

Open Letter To All From Ajahn Brahm On His Exclusion by Wat Pah Pong

Perth, Australia -- A Theravada Bhikkhuni Ordination was held in Perth on Thursday 22nd October. The decision to proceed with the Bhikkhuni Ordination was finalised only on 20th September 2009, when the Committee of The Buddhist Society of Western Australia unanimously gave their support.

We did realise this was a sensitive matter and resolved to keep it in-house for the next month as we finalised the preparations. On Wednesday 13th October, 24 days after the decision was finalised, I informed Ajahn Sumedho in Amaravati, as a matter of courtesy, during my brief visit to the UK to see my mother (who has severe dementia).

The matter of Bhikkhuni Ordination had been discussed in Wat Pah Pong about two years ago and, as I recall, they resolved to follow the lead of the Mahatherasamakom (the supreme Monks' Council of Thailand).

I was and remain under the impression that the ordination of Bhikkhunis outside of Thailand was not contravening the rulings of the Mahatherasamakom. This is because I had consulted with the acting Sangharaja, Somdej Phra Pootajarn, well beforehand to ask him precisely his opinion on the ordination of Bhikkhunis outside of Thailand. His response, which I have circulated amongst the Western Sangha for a long time now, was "Thai Sangha law does not extend outside of Thailand". He repeated this another two times to make his intention clear.

Even though my ordination as a monk was in Thailand, I understood that my obligations were to the Dhamma and Vinaya, not to the Thai state. Nor was allegiance to Thailand part of the advice given to me by the Acting Sangharaja who presented me with the Thai ecclesiastical honour of Tan Chao Khun. The certificate that I received at the ceremony merely states that "Phra Brahmavamsa of Bodhinyana Monastery in Australia is a monk of Royal Grade with the title of Phra Visuddhisamvarathera. May he accept the duty in the Buddha's dispensation of teaching, settling Sangha business and looking after the monks and novices in his monastery in an appropriate manner. And to develop happiness and well being in the Buddha's Dispensation."

At the meeting in Wat Pah Pong on Sunday 1st November 2009, to which I was summoned at very short notice, it was apparent that the senior Thai monks had a poor understanding of the Vinaya rules concerning sanghakamma (formal acts of Sangha governance). For example, it took a long time to convince them that a Bhikkhuni Ordination is a double sanghakamma. The first part being performed by a gathering of Bhikkhunis presided over by the Preceptor ("Upajjhaya" or "Pavattini" -Ayya Tathaaloka from the USA) and the second part where the new Bhikkhunis approach the Bhikkhu Sangha to have their ordination confirmed by a ñatticatutthakamma (a formal motion followed by 3 announcements). I was one of the two Bhikkhus who chanted the ñatticatutthakamma in the Bhikkhu Sangha.

Once the senior Thai monks understood that I was not the Upajjhaya, they were willing to let the matter drop, provided I would promise in the midst of the Sangha not to participate in the ordination of any more Bhikkhunis. Remembering the example of Venerable Ananda at the First Council, I made that promise to the assembled Sangha three times. It looked as if harmony would be restored.

However, some senior monks raised the question of the status of the four women who had received Bhikkhuni Ordination. I accepted that they would not be regarded as Bhikkhunis in Thailand under the present climate, but the ordination was legitimate and they were Bhikkhunis. A senior monk then claimed that the ordination was invalid because of "ditthi vipatti", which he explained as meaning without the approval of the Sangha of Wat Pah Pong. As anyone with a basic knowledge of sanghakamma knows, this is nonsense. However, that unfounded view held sway and the meeting came down to a single clear choice: If Ajahn Brahm would state in the midst of the Sangha that the four women were not Bhikkhunis then there would be no penalty, otherwise Bodhinyana Buddhist Monastery would be removed from the list of branch monasteries of Wat Pah Pong. I paused for a minute to reflect and, considering that I could not go against the Vinaya and state the Bhikkhunis were not properly ordained, nor could I go against the wishes of the Sangha of Bodhinyana and the thousands of lay Buddhists that support the Bhikkhuni Ordination, I refused to recant.

As a result, Bodhinyana Buddhist Monastery was removed as a branch monastery of Wat Pah Pong. I emphasise that this decision had nothing to do with the process, secretive or otherwise, through which the ordination took place. The decision to excommunicate Bodhinyana Buddhist Monastery rested solely on my refusal to state that the Bhikkhuni Ordination was invalid.

After the meeting formally concluded I paid my respects to many of the senior monks who reminded me of their continued friendship. For example, one old friend said to me "meuan derm" (meaning "just as before"). I hope that a similar attitude will prevail among all my friends in the Western Sangha.

Ajahn Brahm
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