

VIETNAMESE BHIKKHUNI DHAMMANANDA: TRANSFORMING

War and Violence to Peace and Respect



Sakyadhita Conference Vietnam

By Susan Pembroke

Bombs from American B-52 planes and heavy rockets pummeled the rural North Vietnam village where Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's working class parents struggled to stay alive during the escalating Vietnam War. Born in 1969 on a gloomy day in winter, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, a skinny baby and the sixth of ten children, was given the name Pham, thi Minh Hoa. The translation is Pham, the Bright Flower, her name symbolizing hope and beauty at a time U.S. bombs were destroying the very forests she would come to love. The raging war prompted Ayya Dhammananda's family to flee the delta village of her birth and relocate to a remote area bordering Laos, a town nestled between the mountain ranges named Truong Son, the Long Range mountains.

Her hard working parents succeeded in farming a fertile track of land. Ayya (the term of respect she prefers) Dhammananda grew up in a wooden house, bustling with children and activity. Outside were the family's animals and beyond them lush forests, rivers, and mountains. In her world, one way of measuring quality of life was to count the craters from American bombs. In her village in the Ha Tinh province, she found only two bombed sites compared to many more in other towns. Their home, one of the largest in the village, attracted a steady stream of beggars. Even as a little girl, Pham delighted in giving food to those in need. She could not have imagined then that one day she would choose to abandon everything to ordain as a bhikkhuni and become a person dependent on others for food as well.

Her childhood and adolescence vacillated between tenderness and harshness, encouragement and disparagement, loving ties and wrenching separations. She had a kind-hearted mother who did not know how to express love and a father who recited poems and proverbs to her before she fell asleep at night and insisted the highly intelligent Pham go away to the best school but burned her books and beat her with a cane when she became too engrossed in learning. As a little girl Pham regularly turned to her grandmother for nurturance and affection.

In January 1973, almost four years after Ayya Dhammananda was born, a ceasefire had been arranged and U.S. ground troops left Vietnam. Soon afterward, though, fighting resumed between the North and South until South Vietnam surrendered on April 30, 1975. Pham was six. Peace lasted for only a short time. War broke out again, this time with China in the north and the Khmer Rouge in the south. The years from 1978 to 1981 were the most terrifying. In 1978 when Pham was in second grade, adults dug deep tunnels around her school so that teachers and children had a safe haven to escape the bombing.

Growing up in a veritable battlefield took its toll on Pham. A joking façade concealed a serious, thoughtful child who wanted to make sense of a bewildering, violent world. She sums up her life journey in three sentences. "I was born in suffering. I grew up in suffering and was looking for a way to overcome dukkha. I found the way and now live by it." The part she omits is an earnest wish to help others overcome suffering as well.

Her parents met when her father returned to his hometown after an absence of twenty-five years. Pham's mother happened to be caring for Ayya Dhammananda's paternal grandfather, a Confucius scholar who failed a test that could have led to a governmental position which would be appointed by the monarch. That failure scarred him. His bitterness impacted the entire family. Perhaps part of Ayya

Dhammananda's thoughtful personality and quest for a solution to life's cruel realities was partly forged by a combination of the tough life she was born into and a family that discussed ideas and philosophy.

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Yet, not all of her life involved hurt and sadness. Some of Ayya Dhammananda's happiest childhood memories involved listening to her father tell stories about his exotic experiences in foreign lands. His recounting of time spent in Thailand introduced her to Theravada Buddhism and sparked an inquiry that transcended the spiritual amalgam of animism, sprite worship, devotion to Quan Yin, Pure Land Buddhism, Christianity, and Confucianism prevalent in Vietnamese villages. Pham's father, a nationalist, joined the Vietnamese Liberation Army in Bangkok in 1946 when he was twenty-four. From northeast Thailand, his group advanced into Laos and Vietnam where they fought the French. Her father remained a fighter until the final Vietnamese victory over the French in Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

As a little girl Pham was fascinated by her father's tales about monks who were offered sticky rice when going on alms rounds in the early morning. Her father described the monks as quiet, good hearted, and generous in sharing what they had with the poor and homeless. The young Pham dreamed of living in those places so she could offer food. Her father could only apologize for living in a part of Vietnam in which there were no monks and expressed regret that it was not a Vietnamese custom to offer food to monastics the way they do in Thailand and Laos. A seed, a vision of another way of life, had been planted in Pham's heart. Her father's stories may have enabled her to imagine a life larger, more complex, and more enriching than the one her rural village afforded, and may have led to her spending fourteen years of her adult life in countries other than Vietnam.

Exploration, courage, and adventure were core aspects of her family's legacy.

As Pham entered her teen years, there was mounting tension and worry at home. Her oldest brother joined the army and was sent to Cambodia. Her father frequently lost his temper,

often leaving her mother and grandmother in tears. In addition, her two older sisters left school to work on the farm. When Pham was fourteen, her brother returned home a disabled war veteran. He lost a leg and suffered many head wounds caused

by a landmine. Late at night, under the moonlight, her brother played the guitar. He and her sisters sang melancholy songs about life, love, and war.

