

Responses to the 5 Points for the UK Siladharas

Perspective from an anonymous Siladhara on receiving the 5 Points -- one shared by most others -- but who have found the atmosphere sufficiently intimidating that it has generated a lack of possibility for them to respond publically in a way authentic to their experience.

“I have been a Theravadan nun for a number of years. I love the Sangha with my whole Being and monastic life is like breathing to me. I never had any difficulties or problems with being a woman. I really enjoy it, and could see the advantages and limitation of it, as with any conditions.

While spending some time in the East, I was deeply shocked by the way women are treated there even now. Coming back to the West and still sensitive from this discrepancy, to my distress I realized that a similar attitude unconsciously suffuses the whole monastic structure even in the West. Being a nun in this environment has become increasingly more and more challenging.

I have been trying to do my best to transform this pain/dukkha and desperately trying to understand this suffering and find peace. It has been an on-going process for the last few years. With our most senior monks being critical and upset with the nuns in public and in private last year and then introducing these 5-points, it has become even more confusing and unbearable.

I cannot help feeling I am judged and discriminated about, just on the condition of having a female birth this lifetime. It does not make any sense to me. My rational mind and the emotional part of my being cannot understand all of this. From the beginning when I had the great blessing to meet the Buddha-Dhamma many years ago, the compassionate aspect of His teaching deeply resonated with my whole Being. The domination of one group of people above another seems out of alignment with the wisdom and compassion of the teaching of the Buddha.

When we were presented with 5-points I was shocked. Basically, the 5-points are reinforce the position of women in the Sangha as being forever junior to the Bhikkhus. In some way it is not a new thing, but how it has been phrased, and the process of how it has been done - without warning and without negotiation - putting pressure on us and then withholding our siladhara ordination if we are not in agreement - is shocking and not supportive of trust.

During the period of time when we were considering how to sign these 5 points, it was very painful and excruciating for many of us. During this time, I had been trying to find some integrity in myself that would allow me to honour my Truth and not to let myself be broken. How could I find the resources to even formally accept the conditions, which I felt to be so destructive for the well-being of women in this form and for the men as well?

I have felt, especially over the last several years, that our Nuns' Sangha has become very strong and beautiful and mature both in the individual practice as well as in our skills working in the relational field. This collective energy field has been strong enough to hold things even when significant individuals who held a lot of responsibility decided to leave. Of course there were interpersonal problems and challenging dynamics, but I felt there has been a good holding space. Personally, I think a very fine and alive tangible Energy- Body has been created between us, when we sat in the wide circle to discuss things.

Many of the nuns shared the perception that the situation of the feminine in the Buddhist monastic structure is not well adjusted to modern values, but thought that if we are wise and patient, we would slowly move forwards to create a healthier monastic structure with equality for all. Maybe this was naive, but this is what many of us felt.

Unfortunately, the five points stop any potential for future growth or improvement. I think our strength and beauty and maturity has become apparent and threatening to the monks, especially those men who had some painful or traumatic stuff around women. We became too strong and outspoken for their comfort.

Last year it was a very confused and complex situation. There were a few events that strongly affected the elder bhikkhus, events that the Siladhara didn't initiate but which affected us. A few monks openly criticized the nuns' community, questioning the integrity of our practice and even saying that our community is going downhill. This, as I said above, does not concur with my direct experience.

I have been upset, disheartened and disillusioned with our monks here (except a few courageous and compassionate brothers who have been empathetic all along) and with the whole monastic structure which supports such unhealthy and undermining conditions for women. The very vehicle which is supposed to enable one to wake up to the fullness of human potential leaves one instead feeling deeply malnourished after being exposed to it over a number of years.

There is no ground for being part of the larger monastic community, for belonging, and for having a valid ordination. Rather, there is the constant reminder on the structural level of the inferiority of women.

So, considering all of the above brings many questions to my mind and heart.

How could I still use a monastic vehicle that is so structurally unfriendly and prejudiced towards women, as my Path to liberation? How can I open up to my full potential of this Human Birth and cultivate the Heart based on the Brahma Viharas (love and compassion) in conditions that are constantly undermining me as person just because of my gender? How can I live with integrity, if I love being a monastic but find the ancient structure unresponsive to our modern times?

