

Present

The Voices and Activities of Theravada Buddhist Women | Spring 2010

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A Joyful, Fragile Revival

The ordination of four bhikkhunis in Australia in October 2009 ignited a firestorm of controversy covered in the media, and various Buddhist blogs and web sites. A newcomer to the phenomenon of bhikkhuni ordination might assume this much uproar accompanied any woman taking higher vows. This could not be further from the truth.

At this time there are, for example, thirty women training to become bhikkhunis at Sri Lanka's Dekanduwa Monastery, a ten-acre complex funded by the Buddhist Cultural Center. This bhikkhuni training monastery is one of several places a woman may go to in Sri Lanka to pursue samaneri training. In all likelihood, these women will ordain without any fanfare or publicity and will return to their teachers for ongoing guidance.

The vast majority of the hundreds of women who have ordained since the late 1990's have done so without any notoriety. When I was in Horana in March of 2009, I met Thai and Malaysian samaneris who were ordaining as bhikkhunis the following month, and were planning on returning to northern Thailand to train in the Thai Forest tradition under highly esteemed Thai bhikkhus. One Thai samaneri—an articulate, well-educated woman—was stunned that anyone would be interested in them or what they were doing.

It is lovely to imagine their dignified ordinations and their subsequent opportunity to disappear into practice amid the lush forests of Thailand. Typical of bhikkhunis worldwide, they wish to be left alone to study and meditate. The last thing they want is the limelight. A good number of ordained women have refused interviews altogether, not because they are indifferent to others but because they realize they are still very newly ordained. They are maturing, and need quiet and solitude to develop fully.

Those of us who are working toward the revival of the Bhikkhuni Sangha believe that the contributions of fully ordained women are as vital to men as to women. Everyone at Alliance for Bhikkhunis (AfB) has had—and continues to have—knowledgeable and adroit bhikkhu teachers. We would never wish to lose them, but simply want our sisters to be heard as well, and to be allowed to join their brothers in their noble efforts.

Seeing a female monk opens so many possibilities for women. A young girl taught to revere bhikkhunis cannot help but come to respect herself in the process: young girls will internalize images of themselves as precious, noble, and containing the potential for immense spiritual attainment. What a loving message and legacy to bequeath to them. Men, in turn, can learn from their sisters and can become skilled in cultivating the feminine expression of the Dhamma. They can experience the joy that comes with being gentle, kind, and nurturing—all tender dimensions of heart essential to progress on the path.

and have been working energetically behind the scenes to help women ordain. Many openly. Delicately, skillfully, patiently, they have been altering the monastic landscape. We are grateful to them for their huge, loving hearts and dependable helpfulness.

Change usually comes in fits and spurts. Often it is not pretty and can feel awkward, even chaotic. We are all at risk for preferring the familiar and can feel disequilibrium and unease when new elements and ways of doing things are introduced. Moving from one state of consciousness to a fresh and broader

If disenfranchising monastic women were allowed, this disavowal would undoubtedly prove an insurmountable barrier in attracting critically-minded and compassionate people—men and women alike—to the Dhamma.

The AfB is not simply seeking the revival of the Bhikkhuni Sangha but is ultimately committed to the spread of Buddhism in the West and other parts of the world, as well as strengthening Buddhism where it is already anchored. If disenfranchising monastic women were allowed, this disavowal would undoubtedly prove an insurmountable barrier in attracting critically-minded and compassionate people—men and women alike—to the Dhamma. Literate and progressive individuals would have grave doubts about a religion that did not cherish the feminine. Protective fathers would not entrust their beloved children to a religion that demeans their daughters.

As little as fifteen years ago, there were no Theravada bhikkhunis. That is how new and fragile this revival is. The notable exception was German-born Ayya Khema, who ordained at Hsi Lai Temple in Los Angeles in 1988. Other Theravada women ordained with her. However, unlike Ayya Khema, they lacked assistance and most were forced to disrobe, a sad but inevitable outcome when organized support is absent. Countless people are propelling the emergence of Theravada bhikkhunis at this time. Mahayana bhikshus and bhikshunis have played an essential role in sponsoring trainings and ordinations. Numerous compassionate bhikkhus have taken up the banner

awareness, and the reality such an understanding ushers in, can feel perilous. We may feel there is nothing to catch us should we fall. Fear and resistance are understandable reactions to the novel and untested.

Whatever conflicts and problems have happened in the past, we can choose to set them aside. Even better, throw them away entirely and begin anew. We invite everyone to join us in working toward the re-establishment of the Fourfold Assembly that the Buddha implemented.

Like a loving family where there are occasional squabbles and misunderstandings, family members never forget their common bonds. They forgive and resolve to forge even sturdier ties. The Dhamma joins us as a family, all of us cheering and encouraging each other as we paddle toward the far shore. ❖



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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