pass our lives as solitary hermits. This, however, would be a misunderstanding. As monastics, we should not lose sight of our obligations to people living in the world and of our duty to transform society in the light of the Dharma.

Today this responsibility has become more urgent than ever before. As humanity has learned to master the material forces of nature, our capacity for self-destruction has increased by leaps and bounds. The discovery of nuclear power allows us to create weapons that can obliterate the entire human race at the press of a button. The world has become more sharply polarized into the wealthy and the poor, with the rich getting richer and the poor slipping into ever deeper poverty. Billions subsist on one or two meager meals a day, and ten million die each year from hunger and chronic malnutrition. Poverty breeds resentment, increasing communal tensions and ethnic wars. In the industrialized world, we recklessly consume our natural resources, polluting the environment, burdening the atmosphere, and heating up the planet to dangerous levels. As the earth's climate grows warmer, we risk destroying the natural support systems on which human survival depends.

As Buddhists, we have to understand the forces at work in today's world, and to be able to demonstrate how the Dharma can preserve us from self-destruction. For this, we need programs of study that go beyond a narrow fixation on Buddhist Studies, programs that prepare Buddhist monks and nuns to deal with global problems. The core of Buddhist education should, of course, emphasize the classical Buddhist traditions. But this core curriculum should be supplemented by courses that cover other areas where Buddhism can make a substantial contribution to improving the state of the world. These would include such subjects as modern psychology, sociology, bio-ethics, conflict resolution, and ecology, perhaps even economics and political science.

As Buddhist monks and nuns, we have an obligation in today's world to raise high the torch of the Dharma, so that it can shed light on those living in darkness. To be effective in this role, Buddhist education must equip us to understand the world. This expanded vision of Buddhist education will likely draw objections from strict traditionalists, who believe that monastics should confine themselves to Buddhist Studies in the narrow sense. They might point out that the Buddhist scriptures prohibit monks from discussing such topics as "kings, ministers, and affairs of state," let alone from studying secular subjects like sociology and ecology. However, we have to realize that

we live in a very different era from that in which the Buddha lived and taught. Buddhism flourishes to the extent that it maintains its relevance to human affairs, and to communicate effectively with people we must understand the enormous problems they confront and see how the Dharma can offer solutions to them. This will require a rigorous and radical revision of traditional programs of Buddhist Studies, but such renovation is essential for Buddhism to discover a contemporary relevance.

## 6. The challenge and opportunity for bhikkhunis

One aspect of our contemporary situation deserves special mention, and that is the role of women in today's world. Most of the traditional cultures where Buddhism has thrived have been predominantly patriarchal. Though the Buddha himself promoted the status of women, still, he lived and taught during the Patriarchal Age and thus his teachings were inevitably colored by the dominant outlook of that era. This has been the case up to the modern age, and attitudes shaped by this background still prevail in almost all traditional Buddhist lands.

Now, however, women are breaking free from the constraints of a male-dominated worldview. They claim the same rights as men and take more active roles in almost every sphere of human life, from the professions like law and medicine, to university positions, to business and finance, to national leadership as presidents and prime ministers. There is no doubt that this "rise of the feminine" will have a transformative effect on Buddhism as well. Already, some women have become prominent scholars, teachers, and leaders in Buddhism. Several traditions that lost the bhikkhuni ordination have recovered it, and hopefully, in the near future, all schools of Buddhism will have thriving communities of fully ordained bhikkhunis.

For bhikkhunis to stand alongside bhikkhus as qualified representatives of the Dharma—as teachers, interpreters, scholars, and activists—education holds the key. It is thus necessary for bhikkhunis to attain a level of education equal to that of their bhikkhu-brothers in the Sangha. They should attain competency in every sphere of Buddhist education, whether it be Buddhist philosophy, culture, and history, meditation and mind development, or the application of Buddhism to the problems of modern life. I sincerely hope that this conference, which brings together Buddhist nuns and educators from many traditions, will contribute to the achievement of this aim.

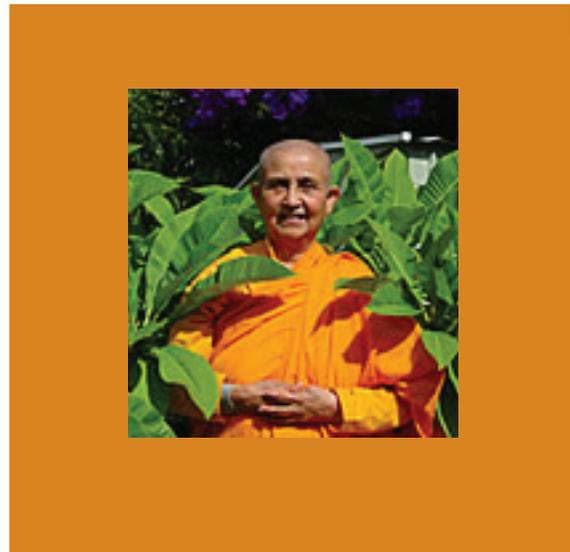


**Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi** is a former president of the *Buddhist Publication Society*, renowned Pali scholar and translator, and chairperson of *Buddhist Global Relief*.

# Venerable Kusuma and the Power of Literacy Education

By Janice Tolman

**When I met Venerable Bhikkhuni Kusuma in 2010, she was traveling around America and Europe to gather support for the Ayya Khema International Hostel for Nuns and Women slated to be built in Colombo. The project includes a residential training center designed specifically for nuns that is near a new training facility for monks.**



The curriculum of the center is designed to include Buddhist education, meditation, social service, environmental education, and English language education. How appropriate that Ven. Kusuma, a woman who became a bridge spanning East and West through use of her language skills, should be advocating for a training center that teaches these skills. She is fostering in the nuns the education they will need to serve their communities and promote a global Buddhism in the twenty-first century.

Throughout her career, Ven. Kusuma has been applying her knowledge, not only of Buddhism and meditation but also of languages—Sinhalese and English. Her cross-cultural education in languages has been applied generously for the betterment of others. She gained her skills early in life and has continued to develop them over a lifetime of living and working among local and international communities. She learned to navigate the social structures of academics, monastics, and politicians. Although these skills were gained through many years of experience, her education began at the feet of her mother and grandmother.

Ven. Kusuma was born in October 1929 and grew up during the last two decades of the colonial period in British Ceylon, which ended with Sri Lankan independence in 1948.

Her parents were well-educated and devout Buddhists who gave their daughter a strong foundation in Buddhist practices and sent her to the highest quality schools. She describes her parents as progressives who gave her a great deal of freedom to experiment. The young Ven. Kusuma learned to chant in Pali as a very young child and was encouraged to speak truthfully and practice kindness. She remembers being nearby as her Grandmother engaged in devotional practices. Her mother taught Buddhism to children and participated in regular full-moon retreats.

Literacy is a traditional value in Sri Lankan society and Buddhist monastics have long had government support and access to literacy. The Pali Canon (Tipitaka), began as an oral tradition then was committed to writing in Sri Lanka around 30 B.C.E. Because of its location on the maritime Silk Routes, the island nation participated in a vigorous economic and cultural life for centuries. Since its independence from England, Sri Lanka has had free secondary and tertiary public education. Now Sri Lanka has one of the highest literacy rates (92%) among the developing nations. Ven. Kusuma's parents and grandparents must have held these traditional values and applied them to their daughters as well as their sons.

Ven. Kusuma's father was an engineer who was employed by the British. Their lives were disrupted by WWII and the family evacuated to a rubber plantation for the duration of the war. These years of freedom from school she remembers with pleasure. She recalls a childhood activity—picking the seedpods of the rubber plant on the plantation. This may have



Rubber Plant and its Seedpods

been when she began to ask questions about the origin of life, questions that she carried through her scientific and then her Buddhist training.

When she returned to school in 1941, she attended the prestigious Ananda College, a boys' school that admitted girls and young women during those years. The school was founded in the 1880s by the Buddhist Theosophical Society to educate Buddhist youth in the English language and in order to foster cultural exchange and economic development. At Ananda College, Ven. Kusuma studied in the English medium and continued learning Buddhism, Pali and the hard sciences including physics. Though she excelled in languages, she anticipated a career in medicine. Years later she won a scholarship to study microbiology in the US, but needing to return to her family, she did not complete her degree despite outstanding grades. By that time she was married and had several young children. She was directed towards science education instead of medicine. Ven. Kusuma married a man

who became the Director of Education and principal of the teacher training college. During her formative years, Ven. Kusuma studied Sinhala, Pali, and English literature and received distinction in these subjects. This background in language and literature probably enabled her most significant contributions to Buddhist women.

Throughout Ven. Kusuma's early education, she was surrounded by a legacy of cross-cultural communication. In fact, Sri Lanka had been the home of socially engaged nineteenth century orientalists like Mr. T. W. Rhys Davids. He resisted the authority of Christian missionaries by studying Sinhalese language, literature, and Buddhism. He studied with renowned scholar monks of the period. Rhys Davids and other British officials promoted the literary and spiritual values of Buddhism upon their return to the West. New translations of Pali texts spurred a revival of interest in Buddhist scholarship, East and West.

When explaining her motivation to study Buddhism, Ven. Kusuma speaks of Mrs. C. A. F. Rhys Davids' translation of the *Therigatha*. As a young girl, Ven. Kusuma was charmed by stories of early Buddhist nuns and the English prose. This is also the text that first motivated her. She describes how, while reading the *Therigatha*, tears began streaming down her face. This strong connection made her want to study nuns. This is also evidence that Ven. Kusuma had become a true bilingual. It was Mrs. Rhys Davids' English translation that had this affect on her. Thanks to her early educational opportunities and access to texts in English, she developed a deep appreciation for the power of language in a globalizing world. Later she studied Pali, the *lingua franca* and literary language of early Buddhism, but the evidence suggests that she frequently relied on her knowledge of English in her Buddhist studies. She went on to make good use of English to aid in international exchange across language barriers in Asia and to help many Westerners including professors of religion and proponents of the bhikkhuni movement.

Ven. Kusuma left science education to teach English, which she did for 20 years. The period of drudgery ended, she says, when she began disciplined meditation practice in the 1960s. When dhamma entered her daily life more fundamentally, she says that she was able to conserve time, money, and energy and give the best to her family. Also during the 1960s, Sri Lankans chose Sirimavo Bandaranaike, as their Prime Minister. She was the world's first female head of government in post-colonial Asia. Years later, Bandara-

## THEN SHE SAW FIRSTHAND THE DIFFICULT CONDITIONS FOR FEMALE RENUNCIATES. THEY HAD NO FORMAL RECOGNITION FROM THE GOVERNMENT, THE MONKS, OR THE BUDDHIST COMMUNITY.

naike's daughter was president until 2005. These women must have served as powerful role models during Ven. Kusuma's professional life. For 19 years, Ven. Kusuma worked as a radio panelist for a regular evening program on Buddhist philosophy and aspects of practice. Ven. Kusuma is now a highly qualified teacher to local and international students of Buddhism, and holds regular meditation classes.

In the 1980s, Ven. Kusuma returned to the University of Sri Jayewardenepura for post-graduate work, this time in Buddhism. She worked on a dual research project with the American professor of religion, Lowell Bloss, interpreting for him as they collected data in nuneies.

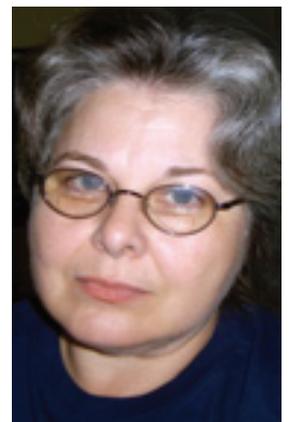
When she had the opportunity to speak to President J. R. Jayewardene, she was ready to present her argument in favor of the female renunciates. Working with the president, the president's wife, the Minister of Cultural Affairs and finally, the Commissioner of Buddhist Affairs, she was instrumental in establishing a special section for the education and security of the nuns. The work on their behalf took over five years and was hampered by the fact that the nuns were not fully ordained bhikkhunis and had lacked resources for years. She knew that she was working for posterity and compelled her government to work with her. She must have used her rhetorical powers and her personal dedication to accomplish her task. These are the potent effects of a good education.

Throughout the ensuing years of increasing interest in bhikkhuni ordination, Ven. Kusuma worked as a laywoman. She did not at first intend to ordain, as she prepared the nuns for ordination. She continued to facilitate international support and interpreted the Vinaya in Sri Lanka, India and Germany. Then she was sent to Korea to evaluate the ordination process. In Korea, she relied on a single nun's use of English as an international language. Along with nine other women, Ven. Kusuma received full ordination in Saranath, India in

1996. She attended the second ordination in Bodhgaya the next year. In 1999, she received her doctorate in Buddhism. Her dissertation on the Vinaya is considered a handbook for Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka. Bhikkhunis in that country now number over a thousand. Due to improved educational opportunities, the bhikkhunis are engaged in higher education and community projects for the betterment of women.

Ven. Bhikkhuni Kusuma has been a pioneer of the reestablishment of the Theravada Female Buddhist Order, and she was the first woman in modern times to wear the robes of a bhikkhuni in Sri Lanka. She continues to travel and speak publicly in Europe and the US though she is over 80 years old. She is an outstanding member of a generation of international women who educated themselves and others with a global perspective: as a bhikkhuni who works for the strength and furtherance of the female order, as a Buddhist scholar and educator, and as a visionary, builder, public speaker, writer, and translator. Her many accomplishments and her current work as a founder of meditation and training centers for laywomen and nuns is worthy of a full biography. Here I have only begun to look at Ven. Kusuma's early life and consider how it has motivated and enabled her pioneering work. This brief examination of her early education is given in the spirit of cross-cultural education for the understanding and betterment of Buddhist women. The work of our time is truly the work of generations who first learn and then enlighten others.

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To learn more and find ways to support the project go to <http://www.bhikkhunikusuma.info/trainingcenter.html>

# Turning Back Towards Freedom

## November 2007: The First Recitation of the Bhikkhuni Patimokkha within the Theravada Bhikkhuni Lineage in North America

By Roseanne Freese

The Buddha established the Sangha 2,550 years ago to provide an additional means for men and women aspirants to attain enlightenment. The Vinaya, containing the monastic precepts, governs the vitality, health, and discipline of the Sangha. The Vinaya guides the actions of the individual and ensures the integrity of the Sangha as a community. The Buddha also called upon his disciples to meet every new and full moon to recite the Patimokkha or monastic vows as one community. Through this effort, everyone has an opportunity to review her own practice of the precepts in thought, word, and deed. This ceremony also allows the participants to acknowledge conflicts that may have arisen in the community as well as address any potential sources of discord. In addition, the Patimokkha outlines procedures through which the community can resolve disputes as well as providing the appropriate medicine for educating, nurturing, or correcting the monk or nun whose issue has gone beyond the bounds of individual review and correction.

Against the backdrop of two recent ordinations of bhikkhunis in the United States, one an ordination of four bhikkhunis in an exclusively Theravada dual platform ceremony by bhikkhu and bhikkhuni sanghas in Northern California in August 2010, and the second an ordination of five bhikkhunis in another dual platform ceremony in Southern California in October 2010, this may be the ideal time to reflect on another defining moment in the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha in the West.

