

# The gathering of elders, Dec. 2009

The latest gathering of Western elders of the Ajahn Chah Sangha (referred to informally as WAM) took place from the 7-9<sup>th</sup> December 2009 at Wat Pah Nanachat, in Ubon, Northeast Thailand. The gathering was attended by some twenty-eight elders, including Ven. Ajahn Sumedho, abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in England, the senior Western disciple of Ajahn Chah. Luang Por Liem, the abbot of Wat Pah Pong, (Ajahn Chah's monastery) kindly gave an opening address.

The gathering this year was dominated by discussion of the unfortunate events surrounding the delisting of Bodhinyana Monastery in Perth, Western Australia from the Ajahn Chah Sangha, and the estrangement of an old friend and erstwhile member of the group, Ajahn Brahmavamso.

The events of the last two months have caused an unprecedented storm in our communities, both monastic and lay, and feelings of division have run high throughout the wider Buddhist world. Evidence of this was clear in a petition and various letters presented to the gathering. Several elders noted how many familiar names appeared in the documents. Sympathy with the feelings expressed in them was mixed with a regret that they were often based on an interpretation of events that differed markedly from our own. There was a sense of frustration that we had not as yet been able to adequately transmit our understanding of the various issues raised, accompanied by an acknowledgment that it was hard to see how it could have been any other way. Our commitment to the principle of consultation and consensus meant that we had no choice but to delay crafting a coherent response until we could come together as a group and discuss the matter face to face.

It might be worthwhile at this point to give a brief overview of the nature of our Sangha. The first thing that must be said is that the Ajahn Chah Sangha is far from being the monolithic Vatican-like entity that some have portrayed it as. It is in most senses a noticeably loose and flexible association of monastics. It currently consists of well over 300 monasteries, with perhaps 2200 Thai monks and nuns and some 170 of various other nationalities, 40 of whom reside in Thailand with the remainder living in branch monasteries throughout the world.

Membership of the Ajahn Chah Sangha is voluntary and contingent on accepting certain basic standards and principles. The Western Sangha is a subset of the whole,

autonomous in the running of all its own affairs overseas – *except* in cases whereby they directly oppose the wishes of the larger group. In turn the Ajahn Chah Sangha in Thailand operates within constraints overseen by the Thai Sangha governing council (Maha-thera Samakom) and, through respecting those, is able to maintain its own distinct character.

Ajahn Chah is one of the most loved and revered figures in the Buddhist world. Association with his name confers privileges and responsibilities, both spiritual and material. It is no surprise then that the elders of the Ajahn Chah Sangha consider it their duty to care for the integrity of the lineage. For the Ajahn Chah Sangha the crux of the problems leading up to Ajahn Brahmavamso's delisting was his determination to follow his own highly controversial agenda, without consultation and contrary to the wishes of the elders. The particular topic on his agenda – the ceremony performed in Perth on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October – was an important but not the crucial element.

One of the reasons that we have found it difficult to respond to matters surrounding that ceremony has been our feeling that the issue has been framed in a seriously misleading way. It seems to us that a number of factors have been conflated that need to be dealt with separately. In addition, the delisting of Bodhinyana monastery by the Ajahn Chah Sangha has been presented on the web as a patriarchal knee-jerk. The situation of the siladharas in England has been cited as a proof of our unwillingness to give the appropriate respect to women's spiritual aspirations. We do not see things in this way.

Here we will offer an explanation on what we see as three related but separate topics:

1. The event in Perth and its repercussions
2. Bhikkhuni ordination
3. The Siladhara Order

### *1. The event in Perth and its repercussions*

In mid-October Ajahn Brahmavamso informed Ven. Ajahn Sumedho that he would conduct a bhikkhuni ordination in Perth before the end of the month. When the news reached the larger Sangha the reaction was one of surprise and a deep dismay. The source of these feelings was not outright opposition to bhikkhuni ordination as such (in fact a number of our Western elders consider the arguments supporting its legitimacy to be well-founded), but the sense that the way the ordination had been arranged constituted a serious betrayal of trust.

What made us feel that way? Well, a meeting of the Western elders of the Ajahn Chah

Sangha had been planned for December, and one of the main items on the agenda was to be the topic of bhikkhuni ordination. This meeting was to be hosted by Ajahn Brahmavamso and his Sangha in Perth. Given the importance the elders attached to the coming discussion, we could not understand why the ordination should be rushed through before our meeting. Why, we wondered, could it not have been performed after our meeting? Why despite a long period of preparation were we given so little notice? And why should the preparations have been deliberately concealed? We were to be presented with a *fait accompli*. A major and controversial innovation, considered illegitimate by the Thai Sangha, would be performed unilaterally. The message to us seemed to be that this ordination was none of our business. Our part was merely to get used to it.

