

A Path To Mindful Service

**An interview with Alliance for Bhikkhunis' President,
Michael Bratton
by Brenna Artinger**



B: I understand that you grew up as a practicing Catholic. Why did you decide to leave the Catholic faith, and how did you become interested in Buddhism?

M: I had been a practicing Catholic for a long time – since my youth. I guess it's best to say that after applying myself earnestly, it just didn't work for me. I tried to be a devout parishioner, but I had too many ideological differences to remain. This left me with a deep spiritual need, so I began to look for something to fill that void.

B: You initially got involved with Zen Buddhism, or a type of Zen Buddhism, is that correct?

M: Yes. I had been practicing meditation in my practice of Aikido, a Japanese martial art whose name means "the way of spiritual harmony". Someone I knew from the dojo recommended I read Shunryu Suzuki's book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, a really wonderful book which happens to be a good beginner's primer on Zen Buddhism. That philosophy really sat well with me and I started following Suzuki Roshi's – actually the Buddha's – philosophies for daily living. At some point I started seeking other literature and other people who were practicing Zen.

B: How did you then get involved with the Theravada tradition and the Bhikkhunis?

M: At first I didn't really want to approach Zen as organized Buddhism. The Christianity that I was raised with taught that Buddhists pray to false Gods and idols and you are not to put other gods before the one God. The remnants of this ideology caused me to approach Zen (Buddhism) cautiously. I was happy to discover that there was nothing like that in Buddhism, so my initial distrust was eased, making it easier for me to open my mind and eventually move on to Theravada Buddhist practice. I had read Stephen Batchelor's *Buddhism Without Beliefs* and this concept appealed to me very much. The untrained newbie in me thought "I can follow Zen principles without having to comply with the ancient edicts of another organized religion. This could be a good thing!"

I practiced on my own for quite a while, reading the very best of both Zen and Theravada teachers and sitting daily on my own. Later I practiced at the San Diego Zen Center for a while. I continued my personal study and was delighted to find some Western Theravada teachers like Gil Fronsdal who I could understand better from both a cultural and a living dharma standpoint. I began to feel like this suited me even more than Zen practice. I still have a love of Zen however, so my own practice contains to be a blend of both. Eventually, I wanted to practice more in earnest and could see the benefits of becoming part of a sangha, so I eventually found my current sangha here in San Diego.

B: How did you come to Alliance for Bhikkhunis?

After I'd been attending sangha regularly for about 18 months or so, I learned that one of the sangha members, Donna McCarthy, was the treasurer on the board of the Alliance for Bhikkhunis. AfB had lost a couple of board members and they were looking for someone to take over their Facebook site. So I started out just being their Facebook person, then after a while they asked me to be on the board. Several months later I was asked to be President.

B: I understand you were a career firefighter.



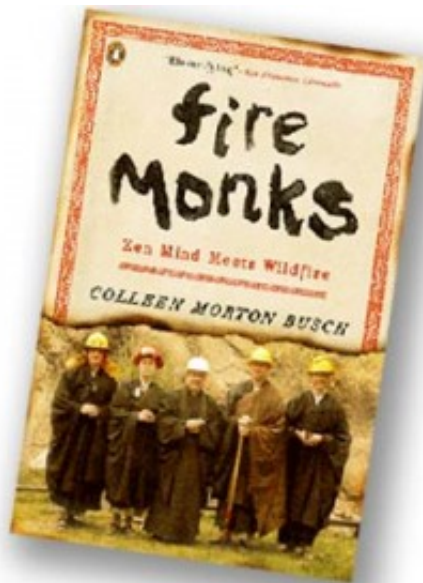
M: Yes, I was a firefighter for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire) for 38 years. Cal Fire is primarily a wildland fire organization which took me to

brush and forest fires all over the state. When I retired in 2009 my rank was Field Division Chief. I commanded the northern half of San Diego County on a day to day basis and I was on a statewide incident command team where I was on a team that commanded large fires, floods, earthquakes and other disasters throughout state.

B: I understand you once fought a wildfire up near a Zen Monastery in California?

M: Over the years I've been to a quite a few monasteries on fire assignments because there are many monasteries of different types in the wildlands the length and breadth of California – Buddhist, Catholic, and others. In 2008 I was assigned to a large fire in the Ventana Wilderness in Monterey County. At one point during the very large fire we were assigned to protect the Tassajara Zen Mountain Monastery. I was part of a secondary group who were trying to keep the fire from heading in their direction. Unfortunately our efforts to redirect the fire were not successful and the fire eventually encroached on the monastery.

In my duties there I had contact with the monks at Tassajara. They wanted to protect their monastery and they had no training and no protective gear. All they had was their robes and a desire to save their home, which brought to mind the Japanese poet mendicant Ryokan who lived his life with one robe, one bowl. In other monasteries I'd been to, the monks and other residents didn't even have enough pairs of gloves to go around, so we often gave them fire gear. One of my colleagues was in charge of making sure the monastery was secure with his assigned group of firefighters. I went out to meet with him a couple of times and the monks were working hard to prepare the monastery for the impending fire front. These guys, they were pumped up. They were almost excited, I mean you could see that there was fear, like we all have when a fire front is approaching, but they were anxious to get to work protecting their home. It wasn't praying and it wasn't expecting God to help them. They took the circumstances at hand and applied themselves to the task.



Witnessing this state of being present with equanimity was as if they'd been fighting fires all their lives. This is what I was discovering in myself in the early stages of practice. It's about what I encounter in life and the inner resources I bring to the table to be present in order to deal with life's ups and downs, ebbs and flows. Incidentally, there's a good book about this fire and the involvement of the Tassajara monastics titled [Fire Monks](#) by Colleen Morton Busch.

