

Smoothing the Way

By Venerable Sudhamma Bhikkhuni

Focused. Determined. Candidates sit apart, reflecting upon this change in their lives. Perhaps they worry that something may yet interrupt this long-awaited moment. Members of the Sangha in flowing bright yellow or dusky orange robes gently settle onto their cushions on the floor. In every bhikkhuni ordination ceremony I've witnessed thus far, the room becomes breathless, hushed. In some ordinations, flowers adorn the room. There may be a few onlookers, or hundreds, or none allowed. The air becomes perfectly still yet vibrant, the ceiling bright as though devas dance above our heads.

A nun, her hands trembling, grasping a tray loaded with carefully arranged flowers, candles, and incense, appears from one corner, approaches the seated group, then bashfully stands to one side. She awaits her preceptor's signal. In this pause, with all eyes upon her, this nun prepares to step into something new, different, unknown. The venerables on the floor send thoughts of encouragement to her. Then the signal occurs. Their soon-to-be new member carefully steps amid the group, sets down her tray, bows, and tremulously breaks the silence with her plea: "Ayye, *saṃghaṃ upasampadaṃ yācāmi, ullumptu maṃ ayye saṃgho anukampaṃ upādāya.*" "Venerable Ayye (Ladies) Sangha, I request ordination. In your compassion, Ayye, raise me up."

By the end of the ceremony, nothing much has happened, just some words said, a carefully rehearsed script in an ancient language to affirm her basic qualifications and her acceptance into the Order—a little skit really, reportedly directed by the Buddha himself, in which the junior nun plays a petitioner and others play her advocates or adjudicators. The actors perform the motions of requests and recommendations, a preparatory interrogation off to the side, then interrogation in front of the group, and more advocacy, most of it repeated three times, all accompanied by countless prostrations and awkward postures. Then finally comes the Bhikkhuni Sangha's silent vote of acceptance: by raising no objection to the proposal stated at length three times, they approve of her. Soon afterwards the new bhikkhuni will be ushered into the presence of the Bhikkhu Sangha to confirm her ordination.

The candidate's training and qualifications were long ago assessed; there are no surprises on this day. It is all a mere formality. Yet something extraordinary has occurred, and the ceremony concludes with joyous shouts of "*Sadhu!*" A woman crossed over from the fringes of monastic life into full center, a rite of passage. She is no longer even called a "woman" but a bhikkhuni (a fully ordained nun or, as some of us say, a female monk). Many onlookers weep.

A candidate may attempt to approach the ceremony casually, but the sight of the solemn, upright bhikkhunīs awaiting her stirs even the skeptics. Something powerful shakes us.

For me it was like a spiritual rebirth. I went into an altered state, sensing a connection to something much



greater than myself, a heart-level partnership—you could say perhaps with others who have done this, who have walked a path cleared by the Buddha that leads to the highest possibilities for us as human beings. I see a similar effect on others; awe arises.

Not every nun hearkens to the deep meaning of higher ordination. But fools and frauds aside (every life endeavor has them), something has changed for most of us. We drop previous inner affiliations to see ourselves as members of an ancient community joined for the most worthwhile purpose imaginable. Part of the deal is accepting a high code of conduct and making personal sacrifices to uphold that code of conduct. Part of the deal, too, is loyalty to the larger group.

Hence, when called by a duty to the Bhikkhuni Sangha, particularly when needed for an ordination—someone's plea to be "raised up"—you go. Imagine, Dear Reader, if a friend asked you to advocate for her to save her life, and only you and a handful of others were capable of assisting. What wouldn't you do to help her? Would you travel a long distance? Would you drop all your personal concerns and go? Of course. If not sick in the hospital, you get up and rush to her aid. You go even if it means a long drive. You go even if it means missing a day of work or your kid's soccer match or your friend's birthday lunch. You go even if you have to get on a plane and travel to another city, another country, another continent. But what if she were not your friend; what if she were your friend's friend, and you hear of this woman's good qualities and learn that your presence can save her life. Don't you still go? Yes. Even if you know nothing about her—only her reputation as a good person—if she needs you, it is not easy to say no.

Similarly, when called upon as a member of the Sangha, you go. For my novitiate ceremony one elder bhikkhuni had agreed to travel from a long distance to be my witness from the female Sangha. Unexpectedly she had to forgo officiating at her close friend's funeral to be there for me. We had never met before. That tug of the heart is hard to put into words, but many of us find it impossible to ignore or deny. Personal consequences recede into the background. Perhaps in 300 B.C. Arahant Sanghamitta felt this way when she got word that the royal ladies in Sri Lanka had undertaken novice vows and

earnestly awaited their chance to fully ordain like the many thousands of men around them had already done. That great nun left her adoring father, the Emperor Asoka, and set sail with her companions for Sri Lanka, to spend her life nurturing the growing Sangha there, never to return home.

