

Present

The Voices and Activities of Theravada Buddhist Women | Winter 2011

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New Turns Toward Ancient Paths: The Ordinations in California

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Dharma Vijaya Ordinees

New Turns Toward Ancient Paths: the Ordinations in California

by Ayya Sobhana Bhikkhuni

As a result of these ordinations, two functional women's sanghas have arisen in California. They are communities of four or more bhikkhunis who agree to meet regularly for Patimokkha – the recitation and affirmation of the discipline. Those in the Los Angeles area are already meeting for Patimokkha. The Northern California group will regularly have a quorum during the three-month Rains Retreat.

As one of the Kammacarinis, the chanters who question the candidates for ordination and make the motion for approval by the assembled Bhikkhuni Sangha, I assisted in both ceremonies. Previously, I served as a Kammacarini at the 2009 ordination in Perth, Australia. Having joined with my colleagues at these ceremonies, I feel the emergence of strong and unified sisterhood from around the world. One can easily see, from my current dwelling in the redwood forest of Aranya Bodhi, that there is no better way to forge a clear path than by repeatedly walking it. Likewise, we bhikkhunis are travelers re-establishing the ancient bhikkhuni footpaths on new contextual geography. Together we are clearing the way for aspiring women who are called to experience the Buddha's plan for monastic life in the Theravada tradition.

What conditions are present now to make this possible?

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Some of the past bhikkhuni ordinations were questioned by Buddhist conservatives on technical Vinaya grounds. They claimed that the entire Bhikkhuni Sangha is not valid because its restoration in the 1990's relied on either bhikkhu-only or mixed-tradition ordinations. They said that it was impossible

for women to uphold the bhikkhuni Vinaya. Others, including progressive bhikkhus and virtually all academic scholars, believe the weight of Vinaya scholarship and Buddhist history supports the revival of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. But, as the recent ordinations demonstrate, respected elder bhikkhus participate and endorse bhikkhuni ordination. There is also wide support for bhikkhuni ordination from the lay community. Questions on technical Vinaya grounds have lost some of their potentially road-blocking characteristics and appear more like road signs we have passed along the way.

When I ordained in 2006, my teacher Bhante Gunaratana could not find a good facility for ordination in America. He sent me to Dambulla, where the Bhikkhuni Sangha was already firmly established and well-organized. Today, since the establishment and organization of Bhikkhuni Sanghas, women can now be ordained in the United States.

Additionally, the twelve-year hurdle has been scaled. There are now competent bhikkhuni preceptors who have been ordained for more than twelve years, as required in the Vinaya. Before this, ordinations had been performed in Sri Lanka by bhikkhunis with less than twelve years at the request of their ordaining Bhikkhu Sangha. These were senior nuns with decades of monastic experience living as ten-precept nuns. After the first mixed-tradition ordinations in 1996 and 1998, these women were asked to be preceptors in order to jump-start the creation of a viable sangha. Technically, this is a confessable fault for the preceptor but it does not invalidate the ordination. In the USA Ayya Sudarshana and Ayya Tathaaloka, each have over twelve years as bhikkhunis. They are qualified in both the letter and the spirit of Vinaya.

STRENGTH IN DIVERSITY

It is a boon that the Aranya Bodhi and the Dharma Vijaya ordinations each had their own unique character. These ordinations can inspire and serve as examples for future ordinations across many communities.

The Aranya Bodhi ordination was typically Western in its emphasis on re-viving Buddhist monasticism based on the early texts. Ayya Tathaaloaka, in consultation with Bhikkhu Bodhi, Bhante Gunaratana, Ajahn Brahm and other elders, aimed to discard more recent traditions that are in conflict with the earliest Dhamma and Vinaya. This ordination emphasized the autonomy of the Bhikkhuni Sangha in that it was initiated and organized by bhikkhunis.

The ordination ceremony itself had a feeling of intimacy and reciprocity between the ordaining candidate and her bhikkhuni preceptor. The candidate was surrounded and enclosed by the Bhikkhuni Sangha. Each time she knelt down, stood up, or bowed, there were hands to protect her from any slippage of the alms bowl or robe. One of the sangha members sometimes jogged failing memory with a whispered prompt, or corrected a mistake in recitation of the lines. Reflective of the intimacy and reciprocity of this ceremony, the candidate requested dependence on her preceptor concluding with the phrase, "From today onwards, the elder is my burden, and I am the elder's burden." The preceptor then quietly explained the basic requisites, touching the alms bowl and each of the five garments. "This is your bowl, this is your outer robe, this is your upper robe, this is your lower robe ..." There was a feeling of tenderness and support.

The Dharma Vijaya ordination reflected the diversity of immigrant Buddhist communities in Los Angeles. In form, it was reminiscent of my ordination in Sri Lanka, where a dynamic bhikkhu elder was the key organizer. Los Angeles is one of the most diverse and dynamic Buddhist communities in America, and Bhante Piyananda has long been a leader in this mixing bowl. The ordaining sanghas on both sides included both Ther-

avadan and Mahayanen monastics. The ordaining sanghas, and the newly ordained bhikkhunis, included natives of many nations: Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Myanmar, Bangladesh, China, Korea, and the United States. The bhikkhu and bhikkhuni upajjhayas each had dynamic roles in organizing and rehearsing the ordinations but, during the ordination itself, the speaking parts

went to the Kammacarinis and the candidates. This presented a nice balance between the two sides of the ordination.

