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The Great Inquiry

An Interview with the Venerable Ayya Tathaaloka

by Jacqueline Kramer

I first met Ayya Tathaaloka when she was in Northern California looking over the land near Jenner that was to become the Aranya Bodhi Forest Hermitage. I had an immediate feeling of sisterhood with Ayya. It turns out that both of us were deeply influenced by her bhikkhuni mentor, the Venerable Myeong Seong of South Korea. The venerable was dedicated to helping rebuild the Bhikkhuni Sangha, and that intention was transmitted to both of us at different times in different ways. Ayya Tathaaloka has bravely and intelligently gone about supporting the growth of the Bhikkhuni Sangha by helping establish the first bhikkhuni forest hermitage in the West, by acting as a preceptor for many Western bhikkhunis, and in many other large and small ways. She has taken great pains to insure recognition of the Bhikkhuni Sangha by careful scholarship and adherence to established procedures.

We spoke again on a sunny May afternoon in 2012, exploring how her early life brought her to the gates of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. The question of how our Western Buddhist pioneers came to the path is an intriguing one. What makes a child from a Judeo-Christian culture seek out Buddhism? What sorts of influences and personality traits draw a child to the East? It's no surprise that an adventuresome, independent spirit and a questioning mind are necessary for the journey. A certain amount of doubt and discomfort

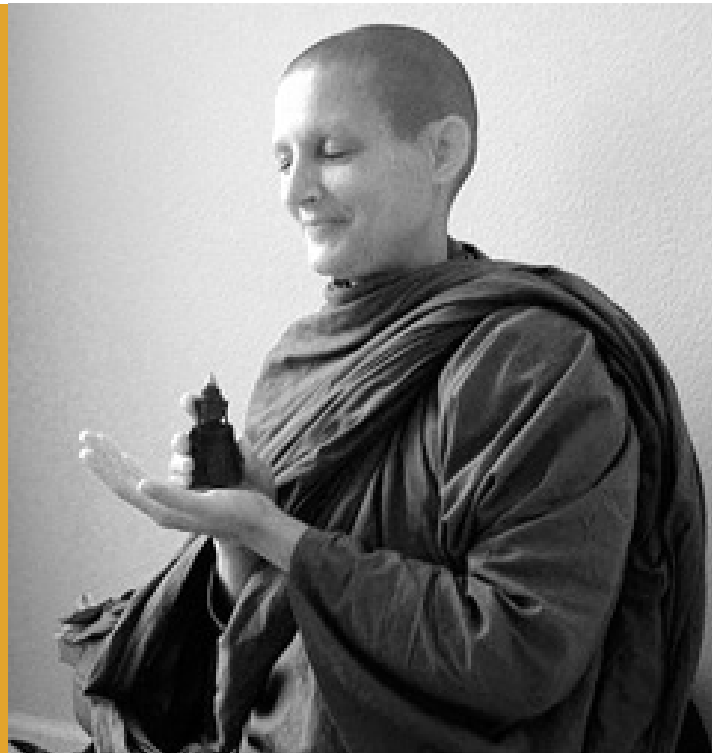
are also important catalysts. In this interview we get a glimpse of Ayya Tathaaloka's adventuresome, independent spirit; her early doubt; and the kind influences that guided her East to Buddhism.

Jacqueline Kramer: What was your first glimmer of Buddhism?

Ayya Tathaaloka: This is a question that other people are able to answer, but I find for myself that I can't. I don't remember my first encounter with Buddhism. Growing up, there were books that had things about Buddhism around me. There was also Buddhism in the movies and on TV and magazines like *National Geographic*. I remember seeing robed Buddhist monks in jungle environments. There are some things I remember from my teenage times that particularly impressed me. Whether you'd say they are connected to Buddhism or not, I'm not sure. I watched the show *Kung Fu*. David Carradine was playing a man who was a Buddhist novice training with a master and was wandering from place to place in the old Wild West learning various life lessons.