A couple of years ago, when two admirable Siladhara nuns, acquaintances from long-ago visits I'd made to England, mentioned their interest in taking higher ordination, I told them I would happily travel a long way to help facilitate their ordination, would travel from the other side of the world if necessary. I meant it. Truly, I'd have gone at their call if it took my last breath! These two nuns did invite me to help with their higher ordination in California last year. I traveled from the other side of the USA to participate.

Of all the ordinations I may witness, aside from my own, the former Siladhara nuns' full ordinations will perhaps move me the most deeply. Those nuns went through a lot to see this excellent day. First they labored many years in their English monastery doing community building, which after much effort and self-reflection (and despite having to navigate the waves of gender politics that occasionally swept through) culminated into a peak of strength in nuns' unity—only to see their strong group slowly strangled by the monks who had been like their fathers, then finally shattered by them. Many of their most cherished sisters quit in despair, and some moved away. They shed many tears.

Having meanwhile founded a satellite group in San Francisco, these two Siladhara nuns discovered the breezy, wide-open possibilities offered by America, an answer to the stuffy oppression they had long accepted from their ambivalent monk benefactors in England. With much trepidation, the two nuns chose to join the worldwide Bhikkhuni Sangha, allying themselves with the strength of us all—not only Theravada, but other Buddhist traditions as well. To do that, they had to formally take leave of the siladhara form, rejecting the remnants of their beloved nuns' community. More tears.

A third person joined the higher ordination ceremony of these two former Siladharas. As a young woman seeking to ordain, she quickly located through the Internet a bhikkhuni teacher in her home country (Canada). After two years of peaceful novitiate training, she happily sat together with the older two nuns awaiting ordination. She has never been traumatized in the name of enlightenment or training or submission to a tradition. Her face, youthful and without signs of worry, her eyes bright, she stood out among the rest of us nuns. The former Siladharas seemed to me like weathered ships at the port for repair after having seen many battles, whereas the young nun looked like a sweet new boat ready to launch, unmarked by any harsh weather or troubles.

Looking at the young nun, I marveled, thinking, "This is who we did it for! This is who we pioneers have suffered for. We hoped that someday, a young woman shall easily find her teacher, train without troubles for two years, and become a bhikkhuni. Here she is!" I hope to see many more like her. The bhikkhuni lifestyle has greatly changed me for

the better in ways that I doubt lay life could have done for me. May all other women who would benefit get to do so more easily than I did.

A long journey brought me to see this day. In the early 1990s, I suffered many changes, including intensive treatments for an advanced cancer and watching my marriage crumble under the duress. Monks from Thailand had introduced me to the Dhamma, a lifeline as my life fell apart. My priorities changed from family and career (attorney) to valuing what counts beyond this life. Having recovered from illness, having picked up the pieces and started my life over—new location, new career, new friends, with Buddhism now the central focus of my life—it hit me one day in early 1994 that if I could become a monk like the compassionate Thai monks, it would be the best gift I could possibly give myself.

Imagine my horror on learning that women of our Buddhist tradition (the only school of Buddhism I could embrace or even, at that time, perceive as truly Buddhist) cannot ordain. People suggested that I take eight precepts, wear white robes, and cook and clean for monks, since I could never join the holy brotherhood. Appalled, for weeks I pondered whether to turn away from the Dhamma completely. I've since met women who say they did quit for this reason.

Then it occurred to me that it would be a great shame were I to give up the best thing I've ever come across simply because I cannot get past my own inner pain. That is, the pain of being shut out, the pain of being thwarted from pursuing the highest path, the pain of never emulating the gentle monks whom I admired, the pain of doubting the fairness and hence the full enlightenment of the Buddha, but most especially the pain of every one of the countless past incidents in my life in which males gained and females lost out, including multiple sexual assaults that had stoked a volcano of rage into my heart. Would I let all this pain block me from gaining what is good in the Buddha's teaching? No, I decided.

For the next few years I cheerfully served monks, dutifully attended lay retreats and talks at Dhamma centers, yet also wept tears of frustration that I could not live as a monk and railed against the unfairness. I constantly saw doors opening up for men, my fellow travelers who also sought a way to end their suffering, but the doors were not open for people like me.

One day a voice in my mind told me it is time to leave home, to find out what kind of a holy life may be out there for me—and I gave notice, packed up my life, and left, not knowing where to go. It was 1997, one year after ten Sri Lankan nuns had fully ordained to form the first modern Bhikkhuni Sangha in our Theravada school. News had not yet traveled to my part of the world.

