

Bhikkhuni Ordination at Bodhinyana Monastery, a Response to Ajahn Chandako and Others

By Ajahn Brahmali and the Bodhinyana Sangha

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It is a good thing that the issue of bhikkhuni ordination, particularly within the Western Sangha connected with Ajahn Chah's monastery Wat Pah Pong, is finally being discussed openly. I welcome Ajahn Chandako's contribution, which is clearly well-intended, and I have no doubt that he is telling the truth as he sees it.

Unfortunately, the issues are quite complex, and there is a long historical process that has led to the present developments. It is only by understanding this process that one can fully appreciate why Ajahn Brahm and the Sangha at Bodhinyana Monastery decided to go ahead with bhikkhuni ordination on October 22nd. Below I will directly respond to most of the points raised by Ajahn Chandako and others.

Ajahn Chandako says he supports bhikkhuni ordination, and I have no doubt that he is sincere. He then mentions that he taught monastic training to bhikkhunis in California (in June 2009). What he does not mention is that during an interview in conjunction with the training he stated that "There are no serious obstacles coming from Western bhikkhus, as long as the bhikkhunis are independent. If you talk about having bhikkhunis in the Ajahn Chah sangha, that is another matter." That ordaining bhikkhunis in the Ajahn Chah Sangha is "another matter" is identical to the conclusion I had reached, and it is the main reason why it seemed necessary to do the ordination in Perth without first consulting the monks of the Wat Pah Pong tradition, including those in the West.

Ajahn Chandako next brings up the 'secrecy' with which the ordination was planned and performed, and then says that this has damaged the sense of trust within the Wat Pah Pong Sangha. I feel that the discretion we felt compelled to exercise was unfortunate but necessary, and I wish it could have been otherwise. It is important to realize, however, that 'secrecy' with regard to women renunciates, of whatever kind, has been the norm in many of the monasteries connected to Wat Pah Pong. In Bodhinyana Monastery, for example, we have been almost completely in the dark as to the developments in some of these monasteries, developments that were important in regard to the monastic training for women. More importantly discretion, regrettably, appeared unavoidable when the opposition to what we were proposing seemed so strong. Again, Ajahn Chandako himself had implied that bhikkhuni ordination within the Wat Pah Pong Sangha would be difficult and this was also my view.

Of course, I agree wholeheartedly with Ajahn Chandako that openness and consultation is preferable to doing things quietly. But when we perceived that openness and consultation could only hamper bhikkhuni ordination – most likely making it impossible – then there was little choice but to keep it quiet, regardless of how that might be viewed by others.

To understand how difficult it is to get bhikkhuni ordination taken seriously, some background

information is useful. Some monks have tried to raise the issue of bhikkhunis within the Wat Pah Pong Sangha for many years, but have essentially been ignored. The Wat Pah Pong Sangha has itself stated, in minuted meetings, that it does “not agree” with bhikkhuni ordination. In at least one monastery the women were told that they would no longer get the support of the bhikkhu Sangha, including no future ordinations, unless they agreed that the practice they were undertaking does not lead to bhikkhuni ordination. Given all this, and other things that I have not mentioned, is it not quite obvious why we did not choose to consult with the greater Wat Pah Pong Sangha? From our perspective any such consultation could only lead to an outright ban on performing bhikkhuni ordinations, and thus make it virtually impossible for us to go ahead. I do not see how we can be blamed for ‘secrecy’ when, as Ajahn Chandako himself has admitted, the conservative forces within the Wat Pah Pong Sangha are so strong.

Ajahn Chandako states that Ajahn Brahm was given the choice of either considering the bhikkhuni ordination performed at Bodhinyana Monastery as null and void or being cut off as a Wat Pah Pong branch monastery. It is important to realize, however, that not even a handful of monks were pushing for such a cutting off. I have been told that the vast majority of monks were quite placid and would probably have settled for a guarantee that Ajahn Brahm would not conduct any further bhikkhuni ordinations. Significantly, Ajahn Brahm was willing to give such a commitment for the sake of ending the disharmony. The large majority of monks at the Wat Pah Pong meeting seemed quite amenable to a compromise solution, but this was not enough for the small number of monks pushing for a complete cut-off.