Three years ago in a small bhikkhuni vihara in rural South Carolina, just days before the Thanksgiving holiday, nine Theravada bhikkhunis, fully

ordained women, gathered at the Carolina Buddhist Vihara to recite the Patimokkha or Monastic Confession Ceremony for the first time in North America. The auspicious date was November 22, 2007. While Mahayana nuns have been able to gather at various Chinese and Vietnamese Pure Land Temples in California to recite the Patimokkha in recent years, it was not until 2007 that there were enough Theravada bhikkhunis in the United States to allow them to come together and perform sangha-kamma, formal acts as a community.

The idea of meeting to recite Patimokkha was first raised in the initial meeting of the North American Bhikkhuni Association in January 2006. Unfortunately, the North American bhikkhunis live far apart. Their small temples are located off obscure country roads and too often well outside of major airport hubs. Coming from communities with no more than one or two nuns, they could ill afford to be away from their communities. Several times over the prior two years they had struggled to gather, but sudden illness thwarted their plans. Inspired by the upcoming eightieth birthday of Bhante Gunaratana, abbot and founder of the Bhavana Society of West Virginia, one of the oldest Sri Lankan viharas in the United States, Venerable Tathaaloka, Abbess of Dhammadarini Vihara of Fremont, California, decided in February 2007 to commemorate Bhante Gunaratana's contribution to American Buddhism by sponsoring the Patimokkha. Without hesitation the venerable abbot agreed to support the event and immediately set about recruiting the support of the Theravada Bhikkhu community. Soon, Bhikkhu Bodhi, the famous translator of the Buddhist Canon and former president of the Pali Text Society, and Ajahn Pasanno, renowned abbot of Abhayagiri Mon-



astery of Redwood Valley, California, pledged their support as well.

The main challenge was assembling the quorum necessary to make this a valid gathering of the Sangha. According to Venerable Tathaaloka, a senior bhikkhuni with ten years in robes at the time, “The significance of the first gathering for Patimokkha recitation is that only a Sangha, with a minimum of five members, can do it. The ceremony can only be done on ground that has been sanctified by a Sangha for the purpose.” Motivated by events at the First International Congress on Buddhist Women’s Role in the Sangha: Bhikkhuni and Vinaya Ordination Lineages, held at the University of Hamburg in June 2007, Venerable Bhikkhunis Sobhana of the Bhavana

Society of West Virginia, Sudhamma, abbess of the Carolina Buddhist Vihara of Greenville, South Carolina, and abbess Tathaaloka decided to renew their effort to meet to recite the Patimokkha. Venerable Sudhamma offered to host the event during her temple’s annual celebration of the Kathina Ceremony that November.

Sri Lankan Bhikkhuni Venerable Sudarshana of the Samadhi Buddhist Meditation Center of Pinellas Park, Florida, the most senior bhikkhuni with eleven years in robes, was chosen to serve as the Patimokkha Master. With Venerable Sudhamma hosting, the other participants included Bhikkhunis Tathaaloka, Sudinna of Sri Lanka and a member of the Bhavana Society of West Virginia, Gunasari

of Burma and currently the abbess of Mahapajapati Monastery in California, Mudita of Germany and founder of Anenja Vihara in Rettenberg, Sobhana, now prioress of Aranya Bodhi in California, Sattima of Sri Lanka and member of the Minneapolis Vihara, and Poonsirivara of Thailand and abbess of the Buddhist Friends Dhamma Centre in Samut-sakhon Province.

A petite woman who stands five feet four inches tall, Venerable Sudhamma can chant with ease the Pali chants from her training in Sri Lanka. Indeed, in the four years I have known her, she has always looked to her practice as something more than cerebral and far deeper than a commitment undertaken merely for her benefit alone. With her kind support, I was allowed to interview the participants before and after their Patimokkha Recitation and to share their expectations and experiences.

the bounds of what is appropriate or suitable for a monastic and to prevent us from doing things or entering upon kammic paths that are not conducive for liberation or mokkha in Pali.

**Venerable Sudinna** (a Sri Lankan bhikkhuni who ordained as a novice or samaneri in 1999): I have participated in Patimokkha recitations in Sri Lanka for six years after my full ordination in 2002. When the ceremony is held, we wash our feet before we enter the meeting hall or “sima.” We enter the sima according to seniority based on the number of years of ordination and take our seats on the cushions. The cushions are placed close enough that we can touch each other if we stretch out our hands. We then recite the Patimokkha together, led by bhikkhunis who can recite it correctly. Everyone listens and rejoices saying “Sadhu” or “Excellent!” at the end of every precept.

*“Patimokkha literally means to make an ‘about face’ or to ‘turn back towards freedom or liberation.’”*

### ***Since non-monastics cannot attend a Patimokkha ceremony, can you describe what happens during the ceremony?***

**Venerable Tathaaloka:** This ceremony can happen anytime. The Patimokkha is the list of precepts of the Buddhist Monastic Discipline that we receive when we are fully ordained. We are asked to have confessed any infractions or precepts broken before participating in the recitation or commit the offence of deliberately and intentionally lying, something the Buddha spoke of as an obstacle or hindrance on the Path of one who seeks to know Truth. Thus, all who gather together for the Patimokkha recitation should be pure in the precepts. Patimokkha literally means to make an “about face” or to “turn back towards freedom or liberation.”

Like coming upon a boundary, the Patimokkha precepts are meant to keep us from going out of

**Venerable Sudhamma:** We bhikkhunis hold 311 rules; some are complicated and include many sub-rules. Yet the Buddha also said that one cannot confess to someone who shares a mutual offense. That complicates things. Even simple rules can be unexpectedly difficult to maintain consistently. For example, the rule against being away from one’s robes overnight can be easily blown by leaving a robe in your room when going for pre-dawn meditation or checking the heavy outer robe in luggage for an overnight flight. In most cases, purity can be achieved through simple confession. Hence, before this Patimokkha, most memorable for me was the preparatory effort to double-check and confess any instances of rule-breaking to someone actually pure from the same offenses, and to remember and make sure no past offense was overlooked.

### ***What does this Patimokkha mean to you in terms of your community and vihara?***

**Venerable Sudinna:** The Patimokkha is not only for the individual but also for the community. It guides our behavior towards each other and helps to maintain harmony and peace without confrontation. Almost every aspect of monastic life is covered by the Patimokkha. Paying respect is an essential factor in our lineage. The juniors are bound to respect the seniors irrespective of their age differences, which is also a rule. This is especially meaningful in the modern world where showing respect is considered obsolete. The running of the monastery is not a burden as everyone willingly participates in sharing the work.

**Venerable Satima** (a Sri Lankan who ordained in 2005 and a resident of Minneapolis Vihara): In Minnesota we still do not have a bhikkhuni residence. We only have a bhikkhu residence and a temple. As

clothing], and the lay community needs the guidance and the teachings from the Sangha.

***What does this Patimokkha mean to you in terms of your practice?***

**Venerable Sudhamma:** Prior to working on this project of hosting our gathering, doubt had begun to creep in; the voice of Mara was pointing out to me, “I didn’t get into the holy life in order to be so lonely!” For a couple of weeks I began to seriously consider whether to disrobe. The day I began to work on putting together the arrangements for this program, turning my mind towards how to serve the bhikkhunis and starting to get in touch with them, my loneliness became a memory. The doubt had become laughable. This is just from getting into the preparatory work, how much more heartening will be the gathering itself!

*When the Sangha is pure and lives  
in harmony with each other they  
become a “field of merit”*

a single bhikkhuni living by myself, I feel the necessity to live in a community with other bhikkhunis. It is by living together that a strong sense of Sangha can evolve. This getting together and reciting the Patimokkha will make a strong Sangha. We will have each other to learn from and get help when in need. I also see the far-reaching effects that this will promote. We will not be individual members living by ourselves but members of a very dedicated Sangha living in harmony with each other irrespective of the distance that separates us.

Also, when the Sangha is pure and lives in harmony with each other they become a “field of merit” to the lay community. When the community understands this, they develop confidence in the Sangha. When they have confidence in the Sangha they come to them for guidance and teaching. Then there is mutual interaction between the lay community and the Sangha and this is of great benefit for both. The Sangha needs the lay community for their four basic requisites [food, medicine, shelter, and

**Venerable Satima:** In terms of my practice, the Patimokkha is my teacher, my guide, my refuge and my kalyana mitra. Kalyana mitra means “noble friend.” It is this that steers me in the right direction, keeps me as it were on track on the Noble Eightfold Path and eventually will lead me to final liberation. The rules are there only to assist me in my journey, not to catch and punish me when I make a mistake. The rules not only set the boundaries but also give me limitless freedom to function in this conceptual dualistic world.

**Venerable Sobhana** (an American bhikkhuni and current Prioress of Aranya Bodhi in California): The Buddha said that the good friend is not half the holy life, but the entirety of the holy life. It is clear to me that the dear relationships within Sangha fulfill several basic human needs. We are social animals. At least as long as we are in training, not yet fully enlightened, to be part of community creates the sense of psychological safety and nurturance.

**Venerable Satima:** As my nurse-maid taught me while

I was growing up, there are only two things we need to remember, practice, and cultivate as our ‘guardian angels’ two values: moral remorse and moral resolve – hiri and ottappa. Now I find that those two things she taught me help me to keep my 311 rules and not be overwhelmed by them.

### ***What does reciting the Patimokkha means to you in terms of brahmacariya or leading the holy life?***

**Venerable Sobhana:** Developing and perfecting our virtue or sila depends on relationships within Sangha. Questions about what is skillful can properly be raised during the Patimokkha, and we are encouraged to lovingly point out the errors of our companions in the holy life.

**Venerable Satima:** As I see it, the rules are for my own growth, for my own independence, for my own freedom and for my own happiness. When I see that I have made a transgression and when I talk to a fellow bhikkhuni who I regard as a kalyana mitra, about my transgression a feeling of relief comes to me. Then I am able to let go without any remorse. I feel pure and light and happy. It also helps me to be more aware of my actions and not do the same mistake again and again. This brings about my own development and progress.

**Venerable Sobhana:** For example, consider bowing. When I was with a full nuns’ community in Sri Lanka, everyone paid respects deeply and frequently. The laity paid respects to bhikkhunis and samaneris, samaneris with one year in robes paid respects to those with one year and a day. The little samaneris paid respects to me as a one-day-old bhikkhuni and so on up the line. These deep bows were always repaid not just with a dismissive “sukhi hotu” or “May you be happy,” or “suvapat veva” or “May you be well,” but with a veritable stream of blessings. At the formal respect paying with our teacher, she would give a dozen phrases in Sinhalese, and then reach for some few English phrases to benefit the foreigners, “Blessings of the Triple Gem, Good day, Good luck.” These mutual exchanges, the currency of respect and kindness, knitted our community together in a protective web.

**Venerable Sudhamma:** I am hoping that the presence in this Vihara of some bhikkhunis following

Vinaya conscientiously will give a model or example that will add credibility to my lifestyle. My supporters from Buddhist countries cannot help but question why I don’t act so “relaxed” about the rules as do many monks in the USA. Sometimes they speak up saying, “But can’t you receive the food today and eat it tomorrow?” or, “Can’t you just take this money now?” or “Can’t you just go alone with that man who can drive you?” Then they add, “Venerable So-and-So does it all the time,” or “Venerable So-and-So said it doesn’t matter. So why can’t you do it?” I cannot respond by criticizing the actions of our good senior monks. But the scriptures are pretty clear and the benefits are clear in my mind. It will be a great help if this tension is eased to where supporters do not have doubt about the necessity of my Vinaya practice.

**Venerable Tathaaloka** (the most senior American bhikkhuni in the gathering): Thinking of the Buddhist way of life, I must consider its base: sila, samadhi and panna. Sila means moral virtue and ethical integrity, samadhi means focused or concentrated meditation and panna, or prajna in Sanskrit, means wise discernment or wisdom. In Buddhist monastic life, there should be unity and purity of sila, samadhi, and panna. In sila, to my current experience, there is no greater sense of unity in purity than in gathering for the Patimokkha. With trust and pure intention, this means expiating one’s transgressions to those who are pure, full acknowledgement and confession, the resolution not to further transgress, and then, the communal gathering together in that mutual purity, harmony and unity. In the Patimokkha, pure intention, pure speech and pure action are united, and affirmed in their unity, both physically and mentally. This may be compared to making a space very clean and clear, without breaches, and with an integrity that becomes apparent in both physical and mental perceptions. It is a fundamental part of the practice and its beneficent manifestation.

### ***What does this Patimokkha mean to you in the context of the growth of Buddhism in North America?***

**Venerable Sudinna:** This is a coming together of many bhikkhunis scattered in North America. They get acquainted and instead of trying to be critical they learn to appreciate each other. They could par-

ticipate in other programs, learn from each other, and find ways and means of sharing the Dhamma with others who want to get rid of their suffering.

America is materially wealthy, but that material wealth has brought much suffering to themselves as well as other countries. Many Americans are searching for happiness, which has eluded them so far in spite of all their wealth. Here Buddhism has a great role to play, for Buddhism recognizes the ills of the world, their cause, their cessation and the way to end all suffering. People assembled here will see for themselves the happiness that a spiritual gathering could provide. Therefore the recital of the Patimokkha could have far reaching effects that we may not visualize at present.

**Venerable Sobhana:** We hope that the monastic option will become a viable choice for American women who are prepared to deepen their practice. The current multiple crises in the world cry out for a more visible presence of renunciant Buddhists, fully dedicated to the practice of wisdom and compassion.

Most American Buddhists do not see models of female monastics. Or they see us women profoundly hindered by inferior status within the monastic Sangha. That said, the possible long term – very, very long term – benefits from establishing a Theravada bhikkhuni Sangha would be the holding up of a model of strict renunciate practice; the reviving the unique culture of strict bhikkhuni community, which is a little different than the bhikkhus’ or monks’ culture; and, the developing of a more universal model, where a nun can travel and learn from different communities and teachers around the world, as monks in Ajahn Chah’s tradition now do.

**Venerable Sudhamma:** This is a benchmark of how far bhikkhunis have come and how far overall the Sangha in USA have come. In itself it means nothing, in that it does not create converts or greatly alter the lives of people other than the participants. Yet like a flag held up in wartime, it can have powerful effect. In ancient times, warriors on not seeing their flag would become doubtful. They didn’t know whether their comrades were dying or in flight. They didn’t know whether to hang on or to flee and live. On seeing their

flag held high, however, they take heart at seeing evidence that their side is strong and they press forward. News of our Patimokkha gathering is like a flag proclaiming strength in this territory. Monastics can take encouragement. Laypeople who offer dana and energy are going to be heartened to do more. Laypeople who wish to ordain cannot be told that ordination is a pipedream. Those American Dhamma students who consider the monastic life utterly irrelevant to the American scene will hopefully come to doubt their position. Finally, the Theravada bhikkhus are also receiving a strong signal and that is to challenge them to do the same.