At both ordinations, the two Kammacarinis took the candidate off to the side for preliminary questioning, exhorting her, "Listen, this is your time of truth, the time of facts... Do not be embarrassed; do not be confused." After being examined,

the candidate came in among the sangha and requested the ordination three times, saying "May the Sangha raise me up out of compassion." The motion for ordination is given at the most formal level, by means of a statement with three repetitions, and ending with the declaration: "The Sangha has acted, so it is silent; thus I will remember it."

The second half of the ceremony, with the Bhikkhu Sangha, is more formal. Now "ordained on one side," the candidates go as a group before the Bhikkhu Sangha and declare their qualification and purity. Traditionally, the second ordination would occur in a separate place. However, during the ordinations at Aranya Bodhi and Los Angeles they were both performed in the same room. This way, the bhikkhus could see the bhikkhuni ordination themselves and have confidence in the bhikkhunis' procedure.

At Aranya Bodhi, Bhante Gunaratana mentioned that in over 60 years as a bhikkhu, [and more than 30 years as an advocate for bhikkhuni ordination] this was the first time he had ever personally witnessed a Theravada dual ordination. Each of the venerables who participated had a similar heart-opening experience. By following the ancient forms laid out by the Buddha we heal the mistakes of the past and revive the unity of the sangha, for the benefit of all.



Dharma Vijaya Participants



Let History Record and Remember the Names of the Ordaining Sanghas as Well as Those Ordained

At Aranya Bodhi Hermitage, August 29, 2010

Bhikkhu Sangha: Ven. Henepola Gunaratana Mahāthero (Presiding Elder and Ovādakācariya), Ven. Shantarakshita Mahāthero (Kammavācācariya), Ven. Amarabuddhi Mahāthero (Kammavācācariya), Ven. Paññasara Mahāthero, Ven. Passano Mahāthero, Ven. Yatiko Thero, Ven. Wimalaratana Bhikkhu, Ven. Puññananda Bhikkhu, and Ven. Varoṇano Bhikkhu

Bhikkhuni Sangha: Ven. Tathaaloka Theri (Pavattinī/Upajjhāyini), Ven. Sudhammā Bhikkhuni (Kammavācācarinī), Ven. Sobhanā Bhikkhuni (Kammācarinī), Ven. Gunasārī Bhikkhuni, Ven. Satimā Bhikkhuni, and Ven. Madikā Bhikkhuni

Newly ordained Bhikkhunis: Ajahn Thanasanti, Adhimuttā, Suvijjanā, and Phalañani

At Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara, October 10, 2010

Bhikkhu Sangha: Ven. Dr. Walpola Piyananda Nayaka Maha Thera (Upajjhaya), Ven. Dr. Udagama Sumangala Maha Thera (Upajjhaya), Ven. Dr. Karunananda Maha Thera, Ven. Subhuti Shibuya Maha Thera, Ven. Dehiwala Vajira Maha Thera, Ven. Dr. Jin Sun Nam Sunim, Ven. Muruthamure Pannaloka Maha Thera (Kammacariya), Ven. Wathogala Saranasiri Maha Thera (Kammacariya), Ven. Bogolle Sumana Maha Thera, Ven. Gajanayakagama Kassapa Thera, Ven. Walpola Anuruddha Thera, Ven. Kalabululande Dhammajothi

Bhikkhuni Sangha: Ven. Peliyagoda Sudarshana Theri (Upajjhaya), Ven. Chan-Kwang Bhikkhuni (Upajjhaya), Ven. Zu Zai Bhikkhuni, Ven. Cintamani Bhikkhuni, Ven. Dr. Il A Bhikkhuni, Ven. De Te Bhikkhuni, Ven. Gunasari Bhikkhuni (Kammacariya), Ven. Sobhana Bhikkhuni (Kammacariya), Ven. Satima Bhikkhuni, Ven. Fu Hei Bhikkhuni

Newly ordained Bhikkhunis: Lakshapathiye Samadhi (born in Sri Lanka), Cariyapanna, Susila, and Sammasati (all born in Vietnam), and Uttamanyana (born in Myanmar)

Also, Anagarika Santussika and Anagarika Dhammapali received Samaneri ordination; and Brenda Batke-Hirschmann received Anagarika ordination.



Ayya Sobhana is the Prioress of the Aranya Bodhi Hermitage on the Sonoma Coast in Northern California. In 1989 she became a student of Bhante Henepola Gunaratana ("Bhante G"), of the Bhavana Society in West Virginia. She served on the Board of Directors of the Bhavana Society during the 1990s, and took novice ordination at the Bhavana Society in 2003. She was ordained as a bhikkhuni at Dambulla, Sri Lanka, in 2006.

Present

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