In any case, and regardless of what actually happened at that Wat Pah Pong meeting, it would have been impossible for Ajahn Brahm to declare the ordination as null and void. An ordination properly performed cannot in retrospect be rendered void; this is a fundamental principle of the monastic Vinaya. In fact, according to pacittiya rule 63 of the bhikkhu Patimokkha it is an offense to agitate for the reopening of Sanghakamma (in this case an ordination) that has been properly performed. The simple fact is that Ajahn Brahm did not have the option to act in this way.

Another charge levelled against Ajahn Brahm is that, although he has lived in Australia for the past 26 years, he is expected to abide by Thai Sangha Law. As far as I know, this is simply not true. I have never seen any document or law to this effect, nor even heard of any verbal agreement of this sort. The reality is that most Western monasteries, including Bodhinyana Monastery, have adapted to local requirements, often in direct opposition to the practices followed in Thailand. One example is the use of jackets, which I understand the Western monasteries were specifically told by the Thai Sangha hierarchy they could not use. Moreover, what the Thai Sangha Laws actually say seems to be shrouded in myth. It is often stated that such laws prohibit bhikkhuni ordination, but the information I possess is that no such law actually exists. Nor does one agree to uphold Thai law by accepting the Chao Khun status, and no such thing is written on the Chao Khun certificate.

Ajahn Chandako claims that all the Western abbots of the Ajahn Chah lineage condemned Ajahn Brahm’s actions. This is too simplistic. I have personally been present when Ajahn Brahm has received phone calls from other Western abbots saying that this was no cause for breaking the bonds of

friendship. Ajahn Brahm replied that as far as he was concerned no bonds of friendship were broken. Moreover, a number of senior members of the Western Sangha were saddened by the sequence of events, evidently not supporting the expulsion of Bodhinyana Monastery from the Wat Pah Pong group of monasteries. In sum, there seems to be much diversity of opinion among the Western Sangha about this issue.

There is also the idea that the ordination in Perth will make the bhikkhunis pariahs in certain places and that they will therefore become more isolated. Apart from a few monasteries, particularly in Thailand, I very much doubt that this will be the case. I think the opposite is much more likely, since bhikkhuni ordination is something many in the West and elsewhere have been striving for.

Then there is the claim that Ajahn Brahm did this to go down in history as the reviver of the Theravada bhikkhuni Sangha. Firstly, the Theravada bhikkhuni order is already thriving in certain places, notably in Sri Lanka. Secondly, the reason Ajahn Brahm chose to be part of the ordination is that some of the nuns who were ordained were his direct disciples. It would be an abrogation of his responsibility to these nuns to hand over the ordination to a bhikkhu Sangha located somewhere else. Further, it is hardly likely that there would have been no reactions from other monks simply because the ordination was performed in this way. Ajahn Brahm would still have been regarded as having played a central part, and it is quite possible that the subsequent sequence of events would have been the same, or similar.

Ajahn Chandako states that if each monastery in the Ajahn Chah tradition had simply decided to go its own way this would have led to a much weaker and disjointed lineage. But our true lineage goes back to the Buddha, not just to Ajahn Chah. And according to the Buddha's instructions, which must take precedence over any other instructions followed by Buddhist monks, all monasteries are independent in their governance. Indeed, it may legitimately be asked how a strong centralized decision making body at Wat Pah Pong is in line with this principle. The weakness or strength of the lineage is ultimately related to the degree to which one follows the Buddha's Dhamma and Vinaya, not the degree to which one follows the rules laid down by a small subsection of the Sangha.

To summarize, the ordination of bhikkhunis at Bodhinyana Monastery happened as it did because it seemed clear that any consultation with the Wat Pah Pong Sangha would have led to it being blocked. It is indeed regrettable that the ordination had to happen in this way, but sometimes, as in the present case, there is no good alternative. However, I do not believe that any irreparable rift in the Sangha has been created. There is a storm right now, but like all storms it will pass. I firmly believe that in the long run this decision to ordain bhikkhunis will be regarded as appropriate given the difficult circumstances. Now we all need to act for conciliation and understanding, to look to the future good of Buddhism and let go of any remaining bad feelings.