***What was the most memorable part of the experience of actually chanting the Patimokkha?***

**Venerable Tathaaloka:** The image that comes to mind is all of us sitting together closely, within forearm’s length and this image arises with an incredible sense of mutual harmony and dedication. We have overcome so much to get here. Great feelings of anumodana or “rejoicing together” arose. I



*Going clockwise, starting with the bhikkhuni wearing the bright yellow robe:*  
Ven. Poonsirivara, who would later found Suan Siridham Vihara south of Bangkok  
Ven. Satima, associated with Minnesota Buddhist Vihara in Minneapolis, Minnesota  
Ven. Mudita, founder of Anenja Vihara in Rettenberg, Germany  
Ven. Sobhana, now Prioress of Aranya Bodhi Hermitage in Jenner, California  
Ven. Tathaaloka, founder of Dhammadharini Vihara in Fremont, California  
Ven. Sudinna, now residing at the Bhavana Society in high View, West Virginia  
Ven. Gunasari, founder of Mahapajapati monastery near Joshua Tree, California  
*(in the center of the circle)* Ven. Sudhamma, Abbess of Carolina Buddhist Vihara in Greenville, South Carolina



marvel at the amazing good fortune that brought us together, the mystery of the past karma we might have together, and the only barely-known karma of the incredible efforts of each of us in this lifetime that have brought about transformation.

I think of how far each of us has come to be able to gather together as a community in this way. All of us are incredibly strong individuals, all highly independent ground breakers, now we have come together in re-clearing and walking this path; a path that not so long ago appeared so heavily overgrown by time, by prejudicial false views, and by the forgetting of our great history.

**Venerable Sobhana:** Every part of our weekend together was memorable. In the Patimokkha ceremony itself, I felt a lot of serenity in the knowledge that we were carrying out the Buddha's plan. I clearly saw the genius of Buddhism, where our monastic Sangha knits itself together into a real community by uniting around the teachings.

The women who gathered here are quite diverse, each one a strong-minded and determined individual willing to be a path breaker. But in reciting the Patimokkha, we joined together under the direction of a supremely powerful teacher, the Blessed One's voice speaking to us through the Vinaya teaching.

**Venerable Sudhamma:** The recitation wasn't boring! The Patimokkha recitation covers 138 pages of Pali text. It's not something that goes quickly, yet the time did not lag. Venerable Sudarshana's voice was strained due to a cold, yet she patiently kept on going with steady determination, which I greatly admired. I also admired the steadiness of her rhythm, not charging hurriedly over the easier parts nor slowing down for the more difficult passages, as one would tend to do when reciting a lengthy, difficult text. After the recitation was finished, most memorable was feeling shiny as a new penny: no unconfessed offenses on my conscience and no wavering or uncertainty, but fresh, pure and confident. Pure! And I remember feeling warm and close to my bhikkhuni sisters, with much appreciation to them for coming together in this way.

### ***How did chanting the Patimokkha change your understanding of the Buddhist way of life?***

**Venerable Tathaaloka:** My understanding of the Buddhist monastic way of life is continuously changing and growing in the living of this life, moment by moment, every day. In the twenty years since I left home as an anagarika seeker, and in the decade since full bhikkhuni ordination, this way of life has never gotten old, or stale, or dull.

In Thailand and in Thai temples in America, I had the chance to observe, from a distance or from outside, the Patimokkha chanting of the Bhikkhu Sangha, even to hear it chanted over the loudspeaker! Its sound echoed through the rural village and city precincts alike. I noticed how it was where the observance of the Uposatha Patimokkha was done fully in meaning as well as in rite, as compared to how it was where it was done partially or in ritual only, and where the community had abandoned the practice. Now this experiential inside knowledge has radically increased my saddha, my trust and confidence, and my faith, in both the wisdom of the methods the Buddha established and recommended for the monastic Sangha, and in the Sangha itself.

**Venerable Sobhana:** I have more hope that a truly functional bhikkhuni Sangha will be found in America during the next few years. By truly functional, I mean that there will be places for candidates and junior bhikkhunis to receive proper training; fully Theravada upasampada ordinations will be avail-

able; those bhikkhunis who prefer to live in community will have suitable places; and the bhikkhunis will help each other in times of hardship.

**Venerable Sudhamma:** In the weeks before our gathering, I had mulled over certain differences among us that I doubted could be worked out harmoniously, and worried whether we could sit together without holding the same views on seemingly basic issues related to the Patimokkha. However, issues did arise. Meeting together on the day of the recitation, we each expressed our concerns and doubts about various rules and issues related to living in the USA. These sorts of topics tend to trigger opinions and debates among people. Perhaps due to cues given by our senior bhikkhunis, we had no argument, discussion, or setting forth of theories. We just listened to each other.

We then sat together for the Patimokkha, in peace. During the several days we spent together, old friendships were renewed, new friendships forged, and one fractured friendship, shattered years ago, made whole. Influenced by others' examples, my focus in the holy life shifted from technical concerns to being peaceful together, and my respect and faith in our whole Sangha of Bhikkhunis was strengthened.

### ***If you were to meet another woman who wanted to go forth and become a bhikkhuni, what would you tell her about the Patimokkha practice?***

**Venerable Sobhana:** The purpose of Vinaya is for our own spiritual progress, not to be a cause of distress. We use Vinaya rules as tests of our mindfulness, as we are able, and when it is impossible to hold a particular rule, due to modern times and situations, then we break it mindfully and confess at the next opportunity. I would tell her not to be discouraged by the difficulties in upholding the Vinaya, and not to focus on the imperfections or differences in how others hold the Vinaya.

The value of confession and Patimokkha is to protect from the mind's tendency to rationalize, to cut corners. We open up our judgments to the scrutiny of a wise colleague in the holy life. The rules that we are not well able to hold hang over us as a constant, gentle reminder, asking, "How can I organize my life differently, in order to make this rule workable for me?"

**Venerable Sudhamma:** If I were to receive such a request for advice, I would not say much at first. Out of the many laywomen who talk and dream of ordaining, few actually take the difficult steps to get started in that direction. Of those who get started, due to many personal and logistical obstacles few actually go forth into homelessness by becoming anagarikas. Of those who do become anagarikas, few manage to ordain as samaneris while others feel drawn back to the lay life or are overwhelmed by aversion to the pressures of monastic life. Of those who do ordain as samaneris, few stick with it for long, due to those obstacles, and the difficulty of enduring training that touches upon one's defilements. Of those samaneris who do stick with it, few will seek higher ordination and fewer obtain it. Out of hundreds of millions of people born in the USA, only approximately six have yet ordained as Theravada bhikkhunis.

Although the details about the Patimokkha are not likely to help a laywoman undertake the difficult initial steps, and may even develop doubt, I would say this much, "We came together for the Patimokkha in unity and harmony, and there is, therefore, hope for a growing USA Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha into which you may someday enter. You will be welcomed." To other bhikkhunis, junior or senior, I would say, "Just do it. Travel a long way if necessary. Consider the Patimokkha gathering a duty, an honor, and a privilege."

**Venerable Tathaaloka:** For any woman who wishes to go forth and shares in the aspiration to fully live the monastic life, I would highly recommend that she come and see and know for herself what it really is, through the full living of the life. It is so good to see the Holy Life well lived, so beautiful, rare and precious in this world.

The Dhamma, with the monastic Vinaya, supports and provides the container and the means to live in this world while fully letting go. I would like to ask the aspiring woman who wishes to go forth, "How can I help you?" and offer whatever I could in terms of encouragement and support on her Path. It is so worth it.

Our world could well use having more women with higher training in morality, in meditation, and in wisdom. The benefits of the presence of women and men of wisdom, dedicated to peace and non-harming, and fully training themselves and becoming proficient in the Buddha's Dhamma and Vinaya are incalculable.

The holding of this ceremony means that a Sangha— a Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha<sup>o</sup>—now exists in America. We are no longer just scattered individuals, but have come together united and in harmony. This is the main significance of the Patimokkha Recitation Gathering. This is the first place that this has ever been done, in Theravada, outside of Asia. Following Sri Lanka, America has now become the second place where the Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha has been revived and established.

The nine bhikkhunis returned to their homes in Sri Lanka, Germany, and the United States. Since this Patimokkha recitation, some have gone on to create new bhikkhuni viharas in California. Now that the seed of Dharma has been planted and now nurtured in the soil of the New World, let us be confident that our Fourfold community of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen, from Canada to Panama, may all receive the benefits of the merit of these nine heroic, devoted, and wise bhikkhunis!

*Roseanne Freese is a member of the Sakyadhita USA Organizing Committee and an occasional contributor of articles and presentations, including the 2007 Hamburg Congress on the Ordination of Buddhist Women, on the birth of the bhikkhuni lineage in China.*



# 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 290<sup>1</sup>

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.

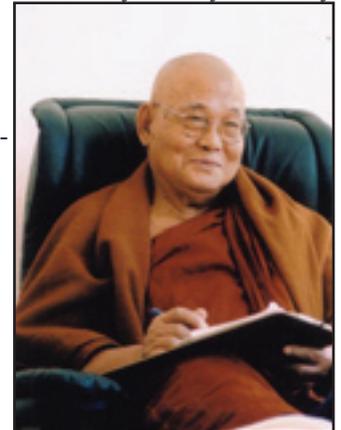
So over the years the motivation to support the heart through renunciation, both in retreat and in the world, has grown increasingly strong. I am also more and more seeing the ultimate unsatisfactoriness of what the world has to offer.

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.

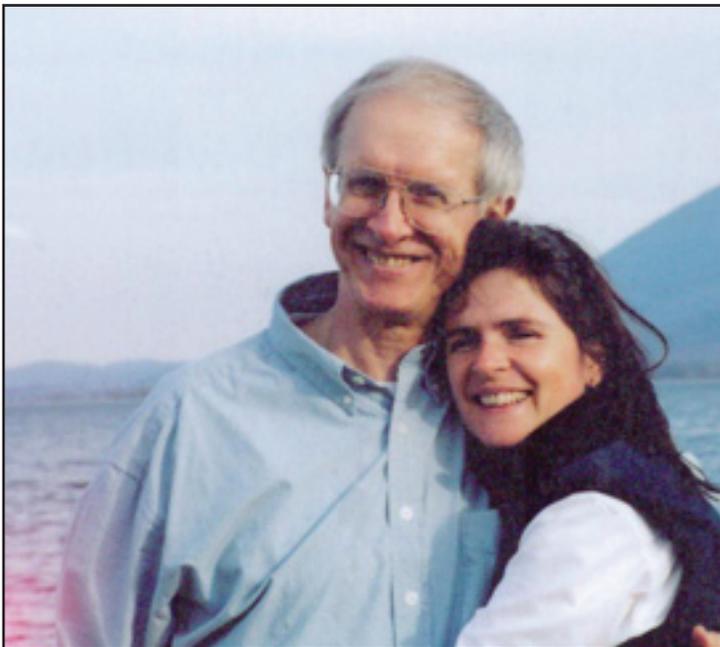
A lovely way to introduce the Eight Precepts into one's life is to observe them on Uposatha days. These are the days when the moon cycle is full, new, and the two half moons. One can take these additional precepts and experience for a day the support they can give to mindfully watching the heart. Playing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



# Bhikkhunīsaṃyutta

## Connected Discourses with Bhikkhunīs

Translated by  
Bhikkhu Bodhi

### 1 Ālavikā

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Sāvattḥī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park.

Then, in the morning, the bhikkhunī Ālavikā dressed and, taking bowl and robe, entered Sāvattḥī for alms.<sup>331</sup> When she had walked for alms in Sāvattḥī and had returned from her alms round, after her meal she went to the Blind Men's Grove seeking seclusion.<sup>332</sup>

Then Māra the Evil One, desiring to arouse fear, trepidation, and terror in the bhikkhunī Ālavikā, desiring to make her fall away from seclusion, approached her and addressed her in verse:

“There is no escape in the world,  
So what will you do with seclusion?  
Enjoy the delights of sensual pleasure:  
Don't be remorseful later!”

Then it occurred to the bhikkhunī Ālavikā: “Now who is it that recited the verse—a human being or a nonhuman being?” Then it occurred to her: “This is Māra the Evil One, who has recited the verse desiring to arouse fear, trepidation, and terror in me, desiring to make me fall away from seclusion.”

Then the bhikkhunī Ālavikā, having understood, “This is Māra the Evil One,” replied to him in verses:

“There is an escape in the world  
Which I have closely touched with wisdom.  
O Evil One, kinsman of the negligent,  
You do not know that state.”<sup>333</sup>

“Sensual pleasures are like swords and stakes;  
The aggregates like their chopping block.  
What you call sensual delight  
Has become for me nondelight.”<sup>334</sup>

Then Māra the Evil One, realizing, “The bhikkhunī Ālavikā knows me,” sad and disappointed, disappeared right there.

### 2 Somā

At Sāvattḥī. Then, in the morning, the bhikkhunī Somā dressed and, taking bowl and robe, entered Sāvattḥī for alms.<sup>335</sup> When she had walked for alms in Sāvattḥī and had returned from her alms round, after her meal she went to the Blind Men's Grove for the day's abiding. Having plunged into the Blind Men's Grove, she sat down at the foot of a tree for the day's abiding.

Then Māra the Evil One, desiring to arouse fear, trepidation, and terror in the bhikkhunī Somā, desiring to make her fall away from concentration, approached her and addressed her in verse:

“That state so hard to achieve  
Which is to be attained by the seers,  
Can't be attained by a woman  
With her two-fingered wisdom.”<sup>336</sup>

Then it occurred to the bhikkhunī Somā: “Now who is this that recited the verse—a human being or a nonhuman being?” Then it occurred to her: “This is Māra the Evil One, who has recited the verse desiring to arouse fear, trepidation, and terror in me, desiring to make me fall away from concentration.”

Then the bhikkhunī Somā, having understood, “This is Māra the Evil One,” replied to him in verses:

“What does womanhood matter at all  
When the mind is concentrated well,  
When knowledge flows on steadily  
As one sees correctly into Dhamma.<sup>337</sup>

“One to whom it might occur,  
I’m a woman’ or ‘I’m a man’  
Or ‘I’m anything at all’—  
Is fit for Māra to address.”<sup>338</sup>

Then Māra the Evil One, realizing, “The bhikkhunī Somā knows me,” sad and disappointed, disappeared right there.

### 3 Gotamī

At Sāvattthī. Then, in the morning, the bhikkhunī Kisāgotamī dressed and, taking bowl and robe, entered Sāvattthī for alms.<sup>339</sup> When she had walked for alms in Sāvattthī and had returned from her alms round, after her meal she went to the Blind Men’s Grove for the day’s abiding. Having plunged into the Blind Men’s Grove, she sat down at the foot of a tree for the day’s abiding.

Then Māra the Evil One, desiring to arouse fear, trepidation, and terror in the bhikkhunī Kisāgotamī, desiring to make her fall away from concentration, approached her and addressed her in verse:

“Why now, when your son is dead,  
Do you sit alone with tearful face?  
Having entered the woods all alone,  
Are you on the lookout for a man?”

Then it occurred to the bhikkhunī Kisāgotamī: “Now who is this that recited the verse—a human being or a nonhuman being?” Then it occurred to her: “This is Māra the Evil One, who has recited the verse desiring to arouse fear, trepidation, and terror in me, desiring to make me fall away from concentration.”

Then the bhikkhunī Kisāgotamī, having understood, “This is Māra the Evil One,” replied to him in verses:

“I’ve gotten past the death of sons;  
With this, the search for men has ended.  
I do not sorrow, I do not weep,  
Nor do I fear you, friend.<sup>340</sup>

“Delight everywhere has been destroyed,  
The mass of darkness has been sundered.  
Having conquered the army of Death,  
I dwell without defiling taints.”<sup>341</sup>

Then Māra the Evil One, realizing, “The bhikkhunī Kisāgotamī knows me,” sad and disappointed, disappeared right there.

