

Ajahn Chandako on the Bhikkhuni Ordination in Perth 2009

by Ajahn Chandako

This letter was originally written as an open letter to the members of the Buddhist Society of Western Australia, but it may also be shared with others who are interested.

Auckland, New Zealand -- Greetings members of the Buddhist Society of Western Australia.

The reason is because of the recent actions and attitude of Venerable Ajahn Brahmavamsa. It's about how decisions are made in the Sangha and about respect for elders and peers.

On October 22nd a bhikkhuni ordination was held at Bodhinyana Monastery without the prior support of the wider monastic Sangha. As a result there have been huge ramifications felt around the world. Fully comprehending the issues surrounding the ordination takes some explanation.

I know the people involved pretty well. I lived at Bodhinyana Monastery for two rains retreats ten years ago, and throughout that time I had very high regard for Venerable Ajahn Brahm. Ajahn Brahmali is a good friend. I have been to India with Ajahn Vayama on pilgrimage, and I have known Ajahn Sujato for 17 years. In the past year I have gotten to know Ayya Tathaaloka, and Ayya Sucinta has stayed at our monastery in New Zealand. Having spoken with or gotten emails from all of them concerning the ordination, I think I understand their perspectives and motivations.

Personally, I fully support women's aspirations to practice the Dhamma in the form of a bhikkhuni if that is their wish. In June of this year I taught a bhikkhuni monastic training retreat in California in order to help them receive proper training and to demonstrate my support for their difficult quest for equal rights for women in Buddhism. I wrote a supportive article for a bhikkhuni newsletter. I arranged and brought requisites for them from Thailand, and invited some to spend time on retreat at our monastery in New Zealand. So I'm definitely not anti-bhikkhuni.

And yet I feel this particular ordination was a serious mistake. Why?

First of all, the secrecy with which the ordination was planned and carried out has significantly damaged trust levels with the rest of the Sangha. The normal way we operate as an international monastic community is based on openness and discussion. However, some of the nuns and monks who participated in the ordination told me that they were requested to keep the event secret. They said it was intentionally kept quiet in order to reduce the possibility of other people voicing objections. There was no public announcement until a couple of days beforehand, and the rest of the Sangha only found out indirectly at that time. Ajahn Brahm did not inform his preceptor (the acting head of the Sangha in Thailand) or the head of the Ajahn Chah lineage, Luang Por Liem. Many people feel that they were intentionally deceived.

Secondly is the timing. In just a few months, most of the senior monks and nuns from our tradition would have come together for the first time since the last WAM four years ago. Bhikkhuni ordination was one of the main topics to be discussed. In holding the ordination

beforehand, Ajahn Brahm and the Sangha in Perth effectively cut off any discussion on the issue and decided it for themselves. What one monastery decides does not simply affect that monastery, but affects all the other branch monasteries around the world as well. Ajahn Brahm's decision has already had major harmful effects on the rest of us. To proceed unilaterally on such a sensitive issue as bhikkhuni ordination without consulting other senior monks or nuns came across as blatantly disrespectful and insensitive.

The main issue here is not actually bhikkhuni ordination. The fact is, the vast majority of the senior western monks worldwide are sympathetic to the idea of bhikkhuni ordination, and progress in that direction was also being made in the mainstream of the Asian Theravada Buddhist countries. If Ajahn Brahm had waited to discuss the issue with his peers at the WAM, there was a realistic hope that bhikkhuni ordination would soon be accepted. Then the entire Sangha could have moved forward in unison with a spirit of harmony. I strongly suspect that this ordination at Bodhinyana will set this process of mainstream acceptance back many years.

If you know monastics like Luang Por Sumedho, Ajahn Sucitto, Ajahn Pasanno, Ajahn Tiradhammo, Ajahn Candasiri, Ajahn Amaro, etc, you know that they are wise, compassionate and tolerant people. Luang Por Sumedho and Ajahn Sucitto in particular have invested a huge amount of their time to make high quality monastic training available to women. So creating and perpetuating portrayals of those who opposed this ordination as anti-bhikkhuni or sexist is simply not accurate and certainly not helpful. Using polarizing language that tries to divide Buddhists into factions of pro and con, conservative and liberal, good and bad is an unreasonable oversimplification of a far more complex situation.