I landed at the Bhavana Society, becoming a pupil of respected elder Bhante Gunaratana ("Bhante G"), my goodkarma rather than his. A rare monk willing to give a woman a chance, he was in for a ride. I arrived at the monastery not understanding much of monastic sensitivities and protocols, accustomed to special status as a generous lay

donor, and tending to reject or criticize whatever I failed to understand. Outspoken, opinionated attorney feminists take more work than most candidates to soften into gentleness and grace, like a tough cut of beef needing more pounding to tenderize. To this day I still draw upon memories of Bhante G's diplomacy, grace, and self-restraint to inform myself how to continue to develop.

Even after having found my monastery, nothing was the same for a woman as for a man. Men received more one-on-one mentoring, men could more casually socialize with the teachers (men) in robes, men had companions with whom to walk out in the woods around the monastery, newly ordained male novices received three times more financial support donated to the monastery on their behalf than did females. For long periods of time, I would be the only novice nun, or only long-term female resident, occasionally the only female on the property. The monks didn't fully understand women, and I often couldn't discern whether my volcanic defilements were at issue, or whether typical male/female social issues were making my life more difficult than the men's lives. Or I would wonder whether it was Western versus Asian culture on some particular occasion—indirect communications and unstated expectations being the Asian monastic norm. In retrospect, often it wasn't one thing or the other, but a combination. Where subtle female guides from my home culture perhaps could have led me around my troubles, my compassionate male guides tended to lead me directly into a brick wall composed of my shortcomings on one side and male superiority on the other, with cultural miscommunications some of the cement in between.

With faith in the Buddha and his amazing teaching, I persevered through what seemed insurmountable obstacles at the time. The bhikkhuni lifestyle that I finally gained is its own reward, and it has also been an extraordinary device for causing me to give up painful shortcomings and slowly but steadily improving my character. I have so greatly benefited that people remark upon the positive changes. Yet over the years, I saw dozens of earnest women, some clearly more qualified than me, abandon pursuit of the holy life when faced with difficulties too severe to endure. Many more observed how hard it would be for women and decided to not even try.

Before ordaining, I dreamed once that I was scaling up a mountain. It was steep and terrifying, nearly sheer. At one point, far above the ground, I wedged into a small niche to regain strength before continuing the terrible upward climb. Finally I reached the top and somehow hauled myself over the overhang, to the secure firm flat ground. I then looked down the cliff edge below me where another woman was struggling upwards. I stretched out my hand and helped her up. As I pulled her up, the cliff shifted and became less steep. She reached the top with a breathless joy. I reached out for the next woman, and as she came upward, the incline again softened. It shifted yet again with the next one. I rejoiced and thought that in the future the women coming up this mountain will never know how hard it was to climb in the past!

My own ordination took place on the shoulders of those who came before me. I was the first American woman and

first Western woman to receive higher ordination through the newly established Bhikkhuni Sangha of Sri Lanka. Most of the half dozen or so Western women who fully ordained ahead of me had received higher ordination through the Mahayana Sangha, some with Theravada monk participation. Not all were well received after the ordination, and they struggled. Many other women found it challenging simply surviving as ten-precept novices. Some of these nuns resigned themselves to not moving forward towards bhikkhuni ordination, while others chose to disrobe. I know of one who lost her mind due to the obstacles faced by women, not by men. Only because of their efforts and their heartaches did the steep mountain become possible for me to climb!

Those arriving after me may find a much more level slope. I hope all sincere future candidates make it here without breaking a sweat. Of course, our defilements await us as the monastic path places us into direct confrontation with our own downsides until we let them go. But at last, at least in some places in the West, we are reaching a point where the process need not be more traumatic than receiving the necessary poundings of a good compassionate teacher seeking to soften a tough student.

In 2011, when making plans to help officiate at the higher ordination ceremony of the two former Siladharas in California, those conversations led to the idea of traveling afterwards from California to Australia together with an old friend who was also participating in the ceremony. At that time I was running a small center, the Carolina Buddhist Vihara in South Carolina where I had served as abbot for eight years. During our trip to Australia, we helped in a going forth ceremony near Perth, and I visited Santi Forest Monastery near Sydney, Australia. Delighted with Santi, I resigned from my position in South Carolina and returned to Santi a few months later for my current residency, thereby stumbling into a situation in which the abbot is departing. Now I have the opportunity to help this community make its big transition from a beloved male abbot to perhaps long-term leadership by bhikkhunis, and this began with answering the call for the nuns' higher ordination. Amazing how these things come together.

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For photos of ordinations held at Dhammasara in 2012, visit www.flickr.com/photos/67319631@N04/sets/72157629587684545/