We still feel that we have not received any satisfactory answers to these questions. We do not understand why Ajahn Brahmavamso should have felt able to act in this manner, given that both verbally and in writing he had affirmed that he would not do so. In fact as recently as last year, in a written response to one of our elders, he had stated that he felt hurt that anyone could believe that he would consider such a move. We have been told that Ajahn Brahmavamso subsequently changed his mind and that we 'should move on.' But, given the emphasis we as bhikkhus place on keeping our word, we do not consider this to be an adequate response.

To the Ajahn Chah Sangha elders the issue was thus primarily one of a disregard for the agreed standard of seeking and gaining consent for actions that affect the whole group. In June 2009 the Ajahn Chah Sangha at Wat Pa Pong reaffirmed its willingness to conform with the Thai Sangha governing council's current position: that bhikkhuni ordination has ceased to exist and cannot be legitimately revived. It was taken as given that continued membership of the group would be contingent on upholding that resolution. In our monastic culture, the disrespect perceived in Ajahn Brahmavamso's actions is, in other words, profound. It is comparable to a slap in the face.

Having decided to go ahead with his plan come what may, Ajahn Brahmavamso did so without informing either his preceptor, Somdet Buddhajahn, (currently also the acting head of the Thai Sangha), or Luang Por Liem, the head of the Ajahn Chah Sangha. The reason that that is significant is that he was performing a ceremony considered highly controversial by the Thai Sangha, and one bound to fail to receive their acceptance.

Ajahn Brahmavamso had, over the years, received permission to act as a preceptor and had been granted a royal ecclesiastical title – these are no small things for a Western monk to be honoured with. These signify tremendous recognition, trust and responsibility. In acting as

he did Ajahn Brahmavamso seemed to render them meaningless. It was widely perceived as gross ingratitude, particularly amongst the Thai Sangha.

At the November 1<sup>st</sup> meeting at Wat Pah Pong, Ajahn Brahmavamso was given the opportunity to reconcile himself with the Sangha of Wat Pah Pong, and by extension the Thai Sangha at large, by acknowledging the invalidity of the ordination ceremony. Having been formally presented with the option three times, he still felt unable to do so. The Sangha felt in turn that it had no alternative but to delist his monastery. As can be heard clearly on the recording of the meeting the resolution was by no means a matter of 'a few grunts,' as it has been widely represented, but rather it was a rousing agreement on the part of the 160 strong monastic assembly, with Ajahn Brahmavamso himself providing the solitary voice of dissent.<sup>1</sup> The resolution was not intended as a punishment but as a formal recognition of a parting of ways. From this point on Ajahn Brahmavamso could no longer consider himself to be representing the Ajahn Chah community.

## 2. *Bhikkhuni ordination*

There are reasonable arguments in favor of bhikkhuni ordination, and reasonable arguments against it. Within our community opinions on the matter vary. In the light of this, the situation we currently find ourselves in is a balancing act of daunting proportions; on the one side there is the need to be faithful to our origins, and on the other the need to be faithful to the time and societies we live in.

As part of a larger tradition rooted in Thailand, any changes of this magnitude which we might wish to initiate would require the consent of the wider Sangha. In order not to become ripped apart, all the members of the Sangha body must proceed in the same direction. Since our lineage does not, at least at present, formally accept the legitimacy of Theravada bhikkhuni ordination, we do not have the authority to carry it out on our own initiative, without breaking that connection with our roots. This view is not just restricted to the Ajahn Chah Sangha. For example, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, at the conference he called on bhikkhuni ordination in 2007, said he could not go ahead with reinstating the bhikkhuni order without the full consent of the Tibetan Sangha, despite the unanimous agreement of the conference that it should be.

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<sup>1</sup> To hear the recording of this, please visit [www.forestsangha.org](http://www.forestsangha.org)

The way we see it is that, in order to effect significant change in the status of practice opportunities for women in the Theravada world, it is not just a matter of going our own way with sanctioning bhikkhuni ordinations and hoping, let alone expecting, that the wider Sangha will just go along with that. Rather the effect of such a move would be to drive a wedge between the Western branches of our community and the other 300 or so based in Thailand. From our point of view it seems that there would be very little positive result from this orphaning of ourselves from the roots of our community. We realize that this is probably not the view of many Buddhists in the West, however, this kind of severance is something we see as being a damaging wound that would compromise the spiritual welfare of all women and men, lay and monastic, that are a part of this lineage of Dhamma practice.