Already feeling despondent, her depression intensified when she was sent to live with an elderly uncle and his wife to study math after doing well in a school contest. She missed her family and asked to return but instead her parents sent a sister to stay with her. Later she would feel grateful to her family for insisting on the best education for her.

By the time she was sixteen, she became increasingly aware that her life was without meaning or substance. Sometimes, when alone, she would sit quietly by the side of a river, gazing at the far away blue mountain range covered in white clouds, and wish that one day she could live there in solitude. Around this time, Ayya Dhammananda had a striking and unforgettable dream. In the dream, she was a tall, thin man in his thirties, walking on a narrow, village path. The man's head was shaven and he was wrapped in a yellowish robe. He went from house to house, receiving food that he collected in a rounded, black object. Her current parents were donors. With barely enough food for the day, the monk went to the outskirts of a forest, sat under the foot of a tree, and mindfully ate. When Pham recounted the dream to her father, he explained the person in the dream was a wandering Buddhist monk. At this point in her life, she had yet to see a Buddhist monk or nun, even in a movie or novel.

Conflicts between her parents made the thought of marriage an increasingly unappealing prospect even at a time when Pham was losing her tomboy figure and occasionally fantasizing about romance. Her resistance to marriage intensified as she witnessed her oldest sister's troubling experiences with men. The young Pham vowed to never fall in love, to never allow herself to become a victim of men. It was not only her parents'

arguments and sister's difficulties that made her wary of family life, but comments her father made as well. When she questioned him about harming and killing others when he was a soldier, her father explained that you did not think about things like that when at war. In other conversations, her father implied that later in life he felt obliged to make other moral concessions as well, those times in the name of providing for his family.

Ayya Dhammananda, still years away from knowing she would one day ordain, thought long and hard about her father's remarks. She feared having a family might force her to do something contrary to her conscience as well. Her oldest brother, though, urged her "to live life in full. Thinking too much makes you miss lived experiences, makes you not a realistic person." She asked her brother how to stop thinking about unwanted or distressing thoughts. He confessed

to not knowing but believed monks might know. Ayya Dhammananda recalls feeling relieved that "at least someone knows, and one day I can learn with them." For a number of years, the wish to become a renunciant had been growing. Following high school, Pham made it clear to her family that she wished to become a nun even though she did not know whether to become a Christian or Buddhist nun.

Distracted by tragic events in her family and unsure of what she wished to study, Pham failed the entrance exams to a desired university. She returned home, helped on the farm, and tutored younger siblings. Eventually she entered an educational

young man.

No matter what her family told her, she remained reluctant to bring a child into the world. Some of the reasons had to do with her lingering confusion about life and what she witnessed at home and some of her hesitancy was driven by social and environmental concerns. Following the war, the Vietnamese population had risen considerably at the same

time punitive American sanctions made the country worse in every area of life. Many forests had been destroyed by the war. She felt very strongly that she could not add "more burden to this earth," the effect of yet another child in a country already ravaged by years of war and impoverished due to economic sanctions. She wrote stories and articles, voicing her multiple concerns, but none were published.

The sudden loss of a brother in a road accident crystallized her decision to renounce lay life. By the time she and her father reached the hospital, her brother was dead. His death was a brutal reminder of impermanence. She remained with her grief-stricken family for two months at which point nothing could prevent her from leaving home to become a nun. She went to the nearest Buddhist nun monastery in Vinh city which was 80 kilometers from her home. There, she met her first teacher, Ven. Thich Dieu Niem, a nun in her seventies. Pham was admitted after an hour interview centering on her circumstances and motives. This day marked a turning point in her life and was one of the happiest days



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college at nineteen and graduated at twenty-one. During these college years, she had contact with Mahayana nuns and became a regular visitor at their nunnery in Nha Trang city where her college was located. The idea of becoming a Buddhist nun solidified in her mind during this period. Her eldest brother, always the mentor to everyone in the family, persisted in urging her to live life full tilt. Her family even attempted to match her with a

she had experienced in many years.

After nine months in the monastery, she was tonsured, not by the giving of precepts, but by verses of renunciation in the Thien Lam Te (Zen) Lineage. During those months, Ayya Dhammananda visited Theravada and Mahayana monasteries in Hue city, 300 kilometers away. Her mind inclined toward Theravada practice, however her heart told her to remain with her teacher

who was very ill. She stayed for two and a half years and performed all her duties, which were demanding since she was the only young and knowledgeable nun there.

Work occupied her time from 4:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., crowding out any time to learn the sutras or practice meditation. Though she appreciated the Bodhisattva practices and admired her teacher as an excellent example of a selfless servant for destitute people, Ayya Dhammananda wanted people coming to the temple to have more dhamma education, not just rites and rituals. One day a wandering Theravada monk came to their monastery. For the first time, she had the chance to listen to profound but practical dhamma teachings, which she found inspiring. She began comparing the busyness at the monastery she was at with the free and simple lifestyle the monk practiced. She began studying books on meditation by Achan Chah and other Theravada authors.

