

# The Presidents Message:



Will the West Have a Bhikkhuni Sangha?

*A Bhikkhuni Sangha is sprouting in the West. Will this fragile shoot survive?* No one can say for sure. It is highly possible that one day Theravada bhikkhunis will disappear from the Western landscape altogether. To conclude otherwise is to ignore history as well as contemporary challenges facing Western monastics. Unlike the expanding number of bhikkhuni viharas and training centers in Southeast Asia, there is no guarantee that ordained women will coalesce into well-supported, thriving bhikkhuni communities in the West.

It is a mistake to assume that because female Theravada monasteries have strongholds in a number of countries, they will naturally thrive elsewhere. During a span of a thousand years, Chinese bhikkhuni monasteries flourished while Sri Lanka had not a one. This is ironic since it was Sri Lankan bhikkhunis who brought ordination to their Chinese sisters. What was, ended. The same can happen in the U.S. and other Western countries.

Another illustration of what may take root in one country but not another is Taiwan. This East Asian country has had dynamic female monasteries for decades. Ordained women overwhelmingly outnumber male monks. The rapid growth of bhikkhuni monasteries happened at a time when similar bhikkhuni monasteries were non-existent in Thailand and Burma, countries relatively close. Communities of ordained female monks are only now beginning to emerge in Thailand but not in Burma. What may seem utterly reasonable to one culture may appear irrational, unacceptable, or even offensive to another.

An additional error would be to view misogynistic attitudes as the primary driver blocking women from enjoying the privilege of living as a female monk. A Westerner may be inclined to assume that as gender equity spreads, female renunciants will have an easier time. In reality, in Southeast Asia where women to this day are often viewed as inferior to men, fully ordained women are faring much better compared to the West. Southeast Asian women are blessed to have been born in countries in which the laity has a long tradition of supporting male monks. Adding female monks to the mix has not been that much of a paradigm shift for lay supporters. For many Thai and Sri Lankan women, it is a relief to be able to have close contact with a female monk. They can reveal things to a woman they could not broach with a man.

Currently, a few dozen fully ordained Theravada women are beginning to appear in the West, but, by and large, they are struggling and lack dependable support. Quite a few live in relative isolation on family property and are provided for by sons and daughters. The majority who are trying to make a go of it without family assistance are finding it tough getting their basic needs met. It is easy to assume that since some female monks exist now, they are here to stay. History tells us otherwise. Ordained women have appeared in Thailand, even in Tibet, over the last several centuries, but those hopeful sparks and embers died, without leaving a trace and certainly without evolving into viable communities.

A few isolated bhikkhunis here and there do not a

Bhikkhuni Sangha make. The charismatic German-born Ayya Khema is an example of this. Though she transformed the practice of her students through the re-introduction of jhana practice, she did not leave a legacy of a Bhikkhuni Sangha. There were no junior nuns to pick up where she left off. This is a cautionary tale that warns us not to read more into the occasional glimpse of a Western woman in orange robes. Brilliant, entertaining, and adept writers and meditators, such as Ayya Khema, attract substantial support from lay people. A reserved, introspective young woman, just entering a spiritual career, will not garner that level of support and can easily slip through the cracks.

How do we protect women who are ten, twenty, or thirty years from arriving at spiritual maturity? How do we encourage Westerners to care about a young (or older) woman who lacks the wit and storytelling ability of their favorite lay teacher? This brings us to the central question: does a Bhikkhuni Sangha matter? If so, why? Is there value in supporting individuals who are focusing on their practice and development even if we do not seem to derive immedi-



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ate benefit from their efforts? Unless lay Western Buddhists recognize the value of having full-time, dedicated female monastics, the fledgling Bhikkhuni Sangha in the West will perish over time.

Each historical period contains its own unique challenges and problems for monastics. There were, for example, bhikkhunis in the ancient Siam kingdoms of Lanna and Sukhothai. The changing political scene during the rise of the Ayutthaya kingdom led the monarchy to offer support exclusively to the Bhikkhu Sangha, signaling the death knell of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. When the Bhikkhuni Sangha as well as the Bhikkhu Sangha died out in Sri Lanka hundreds of years ago, one was revived (multiple times), the other wasn't. There were Burmese bhikkhunis who could have journeyed to Sri Lanka with Burmese bhikkhus to ordain women, but the Burmese bhikkhunis were of a different lineage than their bhikkhu counterparts. As a consequence, the Burmese bhikkhunis were excluded from participating—another example of the Bhikkhuni Sangha falling victim to politics. What are the contemporary forces at work in the West that may prevent the development of robust, sustainable bhikkhuni communities?