That series became a kind of paradigm for me. I understood the pattern that you pick up wisdom from teachers or teachings and then in life circumstances, you

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reflect on that wisdom and apply that to the circumstances that you’re meeting in life. Then the circumstances themselves have the opportunity for growth or catharsis or reflection. They may become part of your ongoing awakening experience. Those teachings then become relevant, come to life, and become manifest. That’s something that I got from watching that show.

Of course, that’s not the only place I saw that paradigm; it was all around. There was encouragement from my parents to learn and apply what has been learned to life circumstances. So that’s not a new thing, but that show illustrated these lessons and their wisdom in a classical Buddhist context.

The Lord of the Rings and *Star Wars* also contained deliberate use of archetypal images of Christian and Buddhist monastics, paradigms of forces of good and evil, wise mentors, and the development and cultivation of the acolyte. The disciples were tried and tested, and triumphing over the forces inside themselves was the big issue. The small person who is from nowhere is the one who then triumphs and saves the world. They were archetypes of spiritual seekers.

Also, there were a couple of other things. I remember one friend of the family had gone to Thailand with the Peace Corps. He ordained for three months as a Buddhist monk during the *vassa* after finishing his assignment. I remember hearing about that experience and finding it very interesting—hearing about what it was like and learning that it was possible for a Western person to go and do that. This friend was male and I was interested in whether this would be a possibility for myself or not. It sounded like a really great

learning experience. I was looking at my possibilities for higher education at that time. To have that kind of training in *sila* (virtue) and meditation and wisdom seemed interesting and excellent as compared to university options.

But I was discouraged when I asked whether women could do that too and was told that this was a possibility open only for men. I remember thinking that I had seen some old Buddhist texts and had the idea that women had been ordained in Buddhism in the Buddha’s lifetime. I felt that if the Buddha was truly enlightened, this possibility should be open for women as well. I felt it should be there and that it *had been* there. It seemed really strange to me that this would not be so in a place where Buddhism was thriving, in an affirmatively Buddhist country. To my young teenager’s sense, not knowing much, that seemed very strange to me.

Not so long after that another family friend who came by to visit had been at Shasta Abbey. I hadn’t heard of Shasta Abbey before. I was living in Washington State and at that time we didn’t have any Buddhist temples or monasteries around that part of the country. But Mt. Shasta was just south of us, not so very far. That friend mentioned that there were both male and female Buddhist monks there. When I heard that, I thought, “Right! That’s how it should be.” I felt this kind of awakening interest then. And I learned there were these differing dynamics about ordination and women being able to ordain or not.

I would say another memorable thing would be a little bit later, still as a teenager, encountering two books that were quite important. One was Master Sheng Yen’s *Faith in Mind*.

It is an English translation of an enlightenment poem by the Third Zen Patriarch in China. I ended up studying and practicing the *hua tou* with him later.

JK: Where was he?

AT: He was in Taiwan. He also founded the Dharma Drum Buddhist Association Center on the East Coast here in the U.S., and it has a West Coast branch as well. That poem by this old Buddhist master touched me.

Then there was the *Blue Cliff Records*, the koans. Someone introduced that book to me as a book of Buddhist wisdom because I seemed to be interested in such. I opened it up and began to look at it, and it brought up tremendous doubt in me right away—the underlying doubt about the many things in life and in our world that were always simmering below the surface. We're skimming on top of that in ordinary life.

know both my mother and my father seemed to have respect for the Buddha.

JK: What religion did you grow up with?

AT: I didn't grow up with one particular religion. My father was an atheist scientist and his family was not religious. They were a family of engineers, with a lawyer or two. They were into the material world and big into cause-and-effect forensic science, which is an investigative science. I got a kind of religion of science and investigation from them. My mom had a partly Episcopalian background with a large dose of naturalism—love for the natural world. She had studied botany, worked as a naturalist, and ended up doing her Ph.D. in phenomenology, which originated with that name under the German philosopher Heidegger, who studied Yogacara Buddhism, which is also known as Vijñānavada,

“Doubt can become a hindrance and cause a lot of suffering in our minds. For me, this accumulated doubt was an abiding, underlying pit of suffering.”