On November 1, only a week after the bhikkhuni ordination, a meeting was called at Ajahn Chah's monastery, Wat Pah Pong, and Ajahn Brahm was invited to clarify and explain what had taken place. This was not just a meeting of a few senior Thai and western monks. In fact, 160 of the most senior Thai forest monks came from around the country with only a few days notice to take part in this discussion. It was a public meeting that was open to anyone who wished to attend. Once the details of what actually took place were verified, the Ajahn Chah Sangha gave Ajahn Brahm the choice of either considering the ordination as null and void or being cut off from the Ajahn Chah tradition. He chose the second option.

By handling the bhikkhuni ordination in the way that he did, Ajahn Brahm put the Sangha of Ajahn Chah in a position where they basically had no choice but to remove his monastery from the Ajahn Chah lineage. This was very predictable. What I have been told by senior monks in Thailand is that there is a law in Thailand that makes it illegal to ordain bhikkhunis without the consent of the Great Council of Elders, the Mahathera Samakom. Although Ajahn Brahm does not reside in Thailand, if he wishes to retain a connection to the Thai Sangha, he is expected to abide by Thai Sangha laws. Even if he considered the bhikkhuni law unjust, in accepting his Chao Khun status from the King of Thailand (similar to being appointed a bishop), Ajahn Brahm agreed to uphold Thai law and the regulations of the Great Council of Elders. Working to change that Thai law would be constructive, but knowingly breaking the law and remaining part of the Thai lineage are incompatible.

When being removed from the Ajahn Chah Sangha was so obviously predictable, one again wonders why the ordination was handled the way it was. It seems that either Ajahn Brahm intentionally forced the issue in order to be able to go independent from the Ajahn Chah lineage; or that he was very much out of touch with the rest of the Sangha.

Those present at the Ajahn Chah Sangha meeting were some of the best forest monks in the world today. Some are true meditation masters and were definitely not approaching the issue from the standpoint of worldly ego. Most are monks who are excellent examples of the Buddhist teachings: wise and circumspect people who have dedicated their lives to practicing the Dhamma. All of the recent correspondence concerning the ordination had been translated into Thai, so they were well informed on the issues. They were however all, or nearly all, men, so some might get the impression that this was a sexist movement to repress equal rights for women even though this was not the case. Ajahn Chah set up one of the largest and best trained nuns communities in Thailand, and his successor, Ajahn Liem, said at the Sangha meeting that he has also spent a great portion of his life teaching the path of liberation to women.

Ajahn Sujato has also been a very vocal participant in this series of events. However, since he had already declared himself independent of the Ajahn Chah lineage and Bodhinyana Monastery, his actions and statements have been considered tangential to the main issue. To the best of my knowledge, Ajahns Brahm and Sujato have never tried to present their case at an Ajahn Chah Sangha meeting or discuss it at the WAM. If they had, and it really was clearly a hopeless dead end, then maybe an ordination like this might seem reasonable.

For all the western abbots of the Ajahn Chah lineage (who often have very independent views on Sangha matters) to be totally united on anything is rare. For all of them to condemn Ajahn Brahm's actions is unprecedented. Many of them have been personal friends of Ajahn Brahm for over 30 years. For them to cancel their attendance at the WAM and to go through all the difficulty of changing their flights and/or sacrificing their airfares shows how serious the matter is; however, for a western branch monastery to be removed from the Ajahn Chah lineage is unheard of. Nothing even close to this has ever happened. Only extreme behavior by someone who showed no remorse would warrant such a response by the rest of the abbots worldwide.

During this process Ajahns Brahm and Sujato displayed no willingness to compromise. Their emails to the Sangha seemed condescending, focused on creating divisiveness, accusing others of being sexist and trying to pigeonhole the Sangha into distinct camps that in fact do not exist. Those who did not agree with the ordination were spoken of as a fringe conservative element, when realistically it would be more accurate to say that 95% of the ordained Theravada monastics feel that the manner in which this ordination was held was a serious mistake.

Unfortunately, I believe that this ordination will be more harmful to the nuns involved than helpful. For example, the nuns will likely become even more isolated. There will be very few monasteries where they will be welcome or their ordination recognised. Ordaining in the midst of discord is not the most auspicious way to begin a life as a bhikkhuni, and even ordaining more than one bhikkhuni at a time is an offense in the bhikkhuni Vinaya. Regrettably, their actions will likely have detrimental effects on the mainstream acceptance of full ordination for women in the Theravada tradition. Again, all of this was easily predictable and avoidable, and yet the nuns involved seemed to have little or no idea that there would be negative effects resulting from this ordination.

