

Present

The Voices and Activities of Theravada Buddhist Women | Spring 2010

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'Take It or Leave It' and the Ground Between

By Thanissara Mary Weinberg

In just over six months, the Thai Forest Sangha of Ajahn Chah forged two distinct approaches to the placement of nuns within the order. The first was the imposition of the 5 Pointsⁱ on the siladharaⁱⁱ nuns and the second was the Perth bhikkhuni ordinations. The bhikkhuni ordinations led to Ajahn Brahmⁱⁱⁱ being expelled from the Forest Sangha; his status as preceptor was revoked and his monastery, Wat Bodhinyana, was delisted as an associated branch.

Both the administration of the 5 Points and the bhikkhuni ordinations were done in an atmosphere of secrecy. It seems that secrecy was held for different intentions. In the case of the 5 Points, the use of force was undeniable. The siladhara nuns were led to understand that without acquiescence, they would no longer be welcome to stay within the community of the [Ajahn Chah] Forest Sangha, and that without their assent, no further siladhara ordinations would be conducted. That the inclusion of the 5 Points in the most recent siladhara ordination was a surprise to most nuns shows how little they have been involved in decisions that affect their training and life in the community.

In the case of the October 2009 Perth ordinations, the strategy of secrecy (although there was a public invitation issued prior to the ceremony) was seemingly done to protect the procedure from being prevented by conservative forces within the male monastic hierarchy. Controversy erupted, in any case, as some senior monks objected that the decision was outside due process and without consensus of the Elders. It is regrettable that there appeared to be no wider consultation from Ajahn Brahm with the Elder Council. However, at the same time that the Elders said they were preparing to talk about bhikkhuni ordination at the December 2009 Western Abbots' Meeting (WAM), they were simultaneously forging the 5 Points, which

effectively undermine any possibility of bhikkhuni ordination. In the face of such a crazy-making dynamic—and given the increasing imperative for gender equity in Australia—it seems Ajahn Brahm decided to act before the WAM blocked any possibility of an Australian-based bhikkhuni ordination.

Careful attention to the recording of the subsequent meeting at Wat Pa Pong^{iv}, in which the motion to expel Ajahn Brahm was passed, left some listeners puzzled. It seemed that Ajahn Liem, the abbot of Wat Pa Pong, was initially willing to ‘let it be’ if Ajahn Brahm did not ordain any more bhikkhunis—a request to which Ajahn Brahm readily agreed. However, ‘letting it be’ didn’t appear to be an option for those who pushed further for his expulsion. Many listeners were left wondering if the upset of a few monks really justified cutting asunder a large support base of those who feel an affinity with the Forest Sangha. Was there any consideration for those who now have to negotiate the odd terrain of divided loyalties? For many fourfold sangha members, the severity of this action seemed completely out of proportion to the simple beauty of enabling bhikkhuni ordination. Sadly, any distress expressed by lay supporters has fallen on deaf ears; it seems their perspective is irrelevant to the Elders.

at the edges— if not completely blown apart. A concerned outpouring of disappointment was presented at the WAM in the form of a petition of nearly 3,000 signatures, letters, scholastic representation and respectful feedback. A request by lay supporters and monastics who were not involved in these decisions was made to the Elders to consider revoking the 5 Points and reinstating Ajahn Brahm. A request was also conveyed for a more open forum for dialogue regarding furthering gender equity within the order. This collective response was an expression of dismay, but also based on concern that the precedent established by the Buddha, which encouraged feedback within the fourfold assembly, be maintained.

The response from the Western Elder Council was to close ranks and publish a party line justification for the decisions they undertook, thereby shutting down possibilities for open and authentic public communication. For concerned fourfold sangha members, the response seemed high-handed and insensitive. Subsequently in interviews and in public talks, Ajahn Sumedho—who initiated the momentum for the 5 Points along with a few of his close advisors—made it plain that he had no interest in engaging Western democratic values that

At one time it would have been unthinkable to challenge Church power or hierarchy. To speak out was heresy and the Church was swift to condemn or sentence to hell those who did. As Western Buddhists we like to think of ourselves as more sophisticated than this.