These questions keep arising in my mind and heart but there are no answers. I am personally interested in awakening with a heart strong and radiant and full of love with compassion for all Beings, myself included. These questions are part of an on-going enquiry and the answers have not yet emerged.....”

A response from Sister Sumedha, a UK Siladhara.

To echo something that was said earlier (I think on Ajahn Sujato's blog) I am amazed at the level of fear, denial, almost soporific group trance that the UK monasteries seem to be in the sway of.

I feel that our role as concerned, observant lay people is to try and wake monastics up to what is happening in their name"

When I read this in the ongoing discussion on the web I felt a strong need - as a woman living in the UK communities for over a decade - to write a response.

What I want to say is: I am not asleep to what is happening. I applaud the current unfurling of the complexities and denials that are active in our community life. The issue for me is not just one of gender equality or democracy, though those are important results that come from a heart that is genuinely open and something I very much wish to see. This, to me, is rooted in a spiritual emergency.

The core of why I came here is this: I was deeply suffering but sensed, even more deeply, that in our very nature is the capacity to awaken. Hearing the Buddha's teaching on non-clinging brought a light which has helped an inner perspective to grow. Where is the heart closed, where is there fear, need to control, protect, hide etc? Learning to let this light flow and be active - to bring its power to transform into real, living life - this is the human/spiritual journey as I see... My experience shows it does bring space for wisdom, love, and compassion to shine. From our nature - all of us.

To have been able to ordain was in effect making an outer commitment to this inner capacity to awaken. Tradition, a vehicle. Living in a place where I felt a shared aspiration has been profoundly helpful. Having a community, teachings, living as an alms mendicant, have nourished me beyond words. I want to see that openly and fully available for anyone to whom it is beneficial, as the Buddha intended.

In these ways I respect the place of teachers, of tradition and of training.

But any aspect that has become institutionalised can cut rather than celebrate this awakening life. In everyone: those that apparently hold power as much as those who apparently don't. Whatever spiritual authority comes through our forms, if it is true, belongs to no-one, and everyone, so when the form takes hold of it - in rigid hierarchies or whatever - we are lost.

Structure/freedom, solitude/engagement, accepting teachings/knowing one's inner authority - these are some of the most wonderful and creative paradoxes we have. But when rigidity sets in, and uses liberation teachings and vinaya to justify its stance, the creative relationship with freedom is endangered (to say the least).

It is out of concern for this, as a monastic regarding the "what is happening in our name", that I feel moved to write.

What I see happening in our name is spiritual justification of certain loyalties - to Thailand, to the lineage and whatever attitudes prevail in that family. Of course this has, in part, a genuine spiritual basis in terms of a lineage of teachers who have truly affected one's life, and I respect that, I feel and honour it in myself.

But there is also a loyalty process that is more to do with the sense of family, with acceptance and, importantly, with support, social, political and financial. Examining family values is notoriously difficult; they get embedded. Without listening to outside feedback, without valuing it, without being willing to speak when timely and risk losing support, we just condition each other in certain attitudes - around hierarchy, gender, around what is or isn't proper practice. And how then does one preserve an openness of view? How does practice connect to anything outside its own small world? What happens when one steps out - as is evident with Aj Brahm - is uproar...

Experiencing this kind of 'world closure' - ever more clearly - is heartbreaking. Truly heartbreaking when the Buddha's teaching is such an open ground. I experience it as something like a betrayal of the beauty and potential that is within us all. Not defeating, but deeply deeply saddening and sobering.

Where it leaves me is with an ever firmer conviction that practice must be connected in our lives. That our work as monastics is not just to transcend the world - when anyway, even as renunciates, we live in it - but to acknowledge the drives of fear, anger, control, desire, human need - and not just play them out in our monastic forms. Then the vinaya could again become a vehicle that facilitates awakening rather than a model of purity that replaces the heart. Its a big task.

What nourishes me is that the model of practice that the Buddha established was not something static. 2500 years ago, in the social conditions of his time, the Buddha established ordination for women. The vinaya was established through a series of responses to specific situations. Responses. He also took conventions of purity and reestablished them in saying a Brahmin is not a Brahmin by birth alone but by deed. This was a fearless heart putting its wisdom and clarity into action. He was connecting practice in the world.

So, personally, I find the discussions and events unfolding crucially important. Questioning: issues of authority, how transcendence can become avoidance (so, integration), the importance of presence and embodiment...these are basic and pressing areas.