At this point, I considered myself to be a Zen practitioner, yet still not wanting to add the word Buddhist to my dharma practice. I remember that long drive home from the fire. I saw these monks as humans in tragedy. With nothing but their wits and their fortitude and their deep mindfulness practice to help them. I decided I was going to figure out why I had this fear of using the term Buddhist, which I was starting to see was not allowing myself to make the commitment to become a practicing Buddhist. It spurred me on to investigate the dharma and these years later, here I am.

B: In our previous correspondence you mentioned that you suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD). Did you seek out meditation as a way to cope with that?

M: That's right. When I started to feel the debilitating effects of PTSD, I wasn't aware of what was happening. I didn't know what PTSD was, especially what was caused the symptoms I was experiencing that had crept into my life. No one in my Department really knew what PTSD was in those days. I was one of those firefighters who had always postured myself to be in the busiest fire stations, year in and year out. I wanted to prove to my peers, my supervisors and especially myself that I could handle the toughest situations. I realize now this was fear manifesting itself as a macho persona that came from encountering the intensity of the circumstances I faced day in and day out. I know now, when you do that over and over it becomes like banging your head on a wall: it feels good when you stop. You go to a lot of really difficult calls, you see a lot of people in so

many suffering situations again and again. I witnessed my fellow firefighters getting injured, some of them died in the line of duty. I was burned several times myself as well as incurring bodily injuries many times over the years, so the prospect of this becoming my fate was on my mind often. Luckily, I came to meditation through Aikido, which became a training and a learning process: *accept your circumstances and be calm in motion, motion in calm*. I started to feel positive effects from this, which I know now is becoming present, mindful. So I pursued mindfulness and meditation as a separate practice to dig deeper.

B: Alliance for Bhikkhunis was recently asked why we have a man as President. Do you have any thoughts on that, and what do you think is the role of men specifically pertaining to Bhikkhuni ordination?

M: My first exposure to bhikkhunis was when I met Amma Thanasanti Bhikkhuni. She and Ani Palmo came to our sangha to teach a three-day retreat. Her teachings spoke to me and I immediately felt love and respect for the bhikkhuni way of life. If you've been around people who are true Buddhists, especially monastics, their presence is calm, loving, giving and open. There is a demeanor of being truly present. I learned from an old fire captain when I was just a boot firefighter that you learn as much from the person and the way they operate as you do from their teachings.

My exposure to the Tassajara monastics and then with Amma Thanasanti made me want to learn about the history of ancient and present day bhikkhunis. In my investigation, I found that there are countries where women are forbidden to become fully ordained monastics. This floored me because it seemed contrary to the Buddha's teachings. I learned from Amma Thanasanti what her struggle was to become fully ordained and found this was the story for many women around the world. Men who trained for ordination weren't experiencing this.

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When the board asked me to be president, the fact that I was a man heading an organization supporting female monastics was a concern of mine. I wondered if this would be off-putting to some who might not contribute because of a man heading the organization. It was discussed at length among the board members for several meetings before we decided it was a good thing to have a male as president. We feel it is important for men to support bhikkhunis, not just women. After I became the president I wrote a letter to the readership of our newsletter introducing myself. Not long afterward we had a few people unsubscribe from our newsletter, but I also received several notes of encouragement and congratulations. It seems like it was the right thing to do.

B: Why do you think that Bhikkhuni ordination is so important? There's a lot of

argument, aside from just equal rights, from countries like Thailand, where historically there has been a large amount of discrimination against women ordaining. It's definitely in some sense taboo to ordain as a woman, even as a Maechee, who are not respected in the same way as monks. So why do you think ordination for women is important within Buddhist traditions?

M: Ajahn Brahm, who supports bhikkhuni ordination and has even confirmed some ordinations of women in the face of much criticism, said something that really exemplifies the way I feel about it. He said, 'Women have things to bring to the table that men will never be able to bring.' I think it's probably true the other way as well, that men have things to bring to the table that women will never be able to bring. So to me, modern day Buddhism is about the cooperation of both genders. We're missing out on this large component when women's voices are not being heard and women's teachings are not being taught.

B: What do you think of the arguments made by people in opposition to Bhikkhuni ordination?

M: Well, I haven't heard one that's valid yet. 'We just can't do it' or any other negative judgment levied centuries after the Buddha died are not valid arguments to me. It is my belief that the Buddha didn't put an expiration date on the Bhikkhuni order when he created it. So blocking efforts to resurrect it seems to go against his decision to have a flourishing sangha.

B: What do you think, looking forward, will be the most beneficial thing for the Bhikkhunis? The AfB works mainly towards providing monetary and day to day needs [for the Bhikkhunis]. Looking past these contributions, what do you see for the future?

M: In October of last year we had our Fourth International Bhikkhuni Day. Every time we hold one we get more people from around the world to join us or at least start asking questions about it. Our Facebook page and our website are reaching thousands of people around the world and in that way we feel we're helping to make progress. It's partly a PR campaign, and we feel that's part of our job. When I first joined AfB, we didn't have a lot of money to help with the bhikkhunis, and there were only three of us on the board. Now we have a full board of five members and a few volunteers helping out who are tremendous contributors and slowly donations have started to come in. I feel like there is a definite groundswell of support and we are growing. We have been able to provide assistance for many projects and I feel we are becoming the bhikkhuni support organization that our founder Susan Pembroke envisioned. Hopefully this trend will continue and others will look into their hearts and follow through as well.



About the Author

Brenna Artinger is an undergraduate Literature student in Washington, DC, where she currently resides. In her free time she enjoys hiking, theatre, and learning the Dhamma.

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