Within this short article, I cannot hope to include the entire gamut of problems Western women renunciants face. Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi has written cogently about modern challenges in play for Western monastics in his essay, "The Challenge of



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the Future: How Will the Sangha Fare in North American Buddhism?" <http://www.bhikkhuni.net/library.html> I refer the reader to this in-depth analysis of intellectual, cultural, and social issues Buddhist monastics must address if the Sangha is to prevail in the contemporary world. Rather than cover the same territory, I will focus on pragmatic concerns bhikkhunis are confronting in attempting to secure solid footholds.

### *Practical Problems in Establishing Bhikkhuni Monasteries*

We are not accustomed to sharing our breakfast of scrambled eggs and toast with monks on alms rounds. For many who work and have children to shuttle off to school, it takes every bit of their effort to get the family out the door on time. They often don't have time to eat breakfast themselves, let alone provide it for someone else. In Southeast Asia, it is commonplace to have several generations residing in a home and cherishing a family tradition of sharing food with monks. I have been on pindabat, alms round, multiple times with Thai bhikkhunis. Dozens of people will come out in the early morning to offer rice, fruit, and vegetables, kneel and bow their heads, awaiting a blessing, grateful for a chant that sets the tone for the day. If you are a Sri Lankan or Thai bhikkhuni, you will not starve. We lack this template in the U.S.

Another problem facing Western monastics is the reality that Buddhism is still very much a minority religion. Non-Buddhist neighbors might frown on women walking the streets, begging for food. This is not what spirituality looks like for people in the West who see virtue in industry, self-reliance, and material prosperity. To be dependent, to need help flies in the face of a cultural bias toward independence and self-sufficiency. People might think, I need to work for my food, why don't you? There

is a lack of understanding that maintaining mindfulness and Right Effort, and adhering to the disciplinary code throughout the day is a full-time, rigorous job which benefits many. It is well worth the sacrifices we make to keep this committed cadre of ascetics focused on the task at hand, namely, ending the pointless and futile merry-go-round of finding happiness through the senses. These renunciants are in search of a higher happiness and their single-minded work may inspire us to direct our energies to more fruitful and satisfying endeavors as well. Can the West embrace renunciation as an essential means to peace and contentment? Can they recognize that renunciation is a reward, in and of itself?

In Southeast Asia, lay people routinely volunteer at temples and monasteries. It is a time to be of service as well as to practice. Upasikas and upasakas play a critical role in keeping monasteries operating. Just finding sufficient help to buy and prepare food, run errands, and build and maintain

monasteries is harder in the West since it is not something we have been taught to do. Many Buddhist converts come to Buddhism via a retreat model. They pay good money and expect something in return. Living in a monastery and giving instead of receiving is an alien concept. And since Theravada Buddhists compose a small percentage of the overall population, the care for ordained women falls to a narrow band of people, placing those supporters at risk of burn out. Also, much of the support for Western monastics to date has come from immigrant populations. As their children and grandchildren become more secular and westernized, this help may vanish.

Land acquisition and development pose another set of problems to overcome. Demanding Western zoning and building codes make erecting monasteries much harder compared to Asia. Two years ago while traveling in Northern Thailand, I observed supporters of a local bhikkhuni come together to erect a temple for her. Within hours, they constructed much of the building. I seemed to be observing the Thai version of an Iowa barn raising, both events similar in that they brought a village together to achieve a task as well as strengthen bonds. In the case of Thailand, they were also creating a place they could call their own. No building permits were needed. No plumbing or heat or air conditioning was installed—just some walls and a roof. In the U.S., the authorities would have shut it down.