But are we?

The Perth ordination and the 5 Points, and the repercussions of both, catalyzed seismic shifts within the Forest Sangha which cumulatively broke the spell of its own infallibility. At warp speed, lay supporters were initiated into a sharp learning curve regarding complex points of Vinaya^v, bhikkhuni ordination procedures, the garudhammas^{vi}, historical misogynistic tendencies, Thai sangha politics, gender dynamics and a host of other related topics posted on blogs, Facebook and web sites. Many found their idealized versions of monasticism fraying

aim to defend and support human rights and gender equity. He expressed the view that “such considerations are outside of the Dhamma.” In doing so, he placed the problem squarely with distorted Western notions of equality, as well as with “strident feminists”—despite the fact that the petition was supported by many Asians and men, including monks. His reply didn’t take into account the Buddha’s clear intention to enable bhikkhuni ordination, as well as due process of consensus within the monastic community itself. Overall, the public response from



Photo © Brenda Batke-Hirschmann

the Bhikkhu Elder Council lacked acknowledgement that there was any problem within. Essentially, it is a habitual default to any probing of the power dynamic within the community: ‘you can take it or leave it.’

What are the implications when a religious community defines its own terms without due consideration of the context it operates within? In terms of a human dynamic, many of the petitioners wondered why it was so difficult to simply acknowledge the feedback (at the very least) and perhaps even inch toward recognition that the concern, if not the detail, be considered. It is not as if the feedback came from the extreme fringe (even moderate supporters who ventured a critique found themselves labelled as “demanding feminists”), but from responsible and devoted practitioners who collectively represented a considerable voice of seasoned experience. It simply wounded the heart to see faithful and dedicated supporters acknowledging their indebtedness for the opportunity to practice and receive teachings as part of the Forest Sangha, yet resigning from administrative jobs or quietly leaving—some under a cloud of criticism—with little acknowledgement for their years of service. To bring concerns into public view is not to

diminish the value of monastic life, nor the gratitude for what is offered, but to address genuine disquiet regarding the integrity of how power is wielded.

So what happens for those who feel unable to subscribe to a ‘take it or leave it’ strategy and who feel there is no interest in their concerns? And what happens when there is public denial of any problem?

At the moment we watch the Catholic Church wrestle their conscience with secrets kept in a history of abuse. If there had been no public outcry, would the hierarchy of the Church carry on business as usual? There is much to learn from this situation for emerging Buddhist institutions in the West. What happens to religious institutions when they become impervious to secular law, or deaf to the concerns of those marginalized from a power dynamic? The religious language of the Church has chosen to frame a priest’s abuse of 200+ deaf boys^{vii} under his care as a ‘sin’, rather than as a ‘crime against human rights.’ How we frame a problem conditions the outcome. A sin can be dissolved in a secret confessional box, while a crime needs to be fully acknowledged in the public light of day and amends undertaken. At one time it would have been unthinkable to challenge Church power or hierarchy. To speak out was heresy and the Church was swift to condemn or sentence to hell those who did. As Western Buddhists we like to think of ourselves as more sophisticated than this. But are we?

As the siladhara struggled to find a way to digest the impact of the 5 Points, not only were they asked to keep silent, it also became clear that it was neither safe nor comfortable to speak out. This code of silence has generated a culture of denial in regard to the undermining impact the 5 Points have had on the siladhara and their community. What happens in a culture of secrecy and denial when fear shuts down open and authentic inquiry and dialogue?

One of the 5 Points, apparently drawn from the earlier eight garudhammas (which themselves are of questionable legitimacy^{viii}), maintains that while nuns must invite feedback from the monks, there is no forum for a reciprocal invitation wherein nuns can offer monks feedback. Even less welcome is feedback from the lay community. Since the Vinaya itself was shaped via a process of feedback—much of it given directly to the Buddha by the lay community—it is this vital principle of dialogue that enables the health and safety of the fourfold assembly, while maintaining sensitivity to the context it lives within. Mutual feedback isn’t a Western invention: it was in operation right from the birth of the Buddhist monastic sangha, and it is a relational skill that finds no discomfort within the domain of the feminine.