As this drama unfolded, it became increasingly clear that the real issue was not really the nuns. If the welfare of the four women involved was the primary concern, Ajahn Brahm could have easily used his influence to arrange a bhikkhuni ordination elsewhere with other non-Ajahn Chah monks. That would have achieved their aim of full ordination. It could have all happened

independent of the Ajahn Chah Sangha, and it would not have resulted in waves of protest. The progress within the mainstream towards full acceptance could have continued, and monks like myself would have been happy to support and recognise the ordination.

So the question then arises, 'why did this ordination have to take place at Ajahn Brahm's monastery?' A few days before the ordination, I had a long conversation with Ayya Tathaaloka to find out what was happening and to discuss some of the predictable outcomes, so that the nuns could make an informed decision. Generally, the women were not aware that there would be any major problems arising from this ordination. I suggested the option of having the ordination as independent from the Ajahn Chah Sangha as possible. I thought that this might be a way to achieve their aims while defusing the situation.

The next day, Ayya Tathaaloka phoned back to say that the nuns had voted unanimously to have the ordination at Dhammasara (not a branch monastery of Ajahn Chah) and not to have Ajahn Brahm play an official role in the ordination. They were confident that this would still constitute a valid bhikkhuni ordination. This decision was subject to the agreement of Ajahn Brahm and the monks at Bodhinyana. Ayya Tathaaloka and Ajahn Vayama then went to Bodhinyana to discuss the matter with Ajahn Sujato and to phone Ajahn Brahm, who was in England at the time. Ayya Tathaaloka said that the nuns were not able to convince the senior monks of their alternate idea, so the nuns agreed to go ahead as originally planned.

If the ordination had been independent of Bodhinyana Monastery, Ajahn Brahm would not have been able to take credit for it. Although I cannot know the motivations behind their actions, many people I have spoken to think that what was important to Ajahns Brahm and Sujato was that they go down in history as the ones who revived the bhikkhuni order in the Theravada tradition. This is only speculation, but if this is true, then in some ways the nuns themselves seemed to have been used as pawns in this greater ambition.

In the days before the ordination I wrote to the nuns staying at Dhammasara:

“The nuns have a very valid point in that many of the senior monks have simply not wanted to deal with the issue of bhikkhuni ordination, and the lack of serious attention has been dismissive and harmful. Well, now you have the world's attention. Good on you! At this point you still have a choice. If you hold off on the ordination, almost everyone will praise your restraint, and everyone will have to seriously discuss bringing bhikkhunis into the mainstream of the Sangha. It's currently in everyone's face. If Ajahn Chah's monastery in Thailand gives the official go ahead, then we are all ready to happily support bhikkhuni ordination in Perth. If you go ahead with the ordination now, I think it will be a big mess, actually. There is already much sadness about the disharmony between Ajahns Brahm/Sujato and the European monasteries and Thailand. Ajahn Brahm is digging his heels in even deeper.”

One of the great strengths that holds the Ajahn Chah Sangha together worldwide is a sense of listening to each other, mutual trust and deciding issues together. This is the example set by the Buddha. If, after Ajahn Chah passed away, each monastery had simply decided to go its own way, independently following the opinions of their various abbots while disregarding the views of peers and elders, that would have led to a weak and disjointed lineage.

The communal framework set up by Ajahn Chah can accommodate a wide diversity of monks, nuns, views and lifestyles, but Ajahn Brahm has taken it way past the accepted limit. One of the reasons there is sadness around this issue is because this is the first time any of the western monasteries of Ajahn Chah has decided to split away from the group. If Ajahn Brahm had waited until the WAM to inform the rest of our Sangha that he would prefer to go independent, that would have been considered regrettable but brave and honourable. Instead, the way Ajahn Brahm has handled this bhikkhuni ordination has led to much disharmony, mistrust and bad feelings, both in monastic and lay communities.

This letter is written merely from my perspective, so please accept it as just that. I am not writing as a representative of the Sangha. The isolation of the Perth Sangha and lay community can lead to a reinforcing of particular views without having much opportunity to hear different perspectives, so at least communication among us has increased. If I have said anything in this letter that has caused anyone offense, I apologise and ask for your forgiveness.

With metta,

Ajahn Chandako