### 4 Vijayā

At Sāvattthī. Then, in the morning, the bhikkhunī Vijayā dressed ... she sat down at the foot of a tree for the day’s abiding.<sup>342</sup> Then Māra the Evil One, desiring to arouse fear, trepidation, and terror in the bhikkhunī Vijayā, desiring to make her fall away from concentration, approached her and addressed her in verse:

“You are so young and beautiful,

And I too am a youth in my prime.  
Come, noble lady, let us rejoice  
With the music of a fivefold ensemble.”<sup>343</sup>

Then it occurred to the bhikkhunī Vijayā: “Now who is this...? This is Māra the Evil One ... desiring to make me fall away from concentration.”

Then the bhikkhunī Vijayā, having understood, “This is Māra the Evil One,” replied to him in verses:

“Forms, sounds, tastes, odours,  
And delightful tactile objects—  
I offer them right back to you,  
For I, O Māra, do not need them.

“I am repelled and humiliated  
By this foul, putrid body,  
Subject to break up, fragile:  
I’ve uprooted sensual craving.”<sup>344</sup>

“As to those beings who fare amidst form,  
And those who abide in the formless,  
And those peaceful attainments too:  
Everywhere darkness has been destroyed.”<sup>345</sup>

Then Māra the Evil One, realizing “The bhikkhunī Vijayā knows me,” sad and disappointed, disappeared right there.

## 5 Uppalavaṇṇā

At Sāvattihī. Then, in the morning, the bhikkhunī Uppalavaṇṇā dressed ... she stood at the foot of a sal tree in full flower.<sup>346</sup>

Then Māra the Evil One, desiring to arouse fear, trepidation, and terror in the bhikkhunī Uppalavaṇṇā, desiring to make her fall away from concentration, approached her and addressed her in verse:

“Having gone to a sal tree with flowering top,  
You stand at its foot all alone, bhikkhunī.  
There is none whose beauty rivals yours:  
Foolish girl, aren’t you afraid of rogues?”<sup>347</sup>

Then it occurred to the bhikkhunī Uppalavaṇṇā: “Now who is this...? This is Māra the Evil One ... desiring to make me fall away from concentration.”

Then the bhikkhunī Uppalavaṇṇā, having understood, “This is Māra the Evil One,” replied to him in verses:

“Though a hundred thousand rogues  
Just like you might come here,  
I stir not a hair, I feel no terror;  
Even alone, Māra, I don’t fear you.”<sup>348</sup>

“I can make myself disappear  
Or I can enter inside your belly.  
I can stand between your eyebrows  
Yet you won’t catch a glimpse of me.

“I am the master of my mind,  
The bases of power are well developed;  
I am freed from all bondage,  
Therefore I don’t fear you, friend.”<sup>349</sup>



Then Māra the Evil One, realizing, “The bhikkhunī Uppalavaṇṇā knows me,” sad and disappointed, disappeared right there.

## 6 Cālā

At Sāvathī. Then, in the morning, the bhikkhunī Cālā dressed ... she sat down at the foot of a tree for the day’s abiding.<sup>350</sup>

Then Māra the Evil One approached the bhikkhunī Cālā and said to her: “What don’t you approve of, bhikkhunī?”  
“I don’t approve of birth, friend.”

“Why don’t you approve of birth?  
Once born, one enjoys sensual pleasures.  
Who now has persuaded you of this:  
‘Bhikkhunī, don’t approve of birth?’”

[The bhikkhunī Cālā:]

“For one who is born there is death;  
Once born, one encounters sufferings—  
Bondage, murder, affliction—  
Hence one shouldn’t approve of birth.<sup>351</sup>

“The Buddha has taught the Dhamma,  
The transcendence of birth;  
For the abandoning of all suffering  
He has settled me in the truth.

“As to those beings who fare amidst form,  
And those who abide in the formless—  
Not having understood cessation,  
They come again to renewed existence.”<sup>352</sup>

Then Māra the Evil One, realizing, “The bhikkhunī Cālā knows me,” sad and disappointed, disappeared right there.

## 7 Upacālā

At Sāvathī. Then, in the morning, the bhikkhunī Upacālā dressed ... she sat down at the foot of a tree for the day’s abiding.

Then Māra the Evil One approached the bhikkhunī Upacālā and said to her: “Where do you wish to be reborn, bhikkhunī?”  
“I do not wish to be reborn anywhere, friend.”

“There are Tāvatiṃsa and Yāma devas,  
And devatās of the Tusita realm,  
Devas who take delight in creating,  
And devas who exercise control.  
Direct your mind there [to those realms]  
And you’ll experience delight.”<sup>353</sup>

[The bhikkhunī Upacālā:]

“There are Tāvatiṃsa and Yāma devas,  
And devatās of the Tusita realm,  
Devas who take delight in creating,  
And devas who exercise control.  
They are still bound by sensual bondage,  
They come again under Māra’s control.  
“All the world is on fire,  
All the world is burning,

All the world is ablaze,  
All the world is quaking.

“That which does not quake or blaze,  
That to which worldlings do not resort,  
Where there is no place for Māra:  
That is where my mind delights.”<sup>354</sup>

Then Māra the Evil One, realizing, “The bhikkhunī Upacālā knows me,” sad and disappointed, disappeared right there.

## 8 Sīsupacālā

At Sāvathī. Then, in the morning, the bhikkhunī Sīsupacālā dressed ... she sat down at the foot of a tree for the day’s abiding.

Then Māra the Evil One approached the bhikkhunī Sīsupacālā and said to her: “Whose creed do you approve of, bhikkhunī?”  
“I don’t approve of anyone’s creed, friend.”

“Under whom have you shaved your head?  
You do appear to be an ascetic,  
Yet you don’t approve of any creed,  
So why wander as if bewildered?”<sup>355</sup>

[The bhikkhunī Sīsupacālā:]

“Outside here the followers of creeds  
Place their confidence in views.  
I don’t approve of their teachings;  
They are not skilled in the Dhamma.”

“But there’s one born in the Sakyan clan,  
The Enlightened One, without an equal,  
Conqueror of all, Māra’s subduer,  
Who everywhere is undefeated,  
Everywhere freed and unattached,  
The One with Vision who sees all.”

“Attained to the end of all kamma,  
Liberated in the extinction of acquisitions,  
That Blessed One is my Teacher:  
His is the teaching I approve.”<sup>356</sup>

Then Māra the Evil One, realizing, “The bhikkhunī Sīsupacālā knows me,” sad and disappointed, disappeared right there.

## 9 Selā

At Sāvathī. Then, in the morning, the bhikkhunī Selā dressed ... she sat down at the foot of a tree for the day’s abiding.<sup>357</sup>

Then Māra the Evil One, desiring to arouse fear, trepidation, and terror in the bhikkhunī Selā, desiring to make her fall away from concentration, approached her and addressed her in verse:

“By whom has this puppet been created?  
Where is the maker of the puppet?  
Where has the puppet arisen?  
Where does the puppet cease?”<sup>358</sup>

Then it occurred to the bhikkhunī Selā: “Now who is this...? This is Māra the Evil One ... desiring to make me fall away from concentration.”



Then the bhikkhunī Selā, having understood, “This is Māra the Evil One,” replied to him in verses:

“This puppet is not made by itself,  
Nor is this misery made by another.  
It has come to be dependent on a cause;  
With the cause’s breakup it will cease.”

“As when a seed is sown in a field  
It grows depending on a pair of factors:  
It requires both the soil’s nutrients  
And a steady supply of moisture:”

“Just so the aggregates and elements,  
And these six bases of sensory contact,  
Have come to be dependent on a cause;  
With the cause’s breakup they will cease.”<sup>359</sup>

Then Māra the Evil One, realizing, “The bhikkhunī Selā knows me,” sad and disappointed, disappeared right there.

## 10 Vajirā

At Sāvattthī. Then, in the morning, the bhikkhunī Vajirā dressed and, taking bowl and robe, entered Sāvattthī for alms.<sup>360</sup> When she had walked for alms in Sāvattthī and had returned from her alms round, after her meal she went to the Blind Men’s Grove for the day’s abiding. Having plunged into the Blind Men’s Grove, she sat down at the foot of a tree for the day’s abiding.

Then Māra the Evil One, desiring to arouse fear, trepidation, and terror in the bhikkhunī Vajirā, desiring to make her fall away from concentration, approached her and addressed her in verse:

“By whom has this being been created?  
Where is the maker of the being?  
Where has the being arisen?  
Where does the being cease?”

Then it occurred to the bhikkhunī Vajirā: “Now who is this that recited the verse—a human being or a nonhuman being?” Then it occurred to her: “This is Māra the Evil One, who has recited the verse desiring to arouse fear, trepidation, and terror in me, desiring to make me fall away from concentration.”

Then the bhikkhunī Vajirā, having understood, “This is Māra the Evil One,” replied to him in verses:

“Why now do you assume ‘a being’?  
Māra, is that your speculative view?  
This is a heap of sheer formations:  
Here no being is found.”

“Just as, with an assemblage of parts,  
The word ‘chariot’ is used,  
So, when the aggregates exist,  
There is the convention ‘a being.’

“It’s only suffering that comes to be,  
Suffering that stands and falls away.  
Nothing but suffering comes to be,  
Nothing but suffering ceases.”<sup>361</sup>

Then Māra the Evil One, realizing, “The bhikkhunī Vajirā knows me,” sad and disappointed, disappeared right there.

## Endnotes for Saṃyutta Number 5. Bhikkhunīsaṃyutta

- 331 Thī does not ascribe any verses to a bhikkhunī named Āḷavikā, but two of the verses in this sutta are to be found among Selā's verses: v. 519 = Thī 57 and v. 521 = Thī 58. Thī-a 60 confirms the identity of the two bhikkhunīs, explaining that Selā was called Āḷavikā because she was the daughter of the king of Āḷavaka. She heard the Buddha preach and became a lay follower. Later she took ordination as a nun and attained arahantship. See Pruitt, *Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs*, pp. 83–87.
- 332 Spk explains the origin of the name: After the parinibbāna of the Buddha Kassapa a lay disciple named Yasodhara, while bringing money to build the cetiya for the relics, was ambushed there and blinded by five hundred thieves. Because Yasodhara was a noble disciple, the thieves straightaway lost their own vision as an immediate kammic result. They continued to dwell there and thus it became known as the Blind Men's Grove. Bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs went there for seclusion. It was about three kilometres south of Sāvattihī and was protected by royal guards.
- 333 Strangely, this verse, the appropriate response to Māra's taunt, is not found in Thī. Spk: The *escape* (*nissaraṇa*) is Nibbāna. *With wisdom* (*paññā*): with reviewing knowledge. Spk-pt: The intention is: "How much more, then, with the knowledge of the path and fruit?"
- 334 In pāda b, *khandhāsaṃ* should be resolved *khandhā esaṃ*. Spk glosses *khandhā tesam*.
- 335 Thī-a 64 identifies her as the daughter of King Bimbisāra's chaplain. Two verses here = Thī 60–61, also ascribed to Somā, but the third verse differs in the two sources.
- 336 Spk: *That state* (*thāna*): arahantship. *With her two-fingered wisdom* (*dvaṅgulapaññāya*): with limited wisdom (*parittapaññāya*); or else this is said of women because they cut the thread while holding the cotton ball between two fingers. Spk-pt and Thī-a 65 offer a different explanation: "From the age of seven on they are always testing whether the rice is cooked by taking grains out from the pot and pressing them between two fingers. Therefore they are said to have 'two-fingered wisdom.'" It should be noted that it is Māra who voices this ancient bias.
- 337 Spk: When knowledge flows on steadily (*ñāṇamhi vattamānamhi*): while the knowledge of the attainment of fruition is occurring (*phalasaṃpattiñāṇe pavattamāne*). *As one sees correctly into Dhamma* (*sammā dhammaṃ vipassato*): seeing into the Dhamma of the four truths, or into the five aggregates that form the object of insight in the preliminary phase of practice. Spk-pt: By mentioning the occurrence of the knowledge of fruition attainment, the commentator shows that she has been dwelling in nondelusion regarding the four truths (*catūsu saccesu asammohavihāro*). *Seeing into* (*vipassantassa*; or, "seeing with insight"): for one seeing distinctly by the penetration of nondelusion; for one seeing into the five aggregates themselves in the preliminary portion (of the practice) prior to the breakthrough to the truths (*asammohapaṭivedhato visesena passantassa khandhapañcakam eva saccābhisamayato pubbabhāge vipassantassa*).
- Spk explains in terms of the knowledge of fruition attainment because Somā, being already an arahant, would have been dwelling in the concentration of fruition. In elucidating *vipassantassa*, Spk-pt, in the first clause, connects the word with the realization of the Four Noble Truths on the occasion of the supramundane path; in the second, it takes the word as signifying *vipassanā* in the technical sense of the preparatory work of insight meditation that leads to the path and fruition.
- 338 Spk says one entertains such thoughts on account of craving, conceit, and views. Strangely, though it delivers the coup de grace to Māra, this verse is without a parallel in Thī.
- 339 Spk recapitulates the popular story of her search for the mustard seeds to bring her dead son back to life, told in greater detail at Dh-p-a II 270–75; see BL 2:257–60 and *Commentary on the Verses*, pp. 222–24. Her verses at Thī 213–23 do not correspond to the verses here.
- 340 Pādas ab read: *Accantaṃ mataputtāmhi/Purisā etadantikā*. A pun seems to be intended between two senses of being "past the death of sons." I translate in accordance with the paraphrase of Spk: "I have 'gotten past the death of sons' as one for whom the death of a son is over and done with. Now I will never again undergo the death of a son.... The ending of the death of sons is itself the ending of men. Now it is impossible for me to seek a man." *Etadantikā* occurs too at Thī 138b.
- 341 The first couplet is common in Thī, found at vv. 59, 142, 195, 203, 235, etc. Spk elaborates: "The delight of craving has been destroyed for me in regard to all the aggregates, sense bases, elements, kinds of existence, modes of origin, destinations, stations, and abodes. The mass of ignorance has been broken up by knowledge."
- 342 Thī-a 156 says that in lay life she had been a friend of Khemā, the chief consort of King Bimbisāra. When she heard that Khemā had gone forth under the Buddha, she visited her and was so inspired by their conversation that she too decided to take ordination. Khemā became her preceptor. Her verses are at Thī 169–74. While the verses here are not among them, interestingly vv. 528 and 530 (with minor differences) are found among *Khemā's* verses, Thī 139 and 140.
- 343 Spk enumerates the five instruments: *ātata, vitata, ātatavitata, susira, ghana*. Spk-pt explains *ātata* as an instrument with one

surface covered by skin, such as a kettle drum (*kumbha*); *vitata*, an instrument with two surfaces covered with skins, such as the *bheri* and *mudiṅga* drums; *ātatavitata*, an instrument with a head covered with skin and bound with strings, such as a lute (*vīṇā*); *susira*, wind instruments, include flutes, conches, and horns; and *ghana* is the class of percussion instruments (excluding drums), such as cymbals, tambourines, and gongs.