At the heart of this crisis within the Forest Sangha—the fulcrum around which all else swirls—is the issue of the democratization of Awakening; in other words, how the power structure has contracted and become a defence against, rather than

inclusive of, the feminine. The feminine is not merely comprised of women per se: the feminine represents the capacity to engage in a relationally-based process of consensus, as opposed to patriarchy, which confers power through hierarchy and 'chosen sons'. If small groups of non-elected Elders claim the right to make all the decisions, while also devaluing the input of nuns, lay people and their surrounding monastic community, then a more mature co-created field of Awakening is thwarted. Instead of a dynamic sangha field that is deeply inclusive of lay and ordained female and male practitioners, and in which authentic communication is encouraged, the tendency towards fear, domination, mistrust and competitiveness becomes accentuated. A culture of monologue takes precedent, and depth listening, a further attribute of the feminine, is lost.

Also lost is the consensus-based grassroots structure that was originally intended as the foundation of sangha. To listen, rather than dominate, is so badly needed in our times when all that we love about this earth, and the precious life it enables, is in danger of being utterly lost for future generations. For thousands of years, human consciousness has been shepherded by a patriarchal imperative that has sought control and dominion over all natural resources. We now face the culminating conclusion of this consciousness, which is the real possibility of the destruction of our fragile ecosystem.

In response, the archetypal feminine is rising, as in no other time in his-story, in defence of the very earth herself. The feminine within both men and women—but particularly in women—finds itself less tolerant to collusion. More than ever, women feel the imperative to speak their deeper truth. It is in this context we see increased interest of proper placement of nuns, in particular the reinstatement of bhikkhuni ordination within Buddhist monasticism. It is also within this context that the 5 Points landed so hard on the siladhara nuns.

Siladhara ordination evolved over a period of thirty years of Western women's presence within the Forest Sangha. As an ordination vehicle, it was 'put together' to enable training for women wishing to live as alms mendicants in the West. While it has served well in the past, it is an ambivalent ordination within Theravada Buddhism. Sri Lanka resolved ordination ambivalence and the placement of female renunciates by reinstating full bhikkhuni ordination. There are now nearly 1,000 fully ordained Sri Lankan Theravada bhikkhunis. Yet I remember that the early 1980's, Western women who had ordained as bhikkhunis were expelled from Sri Lanka and threatened with imprisonment. If a conservative country that has been the keeper of Theravada from the earliest days of Buddhism can bring this about, then surely it is possible for Theravada within the West to forge a more visionary approach.

The 5 Points tap into the painful inheritance of misogyny within Buddhism and work directly against a fuller expression of Awakening through female incarnation. For some,

living under the 5 Points shadow is untenable. The 5 Points are crippling. Even in absentia of a dual community, where the internalization of the energetic dynamic of these points is not so obvious, they can insidiously shift reference for spiritual authority from an inner confidence to that of male religious authority.



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For centuries, major religions have mostly disregarded the spiritual authority of the feminine. This sets the stage for a unique journey that lay and ordained women undergo in the face of such powerful patriarchal shaping, particularly with the inheritance of a nearly invisible lineage of female practitioners within 2,550 years of Buddhist transmission. It is a journey to claim an inner authenticity and confidence that is rooted in—and emerges from—the feminine. This is different than the authority that emerges from internalizing the power dynamic of patriarchy, which may generate an inner dissonance for woman practitioners.

When women internalize the hierarchical power dynamic that patriarchy encourages—done at the expense of their deeper nourishment from within the feminine—the need for affirmation, due to the inner hollowness that is felt, can be relentless.

If there is no real understanding of this effect, women can become competitive and damaging to their subordinates and find themselves betraying their sisters in order to win favor with men who exert power over them. While the reclamation of the feminine is a painstaking journey for women, it is ultimately a journey that men also need to undertake in order to mature their Awakening. Indeed it is far too simplistic to say that women are the poor victims and men are perpetrators: some men are much more grounded in the feminine than some women.