JK: Was this like the great doubt that Zen teachers speak of, or was this doubt as in a hindrance

AT: I think this would be the great doubt that the Zen teachers talk about—deep and fundamental doubt. Touching into and penetrating this is the clearing of a hindrance.

JK: Like what are we doing here.

AT: Yes. Of course, before one has a breakthrough to the great inquiry—*what are we doing here?*—that and the kind of doubt that is a hindrance in people's ordinary lives dance intertwined, intermingled with each other. This is because of not applying that doubt to inquiry in wise ways. When that's so, doubt can become a hindrance and cause a lot of suffering in our minds. For me, this accumulated doubt was an abiding, underlying pit of suffering. Reading even a few of the koan cases drew it all together into a great mass—like I was a cat that needed to vomit up a fur ball as big as the whole world. This was a great mental energetic mass of everything I had been unable to digest in the whole world because of not having right understanding. At that time, I didn't know how to see it correctly and penetrate that great mass.

Thinking back I would say those were impressive things, but I don't remember what the first thing was early on. I

Cittamatra, or the Mind-Only School of Buddhism. From her I got a great appreciation for the natural world—the human interrelationship with the natural world being, in itself, her sphere of spiritual communion. Then both my parents remarried. My father remarried a Jewish woman and my mom remarried a Muslim man. So that increased the religious diversity in our family quite radically.

JK: Was your stepmom practicing Judaism and your stepdad practicing Islam?

AT: Just a little. I wouldn't want to say that they were not practicing. They were gently practicing. My stepmom, who was very much a second mom for me, not only did she have a Jewish background but she had a brother who was a “Jew-Bu.” He officially became a Buddhist. So that was also part of my stepfamily.

JK: What form of Buddhism did he study?

AT: I'm not sure. Either Zen or . . . I'm pretty sure it wasn't Tibetan or Chinese.

JK: It sounds like you grew up in a rich atmosphere that invited questioning.

AT: Yes. I think this was also part of the doubt. There were all these religious traditions, and I had lots of friends who

invited me to various churches. I went now and then to different churches, although my parents were cautious about people's attempts to convert their children. Going to Sunday school a few times with friends, I had questions. I was interested in asking them and in what was being taught. My home environment was one of free inquiry and open discussion in which questions were welcomed and encouraged.

The churches I visited with friends did not seem to be ones of free inquiry for children. That quite put me off. It seemed that there was more of an expectation to just believe what we were being told but not to think about it—even that it was wrong to think about it. Free inquiry was not encouraged. That seemed really strange to me, coming from my home environment. I learned to be leery of any circumstance where my own intelligence or inquiry was not respected. I was taught that this could be dangerous or harmful for people. My parents tried to inculcate in me a

the Buddhist path might be able to offer. I think they may have had an interest in what could come out of that. Certainly a good number of my family members, in the times that I had to visit with them after my first five years away in Europe and Asia, really expressed quite a lot of interest, because for my family this was the stuff of movies and books and magazines. To have a family member go and do that was interesting to them.

JK: You're living the adventure!

AT: Living the adventure! Yes. I certainly had a very strong adventuresome spirit, which I think was nurtured in my family environment, particularly by my father. The things he's done in the form of social welfare, in that spirit of adventure, are quite an amazing example. And my mom mentioned to me, about ten years after I had entered monastic life, that she herself had also thought about becoming a nun when she was a younger person, a teenager. But she didn't want to become

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respectfulness with regards differing ways of doing things. They gave me the idea that most everyone will most likely think that they are right because they are doing the best they can, but that applying this as a judgment to others—that one way, my way, is right and another wrong—is also something to look out for.

JK: You were taught to not traffic in views from early on.

AT: Maybe not 100 percent, but some part of it. My father had an interest in Taoism and Zen Buddhism, and later on in life, after my going forth into monastic life, he became much more active in pursuing that. Science seems to have been disappointing in some ways in terms of what he loved in scientific principle, like free inquiry into truthfulness and that kind of honesty. He started to look into Taoism and Zen Buddhism particularly in regards to those principles. For a while he self-identified as a Taoist.