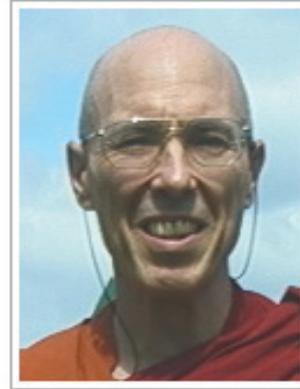
- 344 Though three eds. read in pāda c *bhindanena*, Ee2 and SS have *bhindarena*, which perhaps points to an historical reading *bhidurena*. The Thī counterpart, v. 140, has *āturena*, but Thī 35a contains the phrase *bhiduro kāyo*. Both *bhindana* and *bhidura* are glossed identically in their respective commentaries as *bhijjanasabhāva*, “subject to breaking up.”
- 345 Spk: Pāda a refers to the form realm, pāda b to the formless realm, and pāda c to the eight mundane meditative attainments. By the mention of the two higher realms, the sensory realm is also implied. Hence she says, “everywhere the darkness of ignorance has been dispelled.”
- 346 She was the foremost among the bhikkhunīs in the exercise of supernormal powers (*iddhi*), to which she testifies in vv. 534–35. Her verses are at Thī 224–35. Vv. 532–35 correspond to Thī 230–33, but with significant differences. Thī 234 is identical with v. 521 here ascribed to Āḷavikā.
- 347 Pāda c: *Na c’ atthi te dutiyā vaṇṇadhātu*. I translate freely in accordance with the gloss of Spk: “There is no second beauty element like your beauty element; there is no other bhikkhunī similar to you.” A pun on the bhikkhunī’s name is probably intended. Se and Ee1 & 2 include an additional pāda between pādas c and d, *idh’ āgatā tādisikā bhaveyyum*, absent in Be and Thī 230. This seems to me a scribal error, as it is identical with pāda b of the next verse, where it fits.
- 348 Spk explains pādas ab as if they meant: “Though a hundred thousand rogues might come here, they would be treated just like you in that they would get no intimacy or affection.” I translate, however, in accordance with the apparent sense, which also can claim support from the gloss of Thī-a on Thī 231.
- 349 The *iddhipādā*, “bases for spiritual power,” are the supporting conditions for the exercise of the *iddhi* or supernormal powers described in the previous verse.
- 350 Cālā, Upacālā, and Sīsupacālā—whose verses appear in 5:6–8 respectively—were the younger sisters of Sāriputta, in descending order of age. Their verses are at Thī 182–88, 189–95, and 196–203. However, not only is the correspondence between the two collections fragmentary, but the ascriptions of authorship also differ. Cālā’s v. 537 corresponds to Thī 191, and v. 538 is reflected obscurely in Thī 192, both of which are there ascribed to Upacālā. Upacālā’s vv. 540–43 correspond to Thī 197, 198, 200, and 201, there ascribed to Sīsupacālā. And Sīsupacālā’s vv. 544–46 correspond to Thī 183–85, but there are ascribed to Cālā.
- 351 In pāda b I read *phussati* with Be, Se, and Ee2, as against Ee1 *passati*.
- 352 On pādas ab, see n. 345.
- 353 This verse alludes to five of the six sense-sphere heavens. Only the lowest plane, the heaven of the Four Great Kings, is not mentioned.
- 354 In pāda a, I read *ajalitaṃ* with Se. Be *apajjalitaṃ*, though hypermetrical, gives the same sense. Ee1 & 2 *acalitaṃ*, apparently derived from SS, would mean “unshaken.”
- 355 *Pāsaṇḍa*, in pāda c, refers to the “heretical” systems outside the Buddha’s dispensation. I render it, inadequately, as “creed.” Spk explains the word derivation by way of “folk etymology”: “They are called *pāsaṇḍas* because they lay out a snare (Be: *pāsaṃ ḍenti*; Se: *pāsaṃ oḍḍenti*); the meaning is that they throw out the snare of views among the minds of beings. But the Buddha’s dispensation frees one from the snare, so it is not called a *pāsaṇḍa*; the *pāsaṇḍas* are found only outside the dispensation.” MW defines *pāsaṇḍa* as “a heretic ... anyone who falsely assumes the characteristics of an orthodox Hindu, a Jaina, a Buddhist, etc.; a false doctrine, heresy.”
- 356 Spk explains *vimutto upadhisaṅkhaye* in pāda d thus: “He is liberated into Nibbāna, known as the extinction of acquisitions, as object.” The expression is also at MN I 454,3–4 and II 260,22–23. Spk-pṭ defines “the end of all kamma” (*sabbakammakkhaya*) as arahantship and “the extinction of acquisitions” as Nibbāna. See too 4:25 and n. 324.
- 357 There is no way to determine whether this bhikkhunī is identical with Āḷavikā; see n. 331. The verses do not appear in Thī.
- 358 Spk: Both *puppet* (*bimba*) here, and misery (*agha*) at v. 549b, refer to individual existence (*attabhāva*), in the latter case because individual existence is a foundation for suffering. The philosophers of the Buddha’s time were divided on the question whether suffering is created by oneself (*attakata*) or by another (*parakata*). The former was the position of the eternalists, who held there is a permanent self which transmigrates from life to life reaping the fruits of its own deeds. The latter was the position of the annihilationists, who held that a being is annihilated at death and nothing survives, so that one’s share of suffering and happiness is due entirely to external conditions.
- 359 One key to the interpretation of Selā’s reply is AN I 223–24, where it is said that kamma is the field, consciousness the seed,

and craving the moisture, for the production of future renewed existence. The cause (*hetu*), then, is the kammically formative consciousness accompanied by ignorance and craving. When that dissolves through the elimination of ignorance and craving there is no production of aggregates, elements, and sense bases in a future life. The imagery of seeds and vegetation recurs at 22:54, which also helps to illuminate these verses.

360 Spk provides no personal identification, and no verses in her name have come down in Thī.

361 The simile of the chariot is elaborated at Mil 27–28, which quotes the previous verse. Vism 593,18–19 (Ppn 18:28) also quotes these two verses to confirm that “there is no being apart from name-and-form.” In v. 555 suffering signifies the inherent unsatisfactoriness of the five aggregates (*pañcakkhandhadukkha*), which is identical with the *heap of sheer formations* (*suddhasāṅkhārappuñja*) in v. 553c.

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi is a former president of the Buddhist Publication Society, renowned Pali scholar and translator, and chairperson of Buddhist Global Relief.



ED. NOTE: THE FOLLOWING TABLE EXPLAINS DOCUMENT ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE ENDNOTES

Abbreviation	Document
AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya
Be	Burmese-script ed. of SN
BL	Buddhist Legends (Burlingame)
Dhp-a	Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā
Ee	Roman-script ed. of SN (Ee1 = 1984 ed.; Ee2 = 1998 ed.)
Mil	Milindapañha
MN	Majjhima Nikāya
MW	Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary
Se	Sinhala-script ed. of SN
SN	Saṃyutta Nikāya
Spk	Sāratthappakāsini, Saṃyutta Nikāya – aṭṭhakathā (Burmese-script ed.)
Spk-pt	Sāratthappakāsini-purāṇa-ṭīkā, Saṃyutta-ṭīkā
SS	Sinhala-script mss. of SN (referred to in notes of Ee)
Thī	Therīgāthā
Thī-a	Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā (1998 ed.)
Vism	Visuddhimagga



# *To Do Our Work, We Need Your Help*

This letter is a status update to our stakeholders, to you who have invested in the Alliance for Bhikkhunis (AfB) in one way or another and wish to know whether your trust in us was justified. As you may know, AfB was created more than three years ago and is the only non-profit that exists solely to support the international revival of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. Initially, it seemed our primary task was fund raising so that bhikkhunis had the needed requisites to ordain and remain in robes. Though that remains a critical task, other equally vital undertakings have emerged, such as the need to disseminate accurate information on bhikkhuni history and activities, as well as contemporary challenges and achievements.

Through our digital library and online magazine, *Present*, we correct misinformation about bhikkhuni history, much of which has been accepted uncritically for centuries, and also highlight the truly remarkable women who have played essential roles in safeguarding the Dhamma for future generations. By writing about women, their journey to ordination, and their reflections about how becoming a bhikkhuni has been transformative for them, we hope this empowers women who want to ordain to find the courage to do so.

Our lead article on the Buddha's stepmother and aunt, Mahapajapati Theri, is a prime example of digging deeper into the texts left to us in order to unearth their significance. When the Buddha named the woman who mothered him, and was his first teacher, the head of the newly-created Bhikkhuni Sangha, his action was a public statement about her spiritual attainments and ability. Not just any woman would do. The Bhikkhuni Sangha was essential to the survival of his dispensation. The woman selected had to be remarkable in the myriad ways his chief male disciples were. We are left to infer that Gotami was no ordinary woman.

The Buddha also left us with clear instructions about how to treat mothers and women in general: if you honor me, honor my mother. Gotami's courageous story inspires men and women to this day. Her enlightenment poem can be found in our Poetry section. In it, she proclaims: "I have reached the state where everything stops...This is my last body."

Also in this issue is a piece on Venerable Bhikkhuni Kusuma Theri, a respected scholar who ordained in Sarnath in 1996 and continues to champion the cause of bhikkhuni ordination. Roseanne Freese's feature on the Patimokkha is another effort to dispel

misunderstandings and educate. In her interview of seven bhikkhunis, the monastics explain why the 311 rules found in the Patimokkha are treasured by them and how these rules bind a community and create a safe container for the journey to enlightenment.

Women are finally able to take full ordination in the West. Bhikkhuni Sobhana has written a moving account of her participation in two recent California ordinations.

Carudhamma's account of how wearing white protects her may well prove a revelation for people who have not grasped the role of precepts in making progress on the path to enlightenment. We are again extremely grateful to Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi for his ongoing support and contributions. Please take the time to see his translation of the Connected Discourses with Bhikkhunis and the text of a lecture he gave on the subject of bhikkhuni education.

When I began AfB, I was struck by how disconnected bhikkhunis were from each other. Many lived by themselves, with limited contact with other bhikkhunis. When they did communicate, it was often restricted to emails. Their numbers were too small to allow them to live in the communities the Buddha envisioned. Periods of discouragement and doubt hit any career; a monastic vocation is no exception. In becoming acquainted with these isolated women, I realized the stress and challenges for monastic women went beyond merely wondering if they would receive adequate financial support. They were lonely. They needed the kindness and encouragement of their sisters.

Aware of the emotional and spiritual needs of ordained women, AfB assists bhikkhunis with travel expenses so that they can spend Vassa together or participate in monastic conferences. Our Facebook page also brings monastics and lay practitioners together in a central meeting place. Bhikkhunis from as far away as Thailand or Indonesia announce what they are doing and exchange information. Breaking news in the bhikkhuni world appears here as well as reports of small triumphs.

The elephant in the room of contemporary Buddhism is the unspoken, and sad to say, even spoken, disparagement of women's spiritual capabilities. One of the ways we hope to combat that is through launching International Bhikkhuni Day, a day set aside annually to honor and celebrate bhikkhunis as well as all of our women teachers, including our

mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, or other women who have taken us under their protection and brought out the best in us. (See the article in this issue on The 1st Annual International Bhikkhuni Day.)

A little about the magazine. We are changing our issues from Spring and Fall to Summer and Winter to work around Vassa which dominates the fall and makes it difficult for us to communicate with monastics. We are adding a section entitled Women at the Forefront to showcase lay and monastic women from all Buddhist traditions. The Zen Roshi Joan Sutherland is featured in this issue. We would also love to post any comments or observations coming from our readers. Please feel free to send us letters. We want you to be part of the larger conversation. Let us know what things we are doing right and what things we need to improve on. This is a work-in-progress as well as a collaboration.

Like all start ups, we are going through some expected growth pains. Relying exclusively on volunteer staff to perform key functions is no longer feasible. We have moved forward with hiring key professional staff so that we can maintain the volume and quality of work we are doing. We need your ongoing help to make it possible for us to do our job.

To have a dependable cash flow, we are inviting everyone who benefits from coming to our site, whether they are searching for the location of a bhikkhuni monastery, doing research on a paper, or reading an article from our magazine or library, to Donate A Dollar, or more, if their circumstances allow. We are committed to keeping our services freely available for anyone who wishes to access them. For us to do this, though, we all need to do our part. If you think the work we are doing is beneficial, then please contribute \$1, \$5, or \$10 online. That may not seem like much, but over 56,000 people read our Spring 2010 issue within the first two weeks of its publication, and many thousands have been reading our magazine monthly since then. When thousands of people give a mere dollar, immense good ensues.

**Susan Pembroke**  
President  
Alliance for Bhikkhunis

# Noteworthy

## Ordination News

### Two Significant Ordination Events in California

**August 29, 2010** Four novice women became bhikkhunis during historic dual sangha ordinations at Aranya Bodhi Hermitage in Sonoma County, California on August 29, 2010. Ven. Thanasanti Bhikkhuni (United States), Ven. Adhimutta Bhikkhuni (New Zealand), Ven. Suvijjana Bhikkhuni (United States), and Ven. Phalanyani Bhikkhuni (Germany) were ordained as bhikkhunis (fully ordained nuns) in the Theravada Buddhist tradition.

**October 10, 2010** Five bhikkhunis, two samaneris, and one anagarika were ordained at Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara in Los Angeles. Three ceremonies were held on the same day. The first was for a Canadian-born woman, Brenda Batke-Hirschmann, who became Anagarika Aloka by taking Eight Precepts; the second was for two American-born Anagarikas who received ordination as Samaneris; and the third was for five Samaneris who took full Upasampada, or higher ordination, as Bhikkhunis. The new Samaneris are Santussika and Dhammapali; the new Bhikkhunis are Lakshapathiye Samadhi (born in Sri Lanka), Cariyapanna, Susila, Sammasati (all three born in Vietnam), and Uttamanyana (born in Myanmar).

*Please see detailed accounts of these two events by Ayya Sobhana, Prioress of Aranya Bodhi Hermitage, elsewhere in this issue.*



### Two Former AfB Board Members Take Robes

**On Independence Day** - the 4th of July Marcia Pimentel, whom we have known as the Editor of the Alliance for Bhikkhunis' Present magazine, had her hair cut by friends and shaved by Buddhist monastics. She then donned the white robes of an anagarika - one who has gone forth from the home life into homelessness - and formally undertook the Eight Precepts. She was surrounded by friends, DharmaCreek land sisters, and her fellow Buddhist monastic women.

She received the Pali Dhamma name of "Marajina" - "She Who Achieves Victory Over Mara" - which was specially offered for her by Ajahn Maha Prasert Kavissaro, with Ayya Tathaaloka's blessing and hearty approval. Anagarika Marajina plans to spend the 2010 Vassa Retreat together with women monastics and aspirants from around North America at Aranya Bodhi Hermitage.

As mentioned above in the story about the L.A. ordinations at Dharm Vijaya, Canadian-born Brenda Batke-Hirschman became an anagarika by taking Eight Precepts under Ayya Gunasari. Aloka, as she is now called, had been the

Vice-President of Alliance for Bhikkhunis as well as the Executive Editor of AfB's online magazine Present. She also managed AfB's website.

### Dallas Becker's Ordination at Sravasti Abbey

**At another ordination**, in a beautiful ceremony at Sravasti Abbey in New-man Washington, Dallas Becker, one of Sravasti Abbey's full time residents and a long time student of Ven. Chodron, took Samaneri (novice) vows on August 26, 2010, becoming Ven. Thubten Samten, the Abbey's seventh resident monastic. Special visitor Ven. Jampa Tsedroen Bhikkhuni was in attendance along with Ven. Thubten Chodron Bhikkhuni. (And two new anagarikas were ordained on September 8!). With fifty friends and supporters in attendance, including all the participants in this year's Exploring Monastic Life program, it was a truly auspicious day.