Ultimately, both men and women are wounded by patriarchy. I will explore this territory further for an upcoming anthology, to be published in 2011. But suffice to say that overall, it simply feels deeply inappropriate within the imperative of our time to unnecessarily legislate the perpetuation of centuries of conditioning which confers authority onto the masculine at the expense of Awakening within the feminine—an Awakening that was maturing into a coherent, strong, healthy and vibrant nuns' community in the UK.

The community today now seems to be significantly altered from what it was nearly one year ago. In August 2009, the siladhara nuns were summoned into a meeting at Amaravati Monastery, which they assumed was merely a casual get-together. Instead, they were delivered the 5 Points, which most of them experienced as shattering. The shock—also palpable to many Amaravati lay supporters and friends—was felt by the nuns as a full body blow. The Siladhara area group of exceedingly strong and adept practitioners, who have proved capable of weathering great inner and outer hardship. My own understanding is that the shock wasn't due to an inability to practice with these conditions, or any for that matter; rather, it was due to the deeply embodied knowing—a knowing that doesn't easily find words—that the demanded acquiescence was not only a betrayal to the Awakening feminine within themselves, but also within consciousness itself. During this process an injunction of confidentiality was placed upon the siladharas, leaving no recourse for any other authority or supporter to help negotiate their position.

Without the protection of placement within the larger movement of Buddhism which bhikkhuni ordination offers, a siladhara nun's training is susceptible to additions and subtractions whenever it suits an Elder bhikkhu council or a preceptor. Is it then the case that such a council or preceptor eclipses the siladharas' own sense of lineage to the Buddha? And is it really only the business of a small group of bhikkhus to adjust or add to their training, including imposing injunctions that undermine the very conditions required for bhikkhuni ordination? Is it not

also of interest for lay and monastic supporters who wonder what the implications are for Siladhara Order in the future? Do the unilateral actions of the Elders not invite all Theravadan Buddhists to acquiesce? It seems that without the checks and balances that community consensus provides, force becomes the *modus operandi* and a lack of discernment gains traction. A culture based on undue use of power, insensitivity to context, and reluctance to dialogue can only generate a false and dangerous reality.

Gender inequality within Buddhist monasticism is often maintained through the argument that the only place of true equality is enlightenment. Life is simply unfair, and no amount of tinkering with the conditions of the world will resolve its underlying *dukkha*^{ix} so better to aim for enlightenment. While this perspective is ultimately true, the reality is that we do not live in ultimates. We live in a relative, relational reality where actions have consequences. For example, in the apartheid regime in South Africa, the gross distortion of human rights due to racial discrimination was defended by numerous religious bodies as morally justified. Blacks were simply understood to be inferior to whites. Upon that premise, an entitled racial group created a servant class of over 40 million people. Apartheid could only be sustained through the use of brute force and through the constant inner and outer affirmation of the superiority of one class of people over another.

As someone who has lived and worked in South Africa since 1994, it was disturbing to be told by a very prominent Elder bhikkhu that 'nuns can't really do it', meaning they can't really practice or get enlightened. While I don't think this is a view shared by the majority of monks, within the Ajahn Chah Thai Forest tradition there is an insidious and pervasive sense that women aren't really taken seriously as vessels of Awakening. What happens if these views are held, even unconsciously, by those who shape sangha policy? Any legislation that places one group of people—whether by gender or race—as inferior to another is bound to have dire psychological consequences. The 5 Points legislate a tendency that reinforces the sense of 'less than.' If a thirty *Vassa*^x nun has to wait until a one *Vassa* monk decides whether to invite her to give a Dhamma talk or lead a blessing chant, the cumulative result has to be that the worth, importance and voice of a seasoned, mature nun is less valuable than a novice monk.