JK: How do your parents feel about their daughter having become so fully involved in the Buddhist world?

AT: I think they, being compassionate people, felt quite a lot of sympathy for the painfulness of my own doubt and inquiry and my need to seek and search more deeply. I think they may have had appreciation and hope for me in what

a Catholic nun as things were, and she didn't know what else she could do. She mentioned that at the time that she was pregnant with me she thought about that again. And then she realized that, being pregnant, “now my path is to be a mom.” She mentioned that while she was pregnant she was thinking about that. In a way, vicariously through her eldest daughter's experience, she has shared together in parts of the experience of the monastic life.

JK: It's so beautiful how the mother's vision flowers in a world where there are more possibilities for her daughter.

AT: Yes. I wonder sometimes about karma and rebirth. Like the story of the Buddha's own mom and how she changed, according to the story, in the time of her pregnancy and how important she was in terms of the Buddha's choice for a mother. Now, through modern science, we see how the mother's genetics can be modified by the baby. In a way, the baby influences the mother profoundly while the mother also influences the baby profoundly.

JK: I experienced that when I was pregnant. My daughter, Nicole, who has a very serene nature, influenced my feeling of serenity when I was pregnant with her and on meditation retreat.

AT: Yes, this is something I've wondered about. How much was that thinking of my mom's coming from me, inside her, or how much did I get that from her? Because it can certainly go both ways. As you both change by the modification that's happening between the two of you, it's synergetic.

I've also learned from listening to my parents' discussions about what it is to be a free person. They were in the universities in the 1960s. Questioning one's parents, the ways of the parents, and going one's own way was really an enormous culture and movement in those times. They talked a lot about these things when I was a young person. Over and over again they looked at the patterns they picked up from their parents and how difficult patterns are passed down from generation to generation. That's something that they tried to bring a lot of mindfulness and awareness to and were trying to work with really, really strongly.

Because of hearing that so much as a young person, I developed a heightened awareness for this subject. I think that's one of the things that made me not want to have children right off myself. There was a concern about passing on convoluted programs, or issues, from generation to generation. I wanted to have time to try and work those things out as best I could before passing them on to others.

You know, the idea that my aspiration to ordain may have come from my mom, from what I've learned in Buddhism, I feel so happy and amiable about that. What I learned from being a child born in the 1960s, that sets off these alarm bells. Those alarm bells are not outside the scope of the Buddha's teachings. Really, at the heart of what's there is the question: Are we going to be perpetuating difficult and dysfunctional patterns, or are we going to get out of the loop with those things and become free and happy people?

JK: What an interesting correlation—the Buddhist interest in freedom from patterns and the new psychological view of not wanting to pass negative patterns along to the next generation. I never put that together with the arahant path.

AT: To me that is right out front, very big!

JK: Who was your first Buddhist teacher?

AT: As a younger person, when entering monastic life, I encountered a number of people who served as teachers. I think there wasn't any one teacher, even when becoming an anagarika up through my first novice ordination. I never really thought that someone was truly my teacher until I met my venerable bhikkhuni mentor, the Venerable Myeong Seong, Bright Star. But she is not often called by her name but rather by her role.



Venerable Myeong Seong

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JK: What was her position?

AT: She was the abbess and the main teacher of one of South Korea's foremost bhikkhuni training monasteries. Later on she retired from being abbess and became the head of that monastery's bhikkhuni council of elders, as well as the rector of its college of Buddhist studies. After that she was elected as the national head of the Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha, the female equivalent of what is called the supreme patriarch, like the supreme matriarch for the Bhikkhuni Sangha. But they don't use those titles there. She may still have that position today.

JK: How did you come to her?

AT: I had heard about her through the Dharma bum circuit. At that time we weren't using email or the web, and I was out and about internationally finding places of practice and teachers, going here and there. I heard that the situation for ordained women in Buddhism was best in Korea in terms of education, training, and support. The situation for bhikkhus and bhikkhunis was really quite equal in terms of these factors.

