

# Present

The Voices and Activities of Theravada Buddhist Women | Spring 2010

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**Design & Layout**

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Jampa Tsedroen, Joe Evans, David

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# Welcome Good Branch, You Are Not Unwelcome

*By Anonymous*

In the letter\* that resulted from the December 2009 Western Abbots' Meeting (WAM), a lovely simile was offered of their lineage as "a gnarled and deeply rooted oak" which has weathered vicissitudes due to its lack of flimsiness. Change to such a great entity comes only slowly, they explained.

The ancient, historic Sri Maha bodhi tree of Sri Lanka comes to mind. Despite its extraordinary age of 2,300 years and its religious potency and rightly exalted status, the Sri Maha Bodhi tree is not enormous as one might expect. It remains simple and slender, not large. The trunk once consisted of two large branches that forked in opposite directions, as though balancing each other. When one great branch fell and died, it received an elaborate funeral and cremation.

Today the white-washed shorn stump of the missing branch remains prominently in view. Missing its other half, the living branch looks imbalanced as it leans at a low angle. It is propped upon iron girders for support.

If a new living shoot were to miraculously appear upon the smooth stump of the revered Sri Maha Bodhi tree's missing branch, how would the beloved tree's diligent caretakers

respond? They surely would be supportive! The new growth's progress would bring new energy to the whole tree. They would give all due care to the tender emerging leaves and twigs to assist in continued development; they would help ensure its continued survival. They certainly would not act as an enemy to the tender twigs and leaves of the re-emerging branch, by chopping it away with an axe, or destroying it with poison, or covering it with a blanket for it to wither away without light. They would protect it with their lives.

The gnarled, old tree of the lineage of the Thai Forest Tradition is missing half of its bequeathed trunks: the Bhikkhuni Sangha established by the Buddha. The glaring absence of half of its wholeness leaves the remaining Bhikkhu Sangha (and lay supporters, too) sadly imbalanced in numerous ways.

It seems the guardians of this lovely old Bhikkhu Sangha, upon seeing any sign of new growth developing on the old stump where there was once a Bhikkhuni Sangha, destroy it using an axe, or by using poison, or by covering it with a blanket so that it is denied light.

"Using an axe" means using influence with the lawmakers and law enforcement to cause the State to exercise its power to punish or harass women who attempt to ordain and any bhikkhu who tries to help them.

"Using poison" means spreading falsehoods regarding the potential to revive the female order.

Opponents of a Bhikkhuni Sangha in Theravada Buddhism have, for the past 900 years, continued to make numerous false claims. Yet in the Canon, there is only support to be found:

- In the "Maha Parinibbana Sutta," the Buddha stated it had been his plan from the beginning to create a fourfold Sangha (DN.16);
- With each new bhikkhu rule and bhikkhuni rule, the Buddha gave the same ten reasons for that rule, always for the recipients' ultimate welfare;
- "I allow you, O Bhikkhus, to ordain women" (CV.IX); and when he instructed bhikkhus to leave Vassa residence to help if a woman wants to go forth or fully ordain even if not asked for and all the more if invited (MV.III);
- "Welcome to you, good lady; you are not unwelcome!" (Thig.337);
- "I allow you, O Monks, to teach Vinaya to women." (CV.X.8)

In their letter, the bhikkhus of the WAM express confidence that observers will understand their limitations. They say that the status quo of keeping harmony with the Thai community by

sacrificing the cause of bhikkhunis—thus avoiding the wound of a potential split—prevents compromising “the spiritual welfare of all women and men, lay and monastic, that are a part of this lineage of Dhamma practice.” They do not see that hundreds of their female lay disciples would, in the right conditions, readily ordain as bhikkhunis for the sake of liberation. Remaining out of harmony with the Vinaya regarding women’s ordination wounds more deeply, affecting everyone’s welfare.



Photo © Brenda Batke-Hirschmann

Let us hope that the bhikkhunis of today and tomorrow will be able to count upon all conscientious members of the Bhikkhu Sangha to give all the support that the Buddha expected them to give to bhikkhunis. The Bhikkhu Sangha never had the option of simply ignoring bhikkhunis; they are forbidden even to recite their Patimokkha without first stating that a teaching arrangement has been made for the sake of their fully-ordained sisters. The Buddha established many lovely traditions from which we all may continue to benefit, like the refreshing shade of a gracefully balanced bodhi tree. ❖

*The author of this article wishes to remain anonymous.*

*Edited by Marcia Pimentel.*

\*The WAM letter of December 11, 2009 is [available here](#).

## Proposed Bhikkhuni Publications Series

The vision is for a series of high quality, free distribution, publications about bhikkhunis and women in Buddhism to support the revival of the Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha, and to inspire and bring joy to people everywhere.

We hope to do this by: bringing stories and examples of wise, inspiring, compassionate and courageous buddhist women into everyday awareness; making the early history and contemporary landscape of women in Buddhism common knowledge; and to nurture a deep sense of connection and ‘at-homeness’ for women within the textual traditions and historical unfolding of Buddhism.

We would also like draw inspiration from the bhikkhuni Vinaya, both for women who have a monastic calling, and for those who would like to deepen their understanding of the nature of this training. We hope that by becoming more aware of the past precedents of the lives of women within the Theravada Buddhism, women (and men) will be able to more clearly identify the value and relevance of what the Buddha taught, in their own lives, right now.

### Bhikkhunis Past and Present

- Early bhikkhuni history.
- The contemporary Theravada bhikkhuni landscape.
- A collection of essays and personal reflections about bhikkhunis from the fourfold assembly.

### Inspiration from Bhikkhunis

- A collection of stories, inspiring images and myths about women from the early Buddhist literature (these can take many forms: art, personal reflections, fictional re-constructions, poetry, essays, etc.).
- Audio compilations of Dhamma talks.
- Collections of inspiring writing from 20th century bhikkhunis
- Re-translation of the Therigatha.
- Essays on the Therigatha and on the bhikkhuni apadana.

### Bhikkhuni Vinaya

- A critical examination of the textual tradition and approaches to it, including essays on the garudhammas, sanghadisesa 3, sikkhamana training.
- A publication celebrating monastic and lay styles of Dhamma practice, which respects the integrity and beauty of the interdependent modes of practice, and reflects on the mutual obligations, expectations and relationships.

### Bhikkhuni Resources

- A parallel to “The Bhikkhus Guide” handbook.
- Any other ideas of media that people might be inspired to contribute.

This series is still in its formative stages. Ideas, feedback, and contributions (editing, writing, researching, artwork, audio-visual etc.) are most welcome.

### Contact Details

Venerable Adhimutta  
Rebecca Green  
Marcia Pimentel

[adhimutta@gmail.com](mailto:adhimutta@gmail.com)  
[rebecca.green@ymail.com](mailto:rebecca.green@ymail.com)  
[dragonfly.marcia@gmail.com](mailto:dragonfly.marcia@gmail.com)

**Present**

Post Office Box 1058  
Santa Barbara  
California, USA  
93102-1058



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*Once, while Mahánāga was begging alms at Nakulanagara, he saw a nun and offered her a meal. As she had no bowl, he gave her his, with the food ready in it. After she had eaten and washed the bowl, she gave it back to him saying, “Henceforth there will be no fatigue for you when begging for alms.” Thereafter the Elder was never given alms worth less than a kahāpana. The nun was an arahant.*

*DhSA.399*