The continuing objectification of 'the other' as 'less than' over a period of years justifies a distortion of power, and in such an atmosphere it is challenging to maintain healthy community. In an environment such as this, the propagation of absolutes applied to all relative levels of concern can easily confound and negate the tender inner voice through which conscience communicates. It becomes harder and harder to hear inner authenticity, to be honest, and to trust. Eventually people say less and less about what they truly feel, and they learn

question the very accuracy of their own perceptions. Instead, what is told over and over by those in power becomes the norm, and what is authentically felt becomes denied. It creates a spell of sorts, which no one can break.

As practitioners, however, we must ‘let go’ and move on. Though there is public acknowledgement of the territory between ‘either stay on these terms, or leave’, the disquiet is mainly whispered about behind closed doors. It takes courage to speak out in the face of such considerable opposition. It takes courage to point to the ‘irrational’ roots of discrimination. It is not easy to request dialogue in the face of an authority that uses legal and spiritual arguments to build a defensive wall. In such a culture, those who do speak out tend to be marginalized, demonized or shamed.

This was the case with a siladhara at Chithurst Monastery who signed the petition. The petition was printed out by monks and her name was circled in red and pinned on the door of the nuns’ room in the monastery. An act of bullying, foolishness—boyishness even, almost something one could dismiss as a result of the reactivity around the petition. Yet it clearly revealed a mind set. There was no respect given a senior nun who was trying to find a way to express her concern at decisions she was not invited into, but that powerfully shaped her life. The same was true of the male monastics who found themselves consequently bullied, sanctioned and ostracized after signing the petition. Given that there was no place of safety offered within the communal process to raise objection, those who did sign the public petition were responding the best they could in accordance with their conscience.

Even more insidious is the inner dissonance that happens when a communal culture lacks openness. When an inner sense of conscience (and increasingly gender equity is a matter of conscience) is overridden by a teaching that suggests conscience is not in accord with the Dhamma, then there is the potential for something quite sickly to emerge.

Fortunately, as with any disease, there are symptoms which alert us: leaders who become unaccountable and unreachable; ends that are justified by any means deemed necessary by leaders; leaders who induce feelings of shame and guilt in order to influence and control members; group membership that involves cutting of ties with outsiders who may bring up awkward questions; questioning, doubt, and dissent is discouraged or even punished; the group becomes elitist and an ‘us versus them’ mentality dominates which brings it into conflict with the surrounding culture. As Buddhist traditions with powerful leaders at their head become established as Western institutions, they can be susceptible to projecting themselves as infallible. But the maturity of both a person and an institution is measured in part by its willingness to receive critique. In the same way religious teachings can offer valuable insights for society, considered critique from lay society is an important way

of maintaining checks and balances for religious institutions. There can be no harm in finding forums that enable a respectful exchange and a deeper listening to the context within which the Dhamma is being placed.

Is it really the case that perceived ‘Western demands for gender equality, individual rights and social justice fall outside the practice of Dhamma-Vinaya’? Numerous examples within the Suttas show that the monastic order was influenced by the surrounding culture it was birthed within. Buddhism has always been an evolving dynamic, rather than a static tradition. Its transmission from one culture to another has allowed for influence from the milieu it finds itself within. The Buddha himself set a precedent for adaptability by using the everyday conversational language of the time, which was Magadhi (closely related to Pali) rather than the language of those who held religious power, which was Sanskrit. The encounter of Buddhism with the West has met with influences from democracy (which includes lively debate and inquiry), engaged social action, psychology and feminism, all within the context of the diminishing influence of hierarchy in society. These influences have interfaced with the transmission of Dhamma to generate a vigorous dialogue, which one would hope can remain open and responsive.

While it is true to say that it is possible to practice in any situation, and that placement doesn’t matter, it is also the truth that the displacement of nuns, over a period of centuries, has made their history invisible—and has thwarted the potential for strong female leadership. What struck many of us numb was that thirty years evolution of the nuns in the UK, which had enabled a more shared caucus and ground for consideration in regards to bhikkhuni ordination, was utterly neglected by the imposition of the 5 Points.

A phrase that has been going through my mind regarding all these recent developments within the Forest Sangha is ‘the burden of denial’. Western psychology explains that difficult emotions that are dismissed or disowned in the name of transcendence tend to get projected onto others. What we cannot bear to feel ourselves, we require others to hold for us. Of course it is not a conscious transaction, since those who project and those who internalize projection hardly know it is happening. We project not only our shadow material, but also our enlightenment potential.