*More details are at <http://www.sravastiabbey.org/gallery/2010/sept10ordination.html>*

### Sept. 2, 2010 – Sangha Entering First Vassa at Aranya Bodhi

For the first year in North American history, the Theravada Buddhist women's monastic community gathered together to observe the Vassa retreat together. It is a beginning that is the culmination of many years of dedicated effort and slow nurturing of the causes and conditions for women's Sangha to come together.



*Pictured are Ayya Tathaaloka Bhikkhuni Theri (center), Ayya Sudhamma Bhikkhuni (right front), Adhimutta Samaneri (mid-rt.), Phanyani Samaneri (back-rt.), Ayya Sobhana Bhikkhuni (left front), Suvijjana Samaneri (mid-left) and Anagarika Marajina (back-left) in the hermitage's Dhammasala yurt.*

Many worked hard to prepare the beautiful space where an aspiration came true when, quietly that morning, in their yurt Dhamma-sala surrounded by mist-shrouded redwoods, seven women dedicated to monastic life entered into the traditional Buddhist Vassa retreat period.

## Aloka Vihara Nuns Express Intention for Bhikkhuni Ordination

*From the nuns of the Aloka Vihara (excerpted from Saranaloka Website; full letter at [http://www.saranaloka.org/letter\\_jill-nuns-11-2010.html](http://www.saranaloka.org/letter_jill-nuns-11-2010.html))*

**November 8, 2010**

Dear Friends in Dhamma,

We are living in an historic period where the unfolding of full participation and ordination for women is happening in most world religions. Our community is no exception: When we came here for the first time in January 2008, our intention was to look into establishing a training monastery for siladhara. As three sisters who have trained in the UK monasteries for about 18 years, we each felt ready to enter a space of new growth, inwardly and outwardly. Meanwhile, in our own communities in the UK, the response to the international attention on the position of women and the feminine in Buddhism, was to reaffirm a conservative stance. In October of 2009, just shortly before our move to the Bay Area, we, as a community of siladhara in the UK, agreed to the 'Five Points' in order for siladhara ordination to continue.

Saranaloka Foundation is the first trust that has been established with the specific

intention of supporting nuns of the Thai Forest Tradition of Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho. Our heartfelt wish in coming here was to establish a training monastery for nuns within our lineage; an aspiration that was complicated by the imposition of the 'Five Points' in August 2009.

Since our arrival here last December, we recognize more and more the impact on our hearts of those 'Five Points' and the vulnerability of the siladhara ordination, which is valid only in the Ajahn Chah / Ajahn Sumedho lineage. The training itself has been of immense value to us on our Path and we are deeply grateful to have had the opportunity to train with the siladhara for so many years. Now, living outside of our larger communities in England, we feel unable to pass on the 'Five Points' to other women wishing to live the renunciant life. Our own process is a movement of the heart; responding to the 'Five Points' and the conditions which gave rise to them.

The ready availability in the US of bhikkhuni ordination, the ordination given by the Buddha, offers us a new platform for the establishment of a training monastery for women. Taking all these things into consideration, we have come to the decision to move towards taking bhikkhuni ordination to provide a stronger container to pass on to other women. In keeping with the 'Five Points' we will take leave of the Ajahn Chah / Ajahn Sumedho lineage in order to later receive full ordination. We have already informed the elders of our community of this intention and will formally ask forgiveness and take leave of our community in April 2011, when all the nuns and other elders will be gathered at Amaravati. We recognize that this is a huge step and truly want to honor all that we have received over the years.

Having considered this very deeply, we feel the loss and turbulence that such a big step inevitably brings...

We feel a strong heart connection with the siladhara community in the UK, wishing that they flourish in their practice. The aspiration towards liberation and providing a sustainable form of training for women samanās is a goal we all share.

We continue to be committed to our

vision of establishing a training monastery for Theravadan nuns, practicing in the Forest Tradition; a style which is found in all Buddhist schools. The Forest style of practice emphasizes renunciation, simplicity and meditation as a path of awakening. When the time is ripe, we intend to relocate to a rural setting, more suitable to the Forest style of practice. In the meantime, we are very happy to stay at Aloka Vihara with its peaceful presence and close accessibility for our community, the wild ocean and beautiful Golden Gate Park.

With much gratitude to you all for your support of Aloka Vihara in so many ways.

Many blessings in Dhamma,

*Sister Anandabodhi and  
Sister Santacitta*



*Bhikkhu Bodhi' walking*

## Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi's 10,000 STEPS Raises Money for Buddhist Global Relief

**October 16, 2010** Bhikkhu Bodhi and many others walked to raise money for Buddhist Global Relief at the first "10,000 Steps to Help Feed the Hungry". Although the distance covered depends on the length of one's stride, walking 10,000 steps is the approximate equivalent of walking 8km/5mi. He and the walkers asked people to sponsor them on the walk.



Aloka nuns walking for Bhodi

*Ajahn Santacitta and Ajahn Anandabodhi, nuns from Aloka Vihara in San Francisco, and friends participate in the 10,000 Steps walk for Buddhist Global Relief.*

The event itself was held on October 16 in South Orange, New Jersey at the scenic South Mountain Reservation. Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi led the majority of the walk participants on an 8K walk through the beautiful, wooded trails of the Reservation. BGR members, volunteers, fundraisers, and over sixteen monastics comprised the group of over fifty people who joined the walk in support of the cause.

In addition to the event in South Orange, out-of-town supporters were encouraged to participate by “walking where they were.” Several mini-walks took place on October 16 in conjunction with the South Orange walk, across the United States in places like San Francisco; Bath, Maine; and Denver; and as far away as the United Kingdom. Some of their Facebook fans also showed their support by joining them for a “virtual walk” on their Facebook Fan Page.

With the hard work and dedication of BGR’s supporters, the event raised over \$22,000 to go toward our current hunger relief projects, such as critical rice support to girl students and their families in Cambodia, first-time water supply to a poor village in Sri Lanka, emergency food relief to families in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa — just to name a few.

This was a great example of people turning their compassion into action while enjoying a peaceful walk with a

great group of people. Bhikkhu Bodhi and BGR extend their special thanks to all of the volunteers and fundraisers who participated in the first ever walk event. They look forward to making the 2011 “10,000 Steps to Help Feed the Hungry” event as successful as the first. For more information contact Deena Scherer, [info@buddhistglobalrelief.org](mailto:info@buddhistglobalrelief.org)

### A Western Buddhist Tradition at Dhamma Dena...

**November, 2010** Having been invited by Ruth Denison, Ven. Madika is contributing a monastic component



Ruth Madika

to the community at Dhamma Dena. Ruth’s pioneering work in Mindfulness that opened the door to the Dhamma for so many Americans is complemented by Ven. Madika teaching Awakening Stillness QiGong and Disturbing Emotions Workshops, which she has developed based on the Buddha-Dhamma and her own experience.

The monastics have a schedule of work, study and meditation and are involved with the various retreats scheduled throughout the year. Visits by fellow monastics and laity are welcome, and a commitment of temporary vows is possible for those wishing a longer or deeper stay.

Some updating of the monastic dwelling is in process. The residents are giving some attention to westernizing the attire, chants, artwork and other aspects of monastic Buddhist life. The Laity Sangha of Dhamma Dena has a Google List that will spread the word of needs, discussions and announcements.

Great Determination is in the careful

hands of the Monastic Steward. The position is described on the Great Determination Website. It is available as a hermitage for retreat in solitude when the steward vacates the position. Ven. Madika and Samaneri Kalyana will return there when the opportunity arises. When there is another lay or ordained resident to stay at Dhamma Dena they may travel to Ohio for varying lengths of time themselves to spend in retreat and continue the development there.



Great Determination kuti

### High Desert Vipassana Retreats with Ruth Denison

With Ruth’s unique approach, individual and group activities become vehicles for Vipassana practice which is solely based upon the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. The teacher’s caring presence brings ease and inspiration to this rather difficult and sensitive practice of growing into the awakened mind. See <http://www.dhammadena.com/page3retreats.html>

### News from Our Asian Sisters

News: **June 16, 2010** The struggle for recognition and gender equity for Buddhist ordained women continues in Sri Lanka. A leading Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka, Ven. Sumangala Thero,



Ruth Dennison Retreat

has lodged a complaint against the state Commissioner of Buddhist Affairs regarding the non-safeguarding quality of female Buddhist monks (bhikkhunis). Ven. Sumangala Thero lodged a complaint with the Human Rights Commission after the Sri Lankan Commissioner of Buddhist Affairs rejected a request to legally register the monasteries of female monks (bhikkhunis). “There are 147 bhikkhuni monasteries in which 500 senior and 2000 novice monks reside,” stated Ven. Sumangala Thero, and “the Buddhist term ‘Sangha’ includes both male and female monks”, he added. Details

News: **June 4, 2010** The Navugala Bhikkhuni Aramaya in Galigamuwa, Sri Lanka is seeking help with repairs and maintenance. If you are able to assist in any way, either with materials for repairs, labor, or dana donations, we encourage you to lend a helping hand. Working together, in alignment with Dhamma, we can contribute to continued growth of the Sri Lankan Bhikkhuni Sangha. Thank you for your interest in helping to support Navugala Bhikkhuni Aramaya (just add a note to our fast, secure online support form indicating that your donation is for Navugala). Click here to learn more about Navugala Bhikkhuni Aramaya, and to read details about what’s needed now.

News: **April 16, 2010** The first phase of the new residential building at Songdhammakalyani Bhikkhuni Aramaya in Thailand is scheduled to begin construction soon. Venerable Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, the first Thai bhikkhuni to ordain in the Theravada tradition, initially believed that ordination should be meant

only for those who intended to ordain for life. However, in 2009, she expanded the opportunity for women to ordain temporarily (Temporary Samaneri Ordination or TSO) in order to help establish the Bhikkhuni Sangha in Thailand. TSO was launched on April 6, 2009, and was very well received: between April and December that year, 82 women ordained and received intensive training. As a result of ordination, the women found that their understanding of the teachings of the Buddha and their depth of knowledge in Buddhism were strengthened significantly. The temple now offers TSO twice per year, on April 6 and December 5. The immediate concern is for a proper residence for the nuns during their training period. Please consider becoming part of Thai her-story by making a donation towards the construction of the residence.

### Upcoming Events:

**April 30 to May 7, 2011** Sakyadhita Canada ([www.sakyadhita.org/canada](http://www.sakyadhita.org/canada)) is offering its first residential meditation retreat from April 30 to May 7, 2011 - “The Joy of Meditation”. This silent retreat, lead by Shirley Jayanta Johannesen, will focus on moment-to-moment awareness (vipassana) in a beautiful meditation centre on Salt Spring Island, BC. The daily schedule will include instruction on various meditation techniques, a daily yoga class, individual interviews, group discussions, question/answer periods, and Dhamma teachings. All dana from this retreat will be donated to support Sakyadhita Canada (International Association of Buddhist women). For information and registration: [sakyadhitacanada@gmail.com](mailto:sakyadhitacanada@gmail.com)

## Upcoming Dhamma Dena Desert Retreat

*Holiday Retreat for Women and Men*

Dec 17<sup>th</sup> through January 3<sup>rd</sup>

Beginners welcome. While this is a retreat for Buddhist Laity, two Theravada nuns will be in residence and may offer descriptions of their monastic practice.

## Save the Date:

The Alliance for Bhikkhunis is pleased to announce **September 17, 2011**, as the first annual International Bhikkhuni Day and Pledge-A-Thon!

The day will be an opportunity for meditation and for telling stories about the largely unknown yet immensely influential female figures who have helped nourish and shape us. The Alliance for Bhikkhunis is inviting monasteries, lay meditation organizations, and sitting groups around the world to set this day aside to practice together with us in celebration of women teachers. We’ll be requesting that each participant asks for pledges as a way to raise funds in support of the Alliance for Bhikkhunis, as well as the participating centers or groups. We’re encouraging a festive atmosphere with food, arts and craft sales, bake sales, auctions, music and more.

For additional details about the first annual International Bhikkhuni Day and Pledge-A-Thon, go to the Alliance for Bhikkhunis website <http://www.bhikkhuni.net/>, and click on the link for more information on the event.

## Internet Study Course

From Ayya Tathaaloka:

*Dear friends who delight in studying and investigating Dhamma,*

*This coming year, the highly esteemed monastic scholar, Ven. Analayo, will be offering an internet study course on the Madhyama Agama. He has asked me to pass on the invitation to join in this study to those friends who may be interested.*

*Please see <http://www.buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de/index.php?id=121&L=0> to learn more.*

*The Madhyama Agama is the Buddhist Sanskrit and Chinese language parallel to the Majjhima Nikaya — The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha.*

*Ven. Bhikkhu Analayo, a Theravada Buddhist monk originally trained in Pali-text scholarship by the Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, has achieved renown in his own right through his excellent analytical text critical and comparative scholarship of Theravada Buddhist teachings, particularly of the Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan renditions of the Agama Sutras as compared with their Pali-text renditions in the Nikayas. He is currently one of the leading scholars in the world in this field, with very many published works on various meditation and Dhamma themes.*

*His most recent publication, a monologue on the genesis of the bodhisattva idea, may be read online here.*

*Wishing you joy in insight,*

*Ayya Tathaaloka Bhikkhuni*

# *Gotami's Enlightenment Poem*

Homage to you Buddha,  
Best of all creatures,  
Who set me and many others  
Free from pain.

All pain is understood,  
The cause, the craving is dried up,  
The Noble Eightfold Way unfolds,  
I have reached the state where everything  
stops.

I have been,  
Mother,  
Son,  
Father,  
Brother,  
Grandmother;  
Knowing nothing of the truth  
I journeyed on.

But I have seen the Blessed One;  
This is my last body,  
And I will not go  
From birth to birth again.

Look at the disciples all together,  
Their energy,  
Their sincere effort.  
This is homage to the Buddhas.

Maya gave birth to Gautama  
For the sake of us all.  
She has driven back the pain  
Of the sick and dying.



*Mahapajapati's Enlightenment Poem -  
translation by Susan Murcott*



# An Interview with Joan Sutherland, Roshi

by Jacqueline Kramer

*I met Joan Sutherland in 2008 at the urging of John Tarrant Roshi and many others at the Pacific Zen Institute. She was holding a koan seminar on a crisp October weekend with the theme, Ghosts and Ancestors, at a home in Guerneville, California. The first thing that impressed me about Joan when she walked into the room was her gravitas. She was herself, as is, unapologetically, yet without arrogance. I had met many women who exhibited power but not many women who gracefully blended their innate femininity with that power. Joan seemed as deeply in tune with her femininity as she was with her place in the Tao. In dokusan Joan asked me if I had any questions for her. I replied, “How does it feel to be in your power?” She stopped and thought for a moment and then replied, “Pretty good.” Over a year later I had the opportunity to interview Joan on the phone.*

**JK:** Hello Joan. Thank you for taking the time from your busy schedule to talk with me. Could you say something about what drew you to koan practice?