Her teacher gave her permission to go to Ho Chi Minh City where she met the Ven. Thich Minh Chau, the renowned monk who translated the five Nikayas into Vietnamese and founder of Van Hanh Buddhist Institute. She stayed at a Mahayana nunnery until moving to another nunnery established five years earlier by Ven. Vien Minh. Ven. H. Phapa, one of the monks there, trained in Burma and Thailand for thirty years. He recommended further study in Burma or Thailand. Eventually, she was admitted at the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU) in Yangon, Burma. While in Burma, when classes were not in session, she and the other nuns spent all of their time in forest meditation centers around Yangon.

Ayya Dhammananda studied with various teachers—Pa Auk Sayadaw, Sayadaw U Janaka, Sayadaw U Pandita and Ven. U Tejaniya, and Swe Oo Min Sayadaw. She received a B.A. in Buddha-Dhamma at ITBMU in 2002. Her meditation practice, informed by Buddhist studies, formed the basis of her Ph.D. dissertation: the connection between ego-consciousness and unsatisfactory experience.

While in upper Burma, she met Ven. Bhikkhuni Kusuma and learned about the situation in Sri Lanka for nuns. In Colombo, she continued her studies at the Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies (PGIPBS), University of Kelaniya, and earned a M.A. (2004) and a Ph.D. (2008) in Buddhist Studies at this institute.

In 2002, the first group of four Vietnamese Theravada nuns went to Sri Lanka to receive bhikkhuni ordination organized by Sakyadhita International's branch in Sri Lanka. The ordination conflicted with a final exam at ITBMU. Finally, in June 2004 at Anuradhapura, the ancient city of Sri Lanka, she ordained as a bhikkhuni with seven other women—five Sri Lankans, one other Vietnamese, and one woman from the Czech Republic. She lived with her mentor, Ven. Bhikkhuni Kusuma, for more than four years at Lakavipassana Medita-

tion Centre in Colombo and the Ayya Khema International Centre, founded by Ven. Kusuma, in Horana.

In 2010, a handful of Ayya Dhammananda's dedicated lay supporters were instrumental in the construction of the Khemarama nuns' monastery, the first bhikkhuni arama for Theravada bhikkhunis in Ba-ria Vung-tau province, 120 kilometers from Ho Chi Minh city. In residence are two bhikkhunis, one samaneri, and three postulants. The women monastics were offered land in northern Ha Giang province to build a bhikkhuni monastery. Among the five Vietnamese Theravada bhikkhunis, three have Master's degrees and two have Ph.D.'s in Buddhist Studies. Additionally, all were trained in intensive meditation retreats in Myanmar.

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Vietnam remains primarily Mahayana, with over 24,000 Mahayana bhikshunis and samaneris. Nevertheless, since the 1940s when Theravada Buddhism came to Vietnam during the modern era through a group of monks ordained in Cambodia and led by Ven. Ho Tong, the ranks of Theravada monastics continue to grow. At this time, there are about 300 Theravada monks and about 400 Theravada nuns (eight precepts) in Vietnam. Ayya Dhammananda represents one of a handful of Theravada Vietnamese bhikkhunis.

Wanting to meet the needs of her supporters, Ayya Dhammananda travels throughout the country, giving talks to people from diverse backgrounds, distributing dhamma books, teaching meditation to old and young alike, and assisting in



sion and loving-kindness. She hopes to train young people as volunteers to work on this endeavor. Part of her motivation in going to Australia is to become more informed on the subject of domestic violence so that she can train others in Vietnam. She also supports efforts to assist Vietnamese children disabled from the lingering effects of Agent Orange, an herbicide and defoliant used by the U.S. during the Vietnam War.

Ayya Dhammananda wrote in an email interview, “I was born in suffering. I grew up in suffering and was looking for a way to overcome dukkha. I found the way and now live by it.” Unlike her grandfather who never learned to overcome life’s setbacks and disappointments, her life story is an example of transmuting heartache and grief into compassion and wisdom. In working to dispel her

own sadness and loss, she continues to bring hope and inspiration to those who have also endured tremendous hardship due to years of wars, impoverishment, violence, and ignorance. She encourages them to also walk the path of liberation with her.

rebuilding temples. She wishes to spread what she describes as a “rational Buddhism” in North Vietnam where most people have very limited information on Buddhadhamma.

In addition, she has spent a considerable amount of time in Australia over the last three years, teaching the dhamma and supporting the budding Bhikkhuni Sangha there. She intends to spend the rest of 2011 and much of 2012 in Australia in meditation as well as teaching the dhamma to Australians, Sri Lankans,

If you can offer suggestions or help in assisting Ayya Dhammananda in organizing support for victims of domestic violence in Vietnam, she can be reached at scphaphy@gmail.com.

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Singaporeans, and other Westerners. In Victoria, she will be teaching at a Buddhist summer school program as well.

A subject of growing concern for Ayya Dhammananda is the prevalence of domestic violence. For thousands of years, Vietnamese thinking was influenced by Confucianism, a philosophy rife with patriarchal behavior and gender discrimination. Unfortunately for Vietnamese females, Buddhism is no better in its treatment of women. Both contribute to violence against women and children. Ayya’s goal is to form an organization to educate people about the dangers of domestic violence and implement solutions to this problem through Buddhist teachings on compas-

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