Sometimes it is easier to hand our power over than to tolerate owning it ourselves. When we lose the middle ground of every day human interaction which keeps us more real, we become ideals, archetypes and fantasies to ourselves and each other. When monasticism is used to dehumanize, to inflate ourselves, or to distance ourselves from authentic contact, then the ‘field of relationship’ becomes rife for projection.



Photo © Brenda Batke-Hirschmann

As a young nun at a formal morning work meeting, I was quietly minding my own business when the abbot came into the meeting. He was clearly upset as he had just disrobed a monk. I didn't have any particular problem with the monk disrobing, I was just observant of the fact that he was now sitting in lay clothes. However the abbot was clearly very angry, and yet was pretending that everything was okay. Suddenly, a wave of energy hit me with considerable force. I literally felt it roll across the room from the abbot to me. I found myself consumed with so much grief and upset that I had to leave the meeting. Afterwards I wept for two solid hours. It was so clear to me that it wasn't my energy—I just happened to have been a vehicle for displaced grief and anger (and for my trouble, I was seen as an emotional nun). This was the first time that I clearly understood the principle of projection, though at that time I didn't have the framework for understanding or naming it. Of course I have also projected a lot onto others, which is always embarrassing to acknowledge. Then again, we all have. It is not a surprise to many of us Westerners to know that while we might be adept at meditation, we can also be psychologically wounded with questionable emotional maturity.

Over the years, monastics in the European Union have relied on non-Buddhist methods for facilitating their inner growth and for supporting the development of the community.

Their practices have included approaches such as therapy, and also drawing from other lineages and spiritual practices. The truth is that for the most part, the observance of Vinaya and the practice of meditation has not been enough to heal psychological wounds or meet the deeper human need for connection and love. To acknowledge this gives a fuller picture of how complex the lived process of Awakening actually is. It is a disservice to not communicate a more accurate picture of how much healing and integration of the personal and communal is needed for us as Westerners.

A leap to the ultimate does not necessarily enable an increase of compassionate holding or community well-being. The reality is that the ideal of letting go is often very far from an integrated living of it. Letting go can easily become avoidance. As practitioners, we need to discern true transcendence from a premature 'non-attachment' that masks the fear and denial of complex emotional feelings which are evoked in human relationship. When dharma practice is used to disassociate from authentic human interaction which happens best within a level playing field, then distortions appear.

Buddhist monastic traditions seem to have a real difficulty in finding a level playing field in regard to their relationship to women. A fascinating read, which didn't gain much traction in the Buddhist world—perhaps due to some of its controversial content—is the work of June Campbell, who was translator and

consort of Kalu Rinpoche. Needless to say while her translation work was public, her sexual liaisons with the great master were secret! Years later, as an avowed non-Buddhist, she wrote of her experience in the book 'Traveller in Space, In Search of Female Identity in Tibetan Buddhism'^{xi}. Her perspective is that rinpoches—taken from their mothers at a young age—may have very distorted images of women. Women were deified,

Elizabeth Day (former siladhara Sister Cintamani) illustrates how the removal of denial has literally changed cultural attitudes to the imbalance of power between men and women:

"In Australia there has been a slow but steady cultural shift in recent decades in the way that 'domestic abuse' – now called intimate partner violence – is framed and addressed. The interpretation of violence has broadened to include psychologically

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used as sexual consorts, or expected to be hand maidens. In other words, flesh and blood women who share decisions, power and can criticise as well as support, love and consult, were not available to them. Perhaps this distortion of relationship contributes to the difficulty in Tibetan Buddhist monasticism of allowing Tibetan nuns equal access to resources, full ordination and equal empowerment within the lineages. Within Buddhist monasticism—the most enlightened teachings and practices on the planet—are we really destined to replicate relationships between men and women that are deeply archaic and that perpetrate these painful distortions? Or can insight into emptiness, which allows us to transcend all gender distinction, inform and help illuminate more skilful relationships? After all, we are continually in relationship with others, whether we like it or not. Even arahantship does not abdicate us from the need to respond within this world. Neither does it abdicate us from the consequences of actions within the world of relationship.