**JS:** I would say that there was, at least in the way that I encountered it with John Tarrant Roshi, a profound appreciation for pushing the practice so that one had the deepest and widest and most shattering experience of the nature of things, and then not just having that experience and wondering what to do with it but, with the koans, a way of exploring and articulating the experience. One of the foundations of koan practice is that learning to articulate one’s spiritual experience, which is quite different than learning to describe it, deepens the experience. Then

there is this long process of integrating the experience into everyday life through the koans. So I think those two things, the respect for the experience of the nature of things, and understanding as much as you could about it then embodying it in everyday life in the psyche and the soul and the mind and the heart and the acts of everyday life. This was what drew me in.

**JK:** I read in your bio that you worked with feminist issues. Could you say something about how that affected your Zen practice?

**JS:** That has two parts that are complementary. When I was just out of college I was looking for a way of doing right livelihood. I hooked up with the Los Angeles Com-

mission on Assaults Against Women, which at the time was running a rape and battering hot line and developing a self defense program for women and girls. I worked there for a number of years in both of those areas. It was a profound experience because one has a direct confrontation with suffering—perhaps particularly the suffering of women—and the experience of trying to find ways to respond to that suffering. That was one track. The other track was that I was simultaneously doing some book editing and I had the great good fortune to spend a couple of years working with the archeologist Marija Gimbutas. She was working in the archeology of what she called Old Europe, which was pre-Bronze Age Europe. She was discovering a great deal about the way cultures were quite different than what we tend to think of as the foundations of European culture. It seemed as though there was a greater participation of women in terms of defining the way the cultures behaved and the kinds of mythology there were. That shaped me a lot, too. It brought in the mythic element, the importance of what happens in our psyche, what happens in our soul, when we have language and imagery that speaks a different way than we're used to. That was my first understanding of the importance of expanding the way we express things. The more kinds of imagery, the more different metaphors we have, the truer our picture of something is because it's bigger. I definitely brought that experience into Zen.

**JK:** There are a lot of stories from the ancient Pali and folk traditions that are left out about Yasodhara. It's so important for women to hear those lost parts of the story.

**JS:** I think that's really important. Let me speak particularly about Zen because that's what I know, and Buddhism covers a lot of territory. What I do know about my own tradition is that the spring from which the dharma flows is a direct experience of the nature of reality. That's ungendered. It doesn't have anything to do with those kinds of dualities at all. And, at the same time, we can only have direct experience through this phenomenal world, and the phenomenal world is, amongst other things, gendered. So if we leave out a whole body of ways that the direct experience of the nature of things can be expressed, or the ways we can practice toward seeing that, we're dealing with something partial and therefore unnecessarily limited. We're dealing with something that is not as whole as it could be. That seems to me to be the fundamental issue.

**JK:** Yes, when the Buddha taught, if he was talking to an ox herder he used ox herding metaphors, when he was talking to a king he used kingly metaphors. Different people respond to different metaphors.

**JS:** I agree and I think that's important for a couple of

reasons. One is that our souls and our psyches attach to particular practices in particular ways because of mysterious affinities we have. Someone will find a particular kind of meditation to be the way that works for them and someone else will find that it's singing in the Sufi style or praying in the Christian style; it could be a lot of different things. Those different expressions or gateways should be available for people to attach to. The other thing that's important is that if we limit the ways we talk about spiritual experience we're not going to be as helpful in deepening and clarifying the experience. For example, in Zen there's been a tremendous amount of imagery that involves "penetrating the mystery." There's an heroic breaking through kind of cosmonaut-in-the-spaceship-going-out-into-deep-space quality to that. As a teacher I've talked to hundreds of people about their spiritual experience. Women and men both will say, well, yeah, there's that and there's also the experience of being penetrated. Surrendering to something much larger than oneself. If you leave that imagery out you've actually left out a way of describing something that people are experiencing. So that would be one example. Another would be when you leave out metaphors, say, of gestation and pregnancy. A lot of people



do experience their spiritual life as a kind of pregnancy, a gradual development in a very interior way that eventually leads to something that manifests in the world. What's been gratifying to me is that, while initially this gestation metaphor might offer ways that some women in particular might find a natural affinity for, in the end it's better for everyone. Many people find that there's something in that imagery that expresses what they're experiencing.

**JK:** Yes, it creates a more complete picture.

**JS:** Yes. Another example of that kind of dichotomy would be the bright birth of enlightenment verses the patient gestation of awakening. Particularly in the way we've done koan Zen in the United States, we've tended to emphasize that ideal of enlightenment as the bright birth of enlightenment.

**JK:** How beautiful the gestation imagery is for householders who do have a slower process, who are unable to go on long retreats or engage in intensive practices.

**JS:** Yes, so here's another example of what we miss when we leave out part of the picture. In East Asia, in many times and places, women were not free to participate fully in monastic life. They had to remain in the domestic sphere. But the women who had such a strong desire and longing for that kind of life then developed ways of practicing within the domestic sphere. We as householders, both women and men, find ourselves in a kind of similar situation, not because that life is denied to us, but because we're choosing something else. How much can we learn from these women?

**JK:** I would love to learn from these women. It sounds like you are in touch with some sources here?

**JS:** I'm a magpie and I collect from all over. Sadly, there hasn't been an organized history of that. So I'm just collecting stories and impressions. I read a lot of scholarly work and find the nuggets of the stories that relate to that. Someday I would love to put it all together in some form.

**JK:** I'm interested to hear what the silent, or hardly audible, women throughout history have discovered about spiritual practice. I read in your website bio that one of the things you're interested in is contributions from women to the koan tradition. Can you say something about that?

**JS:** For example, there's an interesting parallel between something that happened in the Sung dynasty in China and something that happened in my own life. In the Sung dynasty there was a great teacher named Dahui. He's known to have been quite open to working with women. It was in working with a woman who was having a great deal of trouble breaking through, having an enlightening



experience, that he developed ways of working with koans where you concentrate on a particular part of the koan in your meditation until something is resolved for you. He developed that way of working with koans with her, through a kind of collaboration between her practice and his guidance of her. In fact, she did have a breakthrough. He went on to use that method with both women and men and it persists to this day, it was such a powerful discovery. I was interested that it was Dahui's willingness not to impose the received tradition about how you work with koans, but rather to listen to her experience and be flexible in regard to opening up the tradition to include her experience. It caused a revolution in the way we work with koans that persists almost a thousand years later. That's there in the tradition as well as in my own experience. I received a particular way of working with koans that came out of the Japanese tradition. It was founded on the idea that there were particular answers to each koan and that the goal of koan study was for a student to realize that particular answer. When more women began doing koan practice it became obvious that something else was happening. The koans weren't staying in the box we had passed down to us by the tradition. Some women would say, "Well yeah, I get that, but there's another thing that's been happening." Women would bring in more of the process of living with the koan or the kinds of insights they were having deeply embedded in their



lives as the result of spending time with the koan. With John Tarrant, both as a student and as co-teachers, we had a fundamental decision to make. Were we going to stuff the koans back in the box or were we going to allow in this richer, wider experience of keeping company with a koan? That seemed like a no-brainer to us—we went with plan B. What I felt was, that's what the koans wanted. The koans wanted out of the box. The koans wanted to be bigger than they were being allowed to be, they wanted to have a more profound effect in people's lives. Because it was a new way of working with koans, I lit on two foundations of trust. One was a trust in the koans, that they knew what they wanted and I had to listen to that, and the other was a trust in the experience that people—particularly, initially, women—were having with the koans. This mattered and needed to be listened to, too. Those two things ended up being completely congruent. This new way—well, maybe new, but maybe they were doing this in China; ev-

ery time I think I've discovered something new I find they were doing it twelve hundred years ago—this new way of doing koans became the way we do koans. So the tradition has really moved in our generation.

**JK:** So you and John Tarrant worked together and allowed this new way to emerge.

**JS:** We were stepping through the filter that had so colored the way the tradition came to us, back to the origins of the koans in China. Because I could read classical Chinese I could immerse myself in that literature and make a connection back to the source.

**JK:** Thank you for taking this time to talk with me today. I really appreciate the work you're doing.

**JS:** Thank you so much for your interest.

**Joan Sutherland, Roshi** is the founder of **Awakened Life**.

She is deeply involved in re-imagining the koan tradition and exploring its relationship to creativity, and she also integrates mythopoeics and contemporary mind and consciousness discoveries with meditation. She holds frequent koan and meditation retreats, and her work appears regularly in Shambhala Sun and Buddhadharma.

She lives and teaches in Santa Fe, New Mexico and is also the holding teacher for The Open Source, a network of communities that includes Springs Mountain Sangha in Colorado Springs, Colorado, Wet Mountain Sangha in Pueblo, Colorado, The Open Source in Northern California, and the Desert Rain Zen Group in Tucson, Arizona. She is one of the founders of the Pacific Zen School, an innovative contemporary koan school.

**Jacqueline Kramer**, author of

**Buddha Mom—the Path of Mindful Mothering**, is the director of the Hearth Foundation ([www.hearthfoundation.net](http://www.hearthfoundation.net)) which teaches Buddhism online to parents. She has been studying and practicing Theravada Buddhism for over 36 years and is past vice president of the Alliance for Bhikkhunis.



# Film Review of “Blind Attachment”

A review of French director  
Clair Denis’ film *White Material*

by Kathy Jean Schultz

draw on her childhood experiences around white colonialism dying, being suffocated by Africans unwilling to be treated like slaves in their homelands anymore.

“White Material,” a French film with English subtitles, is set in a land where violent revolutionary soldiers, primarily captured children who are given guns, are taking over the country road by road, bus by bus, gate by gate.

Colonial-style whites are in danger. Maria denies that. The departing French army drops survival packets from helicopters, but Maria laughs them off, and kicks the survival packs around defiantly, assuming she will never need such a thing. She knows Africa. She and her family have lived here all her life. She has what she assumes to be normal relationships with her black foreman

Isabella Huppert



Every so often a film comes along with many Buddhist teachings on display. French director Clair Denis’ most recent film, a seemingly simple historical tale, is one example of this. “White Material” swells, from its first frame, into an intriguing take on the deep roots of craving. Craving is not easy to identify in ourselves—although it seems crystal clear in others. For practicing Buddhists, the film is a treasure trove of what not to do, and one that drives home the danger of not letting go. Stubborn clinging can only lead to misery, and sometimes tragic consequences as it does in this story.

The French actress Isabella Huppert plays a classic control freak, a white colonial coffee-ranch owner in an African country. She marches about in most every scene. Her inability to detach from her traditional lifestyle is so deeply rooted it can only end in devastation. Huppert plays rancher Maria Vial. Director Clair Denis’ father worked for the French government in Africa and Denis grew up in four different French colonial African countries, including Cameroon and Sierra Leone. She is now a film professor in Switzerland, and many of her films

and her longtime black employees. She has been the coffee rancher and the manager, and the strong-willed woman who can pull her own weight in the business. She is the region’s economic driver, and her workers have always depended on her for their livelihood. Surely a person of that stature can be in control forever.

Maria is under siege both physically and mentally, but operates in denial of both. She keeps her emotions under strict control, thereby keeping common sense at bay.

She brings new meaning to the word “stoic.” A robot soldiering on.

Is this a good thing?

Maria is strong in the face of crisis, determined, stubborn. At first. Over time, however, her stance hardens into a tunnel vision that keeps her deluded and in denial about what is obvious to everyone but her. Her fierce clinging becomes almost comical.

Her workers are scared, and they are escaping to safety just as the critical week of coffee bean harvesting is set to begin. The timing of the revolution is just awful for Maria. If only the bloodbath had come at the season’s

end, after the beans were all picked, it would be more convenient for her.

But she needs her profits, she needs her earnings, she needs to do things just as she has always done. She clings to her schedule. Nothing will interfere with her almighty schedule. Maria's needs and wants blind her to the end of white rule. She clings to the belief she can buy her way into the lifestyle she insists upon. A tsunami of change is coming and she tries to stop it with her rifle and her U.S. dollars.

As her workers walk away from the child soldiers they know are hiding just over the hill, she chides them to stay "just one more week. Just one short week." De-luded people minimize danger, especially the danger of violence and how quickly things can go south, literally in seconds. We all want things the world can never give us—permanence, safety, permanence, security, permanence, dependable sources of pleasure and well-being, loved ones always being the same and available, and on, and on. Did I mention permanence?

wired, as if we are fighting human nature itself. In a pivotal moment, Maria's workers have all escaped to try and save their families. She marches up to a house where she knows she may be able to find and hire another crew, and she asks two women there if there are any men around who will come and harvest for her. For just one more week, as she puts it, just one simple little week. White colonialism is falling down around her, and she impetuously heralds those around her to join her in not seeing what is happening, driving the stake of denial deeper.

One of the women goes off to find the men. Maria and the second woman wait outside. An impatient white imperialist, who's pretty much ordered black workers around her entire life, Maria paces and mutters, while the black woman stands stone still. Maria moves to follow the first woman and the woman says to her "Wait."

Maria is not accustomed to waiting, to taking orders from anyone, to having anything other than her own way. "Wait," stops her. She is now in a desperate situ-



Still of Isabelle Huppert in *White Material*

Maria presumes that what she's always had—a white-owned ranch in an African country, employing an array of impoverished African workers who supply her demands and keep her profits flowing with their labor and their reliable, dependable presence—will always be there. Her arrogance deludes her into thinking that the threats, and reports of attacks coming over the transistor radios the workers can hear everywhere, are just the passing fancy of some rogue army guys.

As we say in the West, she is clueless.  
And proud of it.

Impermanence could drown this character before she even admits she's near water.

As we reach for detachment, for letting go, as we work to overcome craving, it can sometimes feel hard-

ation of her own creation, built upon her expectations, and so she must do as the woman asks.

It seems like the first time a black woman has ever told this white woman what to do. Maria's attachment hangs in the air, thick as pudding. She has always walked where she wants, gotten what she wants, and "waits" on no one's orders.

At this moment, however, she is stopped, like we are so often when we have lost sight of detachment. If we have no expectations we have no problems, but we often forget this.

"Wait." You, wait. You, stop. Stop, now. Here. Maria's arrogance drains from her being. Life as she knows it has come to a halt. Not in some riotous battle or in a raging crowd. Not in the midst of fireworks. But in a



Still of Isabelle Huppert in *White Material*

simple setting, just two people, standing face to face in the yard. She is no longer in charge. That's been an unthinkable option, as it always is, until we find we are no longer in charge.

When we make sincere efforts to detach, to relinquish control, to stop being enslaved to craving, when the blood-pressure-torquing pace of life no longer delivers and apparently never will deliver true peace of mind, we are stopped in our tracks.

"Wait," the woman Maria has had economic power over orders, and if Maria has any hope of having her precious harvest completed, she must wait.

She'll need to swallow her iron will, her Manifest Destiny, her denial of anything she wishes not to see. Her bulldozing toward millions of profits, and her grit, are funneled into a monosyllable. Wait.

Like many white Africans, she lives in a protectively thick-walled concrete house and inside an equally impenetrable denial. The rebels are targeting white people as well as their possessions, the "White Material" of the title.

It is one of the film's many tale-spinning metaphors that Maria drives a bulldozer and is a bulldozer. "From zero to sixty" is a phrase we hear often in our culture. Like it's a good thing. It's a concept often held up as a positive idea. If a car boasts an engine that can accelerate it from 0 to 60 quickly, that's an asset. If a person's temperament goes from 0 to 60 quickly, ah, not so much.