Related to constructing monasteries is the problem of finding affordably priced land that is zoned for group use. Even if such land is found, building code requirements can be deal breakers. For example, for a bhikkhuni monastery to qualify for property tax exemption, the building must be constructed in accordance with the Americans with Dis-

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abilities Act. This adds a whole layer of complexity and expense to the construction process. Even simple meditation huts, kutis, bhikkhunis would be delighted to have are not allowed in the U.S. because they violate building codes. The climate in the West poses other difficulties. Even in desert areas, it can be extremely cold at night. No sleeping under trees or in tents year-round in the U.S. or other Western countries. Even if hardy enough to pursue a wandering ascetic lifestyle, an individual risks arrest for vagrancy if adopting a life of homelessness.

Zoning is another issue. In most places, zoning ordinances prevent more than three unrelated people from living together. Though homes are offered, bhikkhunis cannot assemble the mandated number of four women, the

number needed to chant the Patimokkha, without breaking the law, even though they might be satisfied to share a small space. As a consequence, women who would like to live together in community, bound by and inspired by the Vinaya, cannot.

Additionally, exorbitant health care costs can prevent women from ordaining or remaining in robes. In some instances, U.S. bhikkhuni monasteries mandate that a woman seeking to join their community show proof that she can afford to pay her health coverage. One very ill nun without health coverage could generate staggering medical bills and bankrupt a bhikkhuni monastery already struggling to stay afloat. So, in order for bhikkhuni monasteries to evolve, they need new women entering their ranks but they are simultaneously reluctant to let women in for fear of being crippled by unexpected medical bills. The negative feedback loop is this: lay people might be more enthusiastic about backing bhikkhuni monasteries if they were able to visit such monasteries and find the experience instructive and heartening, but financial and other roadblocks stop such communities from forming, so lay people lack the contact and needed inspiration to fund these monasteries. Lay people will not mourn the loss of something they have never known.

The lack of solid material assistance impacts the bhikkhunis in other ways. Bhikkhus are able to enter established monasteries and focus on their practice to the exclusion of other activities. Newly minted bhikkhunis often lack this luxury. The pressures of keeping a small vihara or monastery going often force them to do more teaching and traveling than their male counterparts. The lack of retreat time can impede a bhikkhuni's spiritual progress. It can also be flat-out frustrating, demoralizing, and enervating.

In conclusion, we are a long way from having a solidly anchored Western Bhikkhuni Sangha. An array of problems persists, some cultural, some practical. Complacency and an unfounded optimism can blind individuals to current perils, thereby guaranteeing the Bhikkhuni Sangha fails in the West. If these ordained women disappear from the contemporary scene, we all lose, whether we realize it or not.



*Susan Pembroke*

# 1st Annual International Bhikkhuni Day

## September 17, 2011

*If* you are convinced the expression of feminine energy and wisdom is vital for enlightenment,  
*If* you believe women must be equal, influential, and full partners if Buddhism is to thrive in the modern era,  
*If* you wish to see communities of monastic women in every corner of the world offer safe havens of learning and practice,  
*If* you'd like your daughter, sister, wife, or mother to have access to the compassion of ordained women and witness renunciation as a lived truth,

then join us on **September 17, 2011**, for our **1st Annual International Bhikkhuni Day**, a global celebration of bhikkhunis, of fully ordained women. Meditate and share stories with people in Spain, Sri Lanka, Canada, Thailand, the U.S., and elsewhere. Be inspired and transformed!

This first celebration will honor the founder of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, Mahapajapati Theri, as well as commemorate women spiritual teachers who have brought out the best in us, be they bhikkhunis or our mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, or teachers, or simply women we have read about.

In addition to expanding our awareness and becoming informed about the rich and complex spiritual legacy left to us by women, we also raise money for bhikkhuni monasteries so that monasteries that are struggling can survive and new ones can be constructed.

Visit our homepage at [www.bhikkhuni.net](http://www.bhikkhuni.net) for talks and other tools, designed to create a memorable day of reflection and discussion, learning, and local as well as global community building. Your presence, your voice, your investment in the feminine manifestation of enlightenment can make all the difference!

*"Throughout the ages, women have had a unique way of approaching the spiritual path and a specific perspective on wisdom. This feminine vision of enlightenment is process oriented, relational, circular, transparent, and passionate."* **Lama Willa Miller**