The Sangha is an ancient institution; it is the longest surviving organization that still operates under its original bylaws. It is also almost 1000 years since the last recorded Theravada bhikkhunis of the classical era lived in Sri Lanka. For such a huge change as this to take place, to reinstate this venerable and rich lineage of Dhamma practice with the full approval and sanction of the wider Sangha, it seems reasonable to take the time to gain a broad consensus.

Even though changes in such an ancient organism must necessarily occur slowly, it is also the case that change *can* come. There are high-ranking and esteemed elders of the Thai Sangha, notably the acting supreme patriarch, Somdet Buddhajahn, who have made it their business to investigate the status and training of bhikkhunis. It is also the intention for some of those who attended this meeting of Western abbots of the Wat Pah Pong lineage to consult with members of the governing body of the Thai Sangha in order to discuss further research on the topic of the bhikkhuni lineage and opportunities for renunciant practice of women in Theravada Buddhism.

The Theravada tradition is like a gnarled and deeply rooted oak, yet one that still bears abundant and fertile seeds. The depth of its roots and the thickness of its branches are some of the reasons why it has lasted for so long. If it was a flimsy sapling, to change and mold it would be easy but its ability to withstand the vagaries of weather and disease would be significantly less. It is our concern to treat this venerable entity with the respect that it deserves and to tend its seeds so that they too may flourish and their potential be fulfilled.

### 3. *The Siladhara Order*

#### *A shared goal, a specific opportunity*

In the case of the Siladhara and the 'five points' our sense is that there has been a miscommunication regarding the overall perspective of how the established Bhikkhu Sangha seeks to support a modern nuns' order, as well as misinformation regarding the 'five points.' However we do feel that we share the concerns of the petition in that we are aware of the limited opportunities that there are for women to train in Dhamma-Vinaya, and also have a wish to support women's aspirations towards liberation.

The Bhikkhu Sangha has preserved and sustained the Buddha's dispensation for more than two thousand years and we acknowledge that it is its responsibility to pass it on. As in Theravada there is no consensus on the re-establishment of the bhikkhuni training, and no lineage or present company of great Theravada bhikkhuni teachers to instruct newcomers, what we can offer at this time has to operate within the Sangha vehicle as it is working in this day and age.

Of course anyone can practise morality, meditation and renunciation; but to belong to an order of Buddhist nuns means being accepted into the larger monastic Sangha, of which the only element that remains universally recognized is the Bhikkhu Sangha. Through being connected to such a body, one has access to the resources of monastic teachers, and the trust and welcome of lay people who have faith in the established Sangha, as well to the material requisites and infrastructure of monasteries. This set of opportunities underpins the vehicle that has come to be known as the 'Siladhara' (= those who uphold virtue) training.

#### *History of the Siladhara Order*

In 1983, Ven. Ajahn Sumedho, having received the permission of the Thai Sangha that had authorised him as Preceptor, gave the Ten Precepts to a small group of women who had already trained under the Eight Precepts for more than three years at Cittaviveka Monastery in England. Ajahn Sumedho's aim was to provide an opportunity for women to train as alms-mendicants within the conventions that were held by the Bhikkhu Sangha. Subsequently, he asked that a training be developed that would flesh out the basic moral structure that the Ten Precepts represent with details that could support the nuns as an autonomous Order. So a training was developed that drew from the Bhikkhuni-Vinaya in order to cover issues that might occur for women, as well as protocols that would enable them to manage their own affairs. Through the ensuing years the training evolved through discussions with the nuns, consultations with Ven. Ajahn Sumedho and the elders of his community, and presentations to Thai and Sri Lankan elders.

There was no intention or authorisation however to establish a Bhikkhuni Order, or any new independent Sangha. Therefore the relationship between the Siladhara Order and the Bhikkhu Sangha was held to be one in which the siladhara would receive ordination from an authorised bhikkhu preceptor. Moreover the convention of 'seniority' would apply as a relational guide. This is the case in the Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni Vinaya, and also defines the relationship between the Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni Sanghas as set up in the Vinaya. Such an understanding is basic to the monastic form; it was there at the beginning and was not a new structure imposed upon the nuns.

*Seniority isn't a power structure*

The convention of seniority in Theravada Buddhism acknowledges that the Bhikkhu Sangha preceded that of the nuns. In daily life it covers matters of courtesy, like who sits where in a formal group gathering, who stands where in a queue for the meal, and who pays respects to whom in the act of formal greeting. Seniority also implies that the senior person in the relationship is expected to look after, encourage and otherwise offer support to the junior.