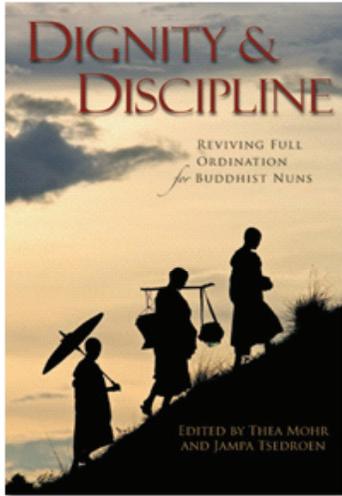
"White Material" depicts the opposite journey, the one that goes from 60 to 0 – a familiar experience on the road to enlightenment.

That's right – wait. Don't go now. Anywhere, anymore.

Filmmaker Clair Denis uses her own life story and current struggles in modern Africa to shine a light on facets of practice that are thousands of years old. She tells a story about the tragedy of attachment, often felt but not often so brightly illuminated.

Kathy Jean Schultz is a writer, editor, and videomaker who lives in Ventura, California.

# Books in Brief



From Seeds of Doubt  
to Seeds of Fruition:  
A Recollection of the  
Making of Dignity and  
Discipline: Reviving  
Full Ordination for  
Buddhist Nuns, Dr.  
Thea Mohr and Dr.

Jampa Tsedroen, Editors, Wisdom Publications,  
Boston, 2010.

by Roseanne Freese

“I am not ready for ordination,” the young Tibetan nun courageously said. The room, a classic tiered lecture hall with giant chalkboards from the late 19th century, was filled with some 200 women, nuns and householders from every hue of the Buddhist rainbow. We had come together in Hamburg, Germany, in July of 2007 to participate in the first ever discussion of women’s ordination since Buddha ordained Mahaprajapati, his aunt, 2,500 years ago—the Buddhist Congress for the Ordination of Women, convened by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and hosted by the University of Hamburg, Germany. Up and down the rows sat Thai Maechees or Ten Precept Nuns dressed in white, Nepalese nuns of the Tibetan tradition wearing pale pink, Canadian Mahayana bhikkhunis wearing light blue, Vietnamese Zen nuns wearing dark brown pants and tunics, German scholars in blouses and skirts, Sri Lankans in brilliant saffron togas, and Taiwanese Pure Land nuns in charcoal gray cassocks. This impromptu meeting of the women’s

sangha was called after the three days of presentations to debate and discuss the recommendations we wanted conveyed to His Holiness. Surprise filled the room. Some nuns leaned forward over their writing desks, tightening their jaws and narrowing their eyes, suspicious if not angry, others (including me) leaned back in our wooden seats, mouths agape in shock, yet still others hunched their shoulders and leaned their bodies in as if to support their sister, while a tiny few sat detached, ready to hear more of what the young woman had to say.

The next day we would witness something equally startling. Nine senior monks, including a teacher of His Holiness, and nine senior nuns, from all branches of Buddhism sat in chairs flanking both sides of His Holiness. Bhikshu Samdhong Rinpoche, Kalon Tripa (leader of the cabinet) of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile led the comments, maintaining a conservative stance, asserting that nowhere in the Tibetan Vinaya was there room for bhikkhus to singlehandedly ordain bhikkhunis alone. The others, however, espoused, even demanded, to change the future course of Buddhism. With vigor and informed passion, the seventeen elders endorsed full ordination for nuns. In direct contrast to Rinpoche, Bhikkhu Sujato, Abbot of Santi Forest Monastery in Australia observed, “The Vinaya never mentioned Mulasarvastivada, Dharmaguptaka, Theravada, Tibet, China, or Sri Lanka, and therefore we need not give such importance to these distinctions. Rather the Vinaya establishes procedures for enabling a candidate to go forth in the Buddha’s dispensation to seek the end of suffering.” They urged the Dalai Lama to initiate for the first time in history women’s ordination using the Mulasarvastivada Vinaya or the Buddhist precepts of the Tibetan Tradition. The maha theris or great elder bhikkhunis were adamant. More than one nun pointed her finger right in the Dalai Lama’s face and more than once did His Holiness pull his visor cap another centimeter lower. These frank opinions were given not in a secluded chamber but before an audience of 1,400, including not just scholars, but the general public and the press.



Tibetan prayer wheels

To discover what led to this surprising polarity, then unanimity of support from the Western and Asian Sanghas, one must turn to the text *Dignity and Discipline*, which presents seventeen of the sixty-five excellent papers presented during those historic three days as well as the discussion on that dark night of the ego. The editors, Dr. Thea Mohr, lecturer, Religious Studies, Goethe University, Frankfurt, and Venerable Bhikshuni Dr. Jampa Tsedroen, Lecturer, Hamburg University, focused their selection on those papers that most ably developed the rationale for women's ordination. They also invited the great American Buddhist scholar, Dr. Janet Gyatso, Hershey Professor of Buddhist Studies of the Harvard Divinity School, to provide a forward to the book through which she provides a clear and exciting summary of the most prominent issues. While this short review cannot do justice to all the scholarship that the participants brought to the Congress, I would like to highlight what I found to be the most personally inspiring.

Dr. Gyatso opens the work by exercising the quintessential Buddhist discipline of exploring what is skillful. Building an ordination platform for women is more than just dealing with the Eight Garudharmas or the "Eight Heavy Rules" that nuns must honor by putting respect for the youngest monk but one day in robes ahead of respect for the most learned nun, scholar and veteran of sixty years in robes. To use a legalist approach to define the problem misses the spirit of the Buddha's wisdom, where consensus is paramount. Gyatso, unlike many Westerners, pleads that we remember this is a Tibetan community issue. To this I would add that this is a painful issue. The Tibetans are now entering their third generation of living in exile and the memory of their

leader fleeing in secrecy to evade capture by Chinese soldiers and Chinese aerial attacks is still a fresh and living memory. It is only in the last twenty years that the community of Tibetans in diaspora has entered the world limelight, and unfortunately, many if not most are still striving for identity, security, integrity, continuity, as well as religious freedom. Unlike Westerners, many Tibetans may actually equate change not with progress but with disempowerment.

Gyatso also observes that there is resistance to ordination by the Tibetan and other Asian Buddhist communities because it is seen as Western and Feminist. By extension, she argues that the Eight Garudharmas were and are a community issue of their own. The spirit of them, whether or not the Buddha actually mandated them, was to protect nuns from abuse. The idea of ordained women was, except for the newly emerging Jain community, a radically new development. Women could be inadvertently exposed to abuse by monks and laymen, and, thus, the Buddha's intention was to protect the morale of the sangha from a loss of discipline from within and loss of respect from the lay community without. The times, however, have changed. Buddhist women no longer face the patriarchal, financial, educational, and political constraints they did 2,500 years ago. Gyatso closes her essay by arguing that we need to shift from issues of power and legality to what would constitute a strong bhikshuni sangha. Indeed, one could push this line of thought further and wonder that if 2,500 years ago the establishment of Buddhism was jeopardized by admitting women, then today would it be jeopardized by not allowing them?

With this same spirit, let us consider other contributors to the Congress. Bhikkhu Sujato notes the problem of using Western religious concepts to package the problem. With respect to ordination lineages, there was never a so-called "schism" between Theravada and Mahayana or Mahayana and Tibetan Schools; they are but different Traditions. Differentiation came about through geographical adaptation over space and time. There was no self-proclaimed "Reformer." Indeed, one can study the different Vinaya texts preserved in Pali, Chinese, and Tibetan and find virtually no significant differences in the Precepts. To Bhikkhu Sujato's observations, I may add that one can read the accounts of Chinese travelers to Southeast Asia in the third and fifth centuries of the Common Era and find Mahayana Lineages thriving side-by-side with Theravada Lineages in countries as distant as Cambodia and Kazakhstan. Rather than dwell on differences within the Buddhist community, we should focus, Bhante Sujato says, on our "shared heritage," and work together for a "shared future as the custodians of

the Dhamma in this small world.”

Ute Husken, Professor of Sanskrit at the University of Oslo, in her essay takes Sujato’s line of argument one step further—there is too much focus on just one text. The Eight Garudharmas, which are only found in the Cullavagga, is not contained in the Pratimoksha or biweekly confession recited in all monasteries, nor is it found in any of the texts for the rites of ordination. The Buddha’s personal “ambivalence” was not an internal issue but an external expression of the “contradictory currents prevalent at the time of the redaction of these texts,” which were put into writing some four centuries after the Parinirvana of the Buddha. Dr. Lekshe Tsomo, an American scholar, Tibetan nun, and president and founder of Sakyadhita International, the very movement that held the first ever Buddhist women’s conference in Bodh Gaya, India, in 1987, summed up the contemporary concerns, “The freedom to receive full ordination is not only in the best interests of women, it is in the best interests of society at large, since it helps optimize the potential of all human beings.” In other words, consciousness is not dependent on gender.

Still we have the question: What do Tibetan women want? If the Mulasarvastivada Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, which began in the seventh century, existed for 1,300 years without ever ordaining women to full bhikshuni vows, then does the absence of ordination matter? Here, Lobsang Dechen, a Tibetan Ani or Ten Precept Nun, would argue that history does make a difference. She notes that unlike Sri Lanka and China, no Bhikshunis ever came to her country, and when the Tibetan community fled the Chinese occupation of her homeland, very few nuns escaped into India. That said, while Tibetan women can leave home, they cannot pursue higher studies without full ordination; and, without understanding, many do not grasp its significance. For her, the satisfaction of technical prerequisites is but a “small obstacle.” She and her sisters are ready!

The day finally arrived. His Holiness the Dalai Lama mounted the stage with his classic duck walk with toes pointing outwards. He bypassed the gilded wooden teaching platform in the center and without

pause quietly prostrated himself three times to a giant thangka of the Buddha hanging from the stage curtains. I sighed, recollecting that this is a Dharma gathering, and not a performance by my favorite rock star. I must listen with attention. Before those 1,400 people and the Buddha Realms, His Holiness at last gave formal remarks. Expectations were high. In essence, he noted that “Thus, there is no point in discussing whether to revive the bhikshuni ordination; the Buddha clearly intended for there to be bhikshunis. The question is merely how to do it properly within the context of the Vinaya.”

Exciting as it was to hear His Holiness advocate ordination, a world of meaning was contained in that statement. What followed, particularly after he heard the presentation by the eighteen Bhikshu and Bhikshuni

Elders was a deflating series of caveats. His Holiness could not move unilaterally even with his own Tradition as it is composed of no less than four independent lineages; that ordination for Tibetan women had to be not only recognized by all Tibetan lineages, but also by the Theravada and Mahayana Lineages. Further, there was the final—and bureaucratic—conundrum that



Tibetan mandala

since there were no Mulasarvastivada Bhikshunis, thus Tibetan novice and candidate nuns could not be taught and physically ordained. While the first two concerns accurately yet unfortunately reflected the true political reality, His Holiness did at least urge that the world Sangha meet together to deliberate. After all, Hamburg was an academic conference and not a Sangha council.

As to the third issue, no women to ordain women, many of us were left dumbstruck. Had His Holiness missed the point of the presentations? Did he not just hear Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi’s careful epistemological and doctrinal arguments that the Buddha did not intend women to be Ten Precept Nuns but Bhikshunis; that gender discrimination is unjust, that there is no prohibition of Bhikshunis of one lineage ordaining those of another lineage, and that in short, would the Buddha not want “what is kind and generous”?

With heavy hearts, we returned to our hotels and host temples. No one was in the mood to eat or drink, not even the lay people who would normally use the last

night of a conference to dine out and say farewell to new friends and old acquaintances. Had we not heard the young Tibetan Ani in the meeting of the two hundred the night before say that she did not want ordination? Had the Dalai Lama heard our answer to the question, “What does the community want?” Perhaps, His Holiness really was listening but hearing, “We the Community Are Not Ready.”

Fortunately, the story does not end here. During the



Tibetan prayer flags

meeting of the two hundred, the young Ani also said that she did not want ordination because it would change her relationships with her teachers and lay supporters by making interaction much more formal and the risk of infraction much greater. It would change her world and she could not see how it would be for the better. It would be a change led not by her people but outsiders. While some in the audience angrily asked why did the university spend money to support such ingratitude and others urged that we women go on with ordination even without consensus, eventually one Tibetan lay woman did stand up and offer a new perspective.

“Sister,” began Rinchen Khando Choegyal, former Minister of Education of the Tibetan Government in Exile and current Director of the Tibetan Nuns Project, “it may be true that you are not ready for ordination, but it may not be true for all of your sisters. Many have studied long and hard and want to receive higher ordination. Can we really disregard their intention to follow in the footsteps of Mahaprajapati? Please, think of them. Also, I ask you to consider this rare karmic opportunity. Can we afford not to consider ordination? Can we afford not to think of our sisters worldwide and our own sisters in the future? Please, if you need more time, then take it, but allow your sisters, who are ready, to proceed.”

Somehow, that hope manifested the morning after His Holiness’ underwhelming conclusion. At six am, the phone rang in my room. It was the Office of His Holiness and the venerable was looking for my roommate, the laywoman who gave those healing words of encouragement to the young nun. I passed the phone to her and after a flurry of Tibetan, I

learned that His Holiness had decided to call a special audience with all the scholars who had presented at the Congress. As our room had two phone lines, my job was to get the word out to the Westerners and to help Madame Rinchen field her return calls from the Asian community.

After breakfast, like buzzing dragonflies we assembled in a white, bare room in a fashion unlike any I had seen before. Arranged in a horseshoe, the nuns sat in the first rows, followed by us laywomen, followed by the monks, and lastly the laymen. Despite the centuries of scholarship and old world decorum that filled the room, we chattered like magpies and woodpeckers. Our joyful cacophony fell to awe and silence as the one door to the room opened and the familiar and warm presence of His Holiness filled its frame. Now in the intimacy of a mere meter, the great elder nuns relaxed their bodies and leaned in as if to embrace their beloved uncle while His Holiness humbly and attentively began by apologizing for the mistaken impression he had left the day before. We soon realized that the Dalai Lama did not mean “if” there would be higher bhikshuni ordination for Tibetan women, but a question of “how” and he had come to us to consult on the kinds of mechanisms to be considered. Ordination is a community, and not a unilateral or private, process and by his very presence he demonstrated this noble intention in word and deed. After all, bhikshuni precepts are given as well as received; and, they require being heard as well as being said, in order for their intention to bear fruit as action. His Holiness was listening to us... as we had listened to the young nun.

Postscript: On November 7, 2010, six Tibetan Ten-Precept Nuns from Europe and Australia received Sramaneriya Precepts in the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya from Venerable Chao Yin at Pu Yi Yuan Temple, Taipei County, Taiwan. In November of 2012, once they have finished their trial period as novices, they will receive their Candidate and Bhikshuni Precepts and then return to their home viharas to pursue study of the Mulasarvastivada Vinaya.

Ms. Roseanne Freese received the Three Refuges from Venerable Tian Yi at the Temple of the Vermillion Cloud in Chiayi County, Taiwan in 1980 and is currently the Secretary for Sakyadhita U.S.A. She also participated in the Hamburg Congress, presenting on “The First Bhiksuni Ordination in East Asia—Giving Birth to a New Way of Life,” which examined the historical, textual, canonical, and lineage issues surrounding the transmission of bhikshuni ordination from Theri Sara and her Sri Lankan sisters to Hui Guo and her Chinese sisters in Nanjing, China, in 434.



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