It is ironic that in spite of the great desire to keep the 5 Points and the Perth ordination secret, the absolute opposite happened. A public critique and an out pouring of debate was catalyzed. While the process was difficult and distressing, it contributed to reducing the burden of denial. This has been a journey that has taken us beyond ideals of enlightenment and into the all-too-painful and familiar territory of human complexities. Mostly, this public debate has happened around the elders of the Forest Sangha, but not directly with them. To talk more directly, within a fourfold assembly forum, there would need to be the recognition that there is a problem, and that this problem has caused much pain.

and financially controlling behaviors. Previously women were expected to take responsibility for the violence they experienced at the hands of their male partner. With much effort and insight, there has been a shift of emphasis toward requiring those men who use violence as a tool of control, not the women whom they abuse, to take responsibility for their actions. The approach now is to support abused women to remain in their homes, with protection in place, and to relocate the perpetrating man. But it has taken enormous effort to develop and legislate according to this deeper understanding of the abuse dynamic.

No one owns the 'house' of Buddhist monasticism. The renunciant path is our collective inheritance. It does not belong to the monks. It is not theirs to confer or withhold at whim. For how long will we allow women to be driven out of their monastic home rather than challenge the abuse of their freedom to practise fully within Buddhist monasticism? The persistence of gender inequity—within a broader cultural context that tolerates it less and less—threatens to bring the house down around us.

So we ask: what would it look like to relocate the 'problem' of bhikkhuni ordination and gender equity within Buddhism, to where it really belongs? The 'problem' doesn't belong with women who want to ordain. The 'problem' belongs with those who fear women's full participation.

The development of insight into this fear is crucial; it has the potential to release any stand-off over this issue. Such development requires robust personal enquiry, honest reflection, and the humility to recognize one's own error. It is a struggle, no doubt. It also risks bringing us into contact with each other in all our complexity—our strengths and our vulnerabilities.

But the honest effort to enquire within—both by women as well as men—for the roots of fear of the feminine can constitute a heart opening that makes dialogue possible. However painful, overwhelming and challenging such a dialogue may be, surely it is a process we must have. The alternative is far worse: secrecy; nuns displaced or disrobed; monks who feel cut off from a more authentic engagement; ill-informed and idealizing, even sycophantic, lay followers.



Photo © Brenda Batke-Hirschmann

The need for personal inquiry is challenging enough, but ever more so when undertaken on a communal level. A good place to start—one which can help us move beyond a culture of denial—is the humble acknowledgment of the pain caused by gender inequity. While there is much for women to explore in terms of how to empower themselves and each other—particularly in the context of creating monastic communities that are independent from monks—the primary work of exploring misogyny in Buddhist monasticism is essential.

It is essential because it provides historical context for Westerners with regard to the complexity of what they have inherited, as they attempt to ground Buddhism within their contemporary cultures. It is essential because it helps everyone be released from the ball and chain of discrimination, which negatively impacts men as well as women. It is essential because it enables a healthy fourfold assembly forge a pathway that explores a great middle way between a ‘take it or leave it’ approach, and a way that encourages a culture of deeper listening into the perpetuation of psychological wounds. And it is essential because it acknowledges that an integrated Awakening

comes about through the journey of our humanity—not in spite of it.

In the Thai Forest monastic sangha, the marshal archetype of conquering ‘the kilesa’^{xii} has an ‘up and out of this world’ paradigm. I’m not sure it is working for what is needed in our time of global crisis. Ajahn Chah encouraged us by advising ‘Don’t be a Buddha or Bodhisattva. Be an earthworm’. What is needed in our times is to bring Awakening ‘down and through’ the mud of human relationship. Awakening could then be seen to have two dimensions or spheres which inter-penetrate. One is the transcendent dimension, which is realized as the static principle of Nibbana. The other is the dynamic aspect of Awakening, which seeks expression as it evolves through the forms of existence.