However, the nuns may occupy positions of authority both in terms of teaching Dhamma, and of training members of their nuns' community. They are shareholders of the charitable Trust that owns and is legally responsible for Amaravati and Cittaviveka. They also occupy positions on the Council of Elders that oversee 'Sangha business' in the group of monasteries that were established in the name of Ven. Ajahn Sumedho.

It also has to be borne in mind that the aims and structures of Buddhist monastic life are not designed to implement power over each other, or power in terms of management, rather they are intended to establish the authority and inner strength to combat the fires of ignorance in one's own mind. In this respect there is full equality of opportunity for women and men. That said, as unenlightened beings, we recognize that there also need to be safeguards against the abuses of position that may occur in the course of community life.

*The 'five points' and the future*

In the last few years, there has been growing divergence between the Bhikkhu Sangha and the Siladhara in terms of the understanding of the relationship between these two communities at Amaravati and Cittaviveka. At the same time, Ajahn Sumedho's recent concern has been to firm up the understanding of the terms under which the Siladhara Order receives its authorisation from the Bhikkhu Sangha. Recognizing that he will pass away in due course of time, Ajahn Sumedho's intention is that the Bhikkhu Sangha within these monasteries should act as guarantors of the Siladhara Order in the future, and that steps

should be taken now to carry this through. This is the origin of the 'five points.' Please bear in mind that these are not a manifesto of a global vision for all women who aspire to liberation, but a memo that outlines what these particular monasteries can offer. It seemed important to get these clearly laid down so that interested parties would know from the outset what they were committing to in terms of the relationship to the Bhikkhu Sangha. Then any aspirant could make an informed choice as to whether to get on board, or to look for another vehicle.

We acknowledge that there may have been failings in the way that these five points were presented to the nuns, and some of us sense that this point will need to be addressed in the future. One agency that has been implemented to improve the process of feedback and consultation is that of a 'liaison bhikkhu' who should be acceptable and respected by the nuns and act as a channel of communication whenever dissonances arise in each dual-gender community. The intention is to continue to develop ways of improvement, this being the principle whereby the Buddha established the Vinaya.

One of Ven. Ajahn Chah's phrases about the mode and environment of Dhamma-practice was that it should be 'good enough' for enlightenment. Whatever the feelings and views that may be aroused when a conservative Asian contemplative tradition meets the psychological zeitgeist of the modern West, our intention has always been to offer something 'good enough' – something both immediate and workable. Still this is no small matter. The Siladhara Order depends on the commitment of women of integrity to make it a lived-in reality, and we feel that the efforts and results of the nuns' practice has been seriously understated in the articles that have been generated around this topic. This is unjust, particularly in the light of the rigor with which they apply themselves to their training.

Meanwhile, the Siladhara Order is currently sending out a branch to America at the same time as it is receiving positive comments from the renowned bhikkhu-scholar P. A. Payutto<sup>2</sup> and the acting head of the Thai Sangha, Somdet Buddhajahn. We hope that, modest as the origins of the Order have been, it may yet spread wherever there is interest in the Buddha's teachings and be a source of light for both East and West.

#### 4. *How to move on?*

Respect is an important quality in Buddhism. In its widest sense it means respect for Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. It also means the quality of mutual respect between people and it was reiterated, specifically in terms of respect for elders, as a foundational principle by

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<sup>2</sup> Tan Chao Khun Brahmaganaporn



the Buddha in his last days. Herein he defined it as one the seven causes of the long-lasting welfare of his dispensation.

Respect for elders is signified in the very name for this tradition. 'Theravada' means 'the way of the elders' and the defining spirit of this way of Dhamma practice is one that can accurately be referred to as 'conservative.' It aims to conserve the way the teachings and the monastic discipline were formulated in the earliest days as a path to liberation. The movement to the West was not initiated in order to develop and modify Buddhism, but to continue the practice of Dhamma-Vinaya wherever lay people had made invitation and offered to support it. Nevertheless, if this meeting of timeless aspiration and contemporary contexts is conducted in harmony, the fine-tuning of how Dhamma-Vinaya is applied in the present is a natural consequence.

Disharmony is an obstacle to this, and we wish that all of us who have concern in this area take steps to avoid the danger of polarization in the Buddhist world. Meanwhile, we hope that this preceding article has helped to generate the kind of understanding that can be a step in the right direction.