If, as someone said recently, these are areas of more 'feminine' insight, they are something the presence of women in and around this tradition can bring - and partly why we (and men who enter these arenas) seem to be so threatening. We are not the threat. It is that work that is the threat, but so important in terms of Dhamma.

Sister Sumedha

Response from Thanissara Mary Weinberg in a letter to Elders regarding the 5 Points.

Dear Venerable Elders & Ajahns,

With due respect these are my concerns:

1. The lack of proper placement within the larger historical context of the Bhikkhuni lineage leaves the Siladhara vulnerable any time an elder council, without due negotiation, decides to adjust their training convention to their suit their own agenda.

2. To restore the Bhikkhuni lineage, as to the intention of the Buddha, is to place the Siladhara within the energetic blessing lineage of the Buddha and the larger international community.

3. To place upon the Siladhara the heavy '5 points' as emulated from the 8 gaurdhammas, while still denying them the option of Bhikkhuni ordination, is to take the most undermining aspect of the historical legacy of the placement of women while leaving them without due protection of a Vinaya vehicle that is recognised by the international Buddhist community.

4. The delivery of the 5 points in an atmosphere of non negotiation and secrecy has been deeply damaging to the well being and faith of many of the Siladhara and the lay supporters.

5. Leading on from the 2007 Hamburg Congress, where dozens of well respected scholars, Bhikkhus and Bhikkunis, (after years of study and investigation), offered their perspective on the re-establishment of Bhikkhuni ordination, it became clear from every angle: legalistic, scholastic, ethical and compassionate, that there is no real hindrance to the re-establishment of Bhikkhuni ordination, as intended by the Buddha.

6. Further, the Congress has thrown collective doubt was upon the legitimacy of the 8 Garudhammas as Buddhavacana and doubt on the intention of the Buddha that these eight points be for the collective Bhikhuni sangha. The imposition of either the 8 garudhammas or the 5 points, will in all likelihood seriously hinder the healthy growth of leadership and well being of the female ordained sangha in the West, to such an extent that, it is not too dramatic to say, that the continued insistence on their legislation will be entirely 'killing' to the vitality of the nuns wing of the 4-fold sangha.

7. With such doubts to the legitimacy of the 'garudhamma' (or equivalent legislation) as well as due consideration as to the sexism implied within them, which is out of tune with common Western cultural standards and is oppressive and prohibitive of women who wish to grow in the holy life, that a respected council should be called to thoroughly investigate the legitimacy and efficacy of the 8 garudhammas and their corresponding 5 points.

8. The fifth point in the '5 points' is shocking in its disallowance of any further and broader

inquiry into nuns within the Forest Sangha regards access to full Bhikkhuni ordination.

9. Further, regards the undue influence of the Thai hierarchy, fashioned on cultural, monarchic and seemingly – Vatican influence – it seems timely to re-evaluate the use of ‘power down’ hierarchy over consensus based hierarchy as put forward by the Buddha.

10. The use of ultimate teaching to dismiss concerns around conventions seems ‘right but not true, true but not right’ and consequently invalidates considered concerns and healthy feedback that enables the monastic community to be free of cultish tendencies that tends to demonize any dissent.

11. At a cross road - regards the place of women in the Forest Sangha and regards the templates that are further forged for decision making bodies – it would be healing and inspiring, and within the spirit of consensus and feedback from the lay community that the Buddha allowed, to encourage a council of respected, well informed, wise and compassionate practitioners that draws from the 4-fold sangha to consider a way forward appropriate to the spirit of both Dhamma and Vinaya.

Bhadda Kundalakesa: The Former Jain Ascetic

I went to Mount Vulture Peak
And saw the stainless Buddha
By the Order of Bhikkhus revered.
Then before Him my hands in añjali
Humbly, I bowed down on my knees.
"Come, Bhadda," He said to me:
And thus was I ordained.
Debt-free, I traveled for fifty years
In Anga, Magadha and Vajji,
In Kasi and Kosala, too,
Living on the alms of the land.
That lay-supporter — wise man indeed —
May many merits accrue to him!
Who gave a robe to Bhadda for
Free of all ties is she.

"Bhadda Kundalakesa: The Former Jain Ascetic" (Thig 5.9)

With great respect for the Venerable Elders,
Thanissara