The middle way between “take it” and “leave it” is the rich and fertile inter connectedness we experience as relational beings. It is the ground for the integration of Awakening, and the ground from which a holistic vision can emerge, one rooted in transcendence yet free to cherish this poor and aching world.

April 15, 2010: I acknowledge and appreciate those sisters and brothers in the Dharma with whom I share the territory ‘in between’: your thoughts, concerns and perspectives mingle into this article.
TMW ❖

Thanissara (Mary Weinberg) was one of the first women to ordain in the West in Ajahn Chah’s Forest Tradition, initially as a mae chee, then as a siladhara. She left the order after twelve years. Thanissara holds an MA in Buddhist Psychotherapy from Middlesex University, UK. She is director of Dharmagiri Hermitage in South Africa, and a facilitator for the community dharma leader program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, USA.



ⁱ The 5 Points: 1. The structural relationship as indicated by the Vinaya of the bhikkhu sangha to the siladhara sangha is one of seniority, such as the most junior bhikkhu is senior to the most senior siladhara. As this relationship of seniority is defined over time it is not subject to change. 2. In line with this, in ritual situations where both bhikkhu and siladhara - such as giving anumodana (blessings to the lay community) and precepts - leading the chanting or giving a talk - is always presumed to rest with the senior bhikkhu present. He may in some cases invite a senior siladhara to lead. Yet if this is a regular invitation it does not imply a new standard of shared leadership. 3. The bhikkhu sangha will be responsible for the ordination the way Ajahn Sumedho has been in the past. The siladhara look to the bhikkhu sangha for ordination and guidance rather than exclusively Ajahn Sumedho. A candidate for siladhara should seek approval from the siladhara sangha and then receive acceptance by the bhikkhu sangha as represented by those bhikkhus who sit on the elder council. 4. The formal ritual of giving pavarana (invitation for feedback) by the siladhara sangha to the bhikkhu sangha should take place at the end of Vassa as it has in our communities traditionally: according to the structure of the Vinaya. 5. The siladhara training is considered to be a vehicle already suitable for the realization for liberation, and is respected as such within our tradition. It is offered as a complete training as it stands, and it is not a step to a different form, such as bhikkhuni ordination.

ⁱⁱ Siladhara: 10 precept ordination with an additional 120+ observances fashioned from the Bhikkhuni Pātimokkha.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ajahn Brahmavamsa (‘Ajahn Brahm’) was one of Ajahn Chah’s first Western disciples.

^{iv} Wat Nong Pah Pong: The ‘mother ship’ (head monastery) of Ajahn Chah’s ca. 20 branch monasteries in Thailand and the West.

^v Vinaya: Pāli word for the monastic code developed by the Buddha which guides the lives and conduct of the monastic sangha.

^{vi} Garudhammas: http://www.dhammadownload.com/index.php?title=8_Garudhammas

^{vii} After a New York Times story reported that Pope Benedict XVI (then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) failed to defrock a priest who abused 200 deaf children in Wisconsin, the pope lashed out against the news media. “Faith,” he said, allows one not “to be intimidated by the petty gossip of dominant opinion.”

^{viii} For further discussion on the garudhammas: <http://groups.google.com/group/dhammadharini/web/non-history-of-the-eight-garudhammas?pli=1>

^{ix} Dukkha: Pāli word meaning suffering, unsatisfactoriness, dis-ease.

^x Vassa: Pāli word for the yearly 3 month ‘rains retreat’ observed by Theravada monastics. June Campbell, ISBN 0 485 11 494 1, 1996, Athlone Press.

^{xii} Kilesa: Pāli word for defilement.

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*Once, while Mahánāga was begging alms at Nakulanagara,
he saw a nun and offered her a meal. As she had no bowl,
he gave her his, with the food ready in it. After she had
eaten and washed the bowl, she gave it back to him saying,
“Henceforth there will be no fatigue for you when begging
for alms.” Thereafter the Elder was never given alms
worth less than a kahāpana. The nun was an arahant.*

DhSA.399