I remember traveling on a ferry and meeting with a fellow Dharma bum. He was just coming from South Korea, and he saw something there that he hadn't seen in his experience of Buddhism anywhere. He was told there was a great Dharma master giving a talk at the main monastery of the Chogye Order in Seoul and that someone would be translating. He was invited to go, so he went. There were lots of bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, and up on the high seat in that head monastery there was a bhikkhuni preaching, teaching them. In his travels he had never seen such a thing, a woman teacher at a main bhikkhu monastery being a primary, featured speaker. He was really impressed by that. He was raving about that when we were on that ferry together. I thought, "Oh, that's interesting."

When I went to South Korea later, I ended up going up to a hermitage in the Eight Peaks Mountains called Seong Jeon Am (Noble Sages Hermitage) and studying and practicing with a master who had been secluded there for about twenty-five years at that time. After being there for some time, I thought I would like to try to enter into the Bhikkhuni Sangha in South Korea.

JK: Were you inclined towards Theravada but studied in Mahayana because this was what was available?

AT: I had been in India, and the situation for women in monastic Theravada Buddhism at that time was largely nonexistent. For those who were lucky enough to receive samaneri ordination and encouraged to live and practice like a bhikkhuni, especially for Westerners, as was the case also with Tibetan Buddhism, we were expected to take care of and support ourselves. As a young person in my early twenties, I had given up everything, left everything behind when I became an anagarika. To support myself was not so easy, as was also the case with others. What was often expected from Westerners was to be giving support. There is the thought that the U.S. and Europe are rich countries and the Asian countries are poorer and in need of support in many places.

This was not always the case with men. I heard someone say—it's kind of a crass comment—"If you were a man, you could just plug into the system in Thailand and you'd be fully supported. There are lots of great teachers there. It's like Buddhist heaven." I thought, "You're right, that would be good." But, being a woman, if I were to go, I would have to think about arranging for my own support. You pay and go for some time on retreat. When the money runs out, then you leave, go to work, make some money, then go back on retreat again. This is what a lot of women have done, and what a lot of women are still doing.

For someone who has left everything and doesn't want to go back—in my heart I didn't even feel able to go back—it seemed like where I wanted to go was much deeper into this path, not coming out for awhile and then back in. I was really

looking for how I could do that. What was asked of me as a very young and newly robed person in terms of supporting myself seemed pretty difficult. It seemed like the act of trying to support myself and trying to seek some gainful employment didn't serve what my heart's desire was. Hearing that there were places where women could go and really be received into the Sangha and fully trained and supported seemed like the direction I needed to go. I started looking for where that might be possible. What I heard was, "Go north," which meant Taiwan and South Korea. At that time Buddhism had not come back big in China.

So I went north. When I went to Taiwan, I found monastics practicing a lot of repentance. A lot of recitation of the names of buddhas and bodhisattvas, a strong emphasis on vegetarianism, on childhood education, and on education in general. The main practices of recollection of the Buddha's name and repentance did not appeal to me deeply as my way of practice. In South Korea I found something that was really important to me, and that was the San Lim Seon Jeong, the Mountain Forest Meditation Tradition. It was completely and fully open to women. The stark, rugged simplicity of this tradition and the time in meditative inquiry—these things really struck a chord with me. I resonated with the part of learning from nature and the part about inquiry, working with radical inquiry. From young in life, as you heard, these had been things that really struck a strong chord in me.

JK: What sort of inquiry practice did you work with?

AT: My venerable bhikkhuni mentor did not actually practice inquiry meditation. She was very strong in Dhamma teaching. She did excellent work in terms of the Bhikkhuni Sangha and developing a training monastery and assistance for a training monastery. Her love and her heart is in Dhamma study and Dhamma teaching. So my own venerable bhikkhuni mentor did not teach me direct meditative inquiry, although I felt very intuitively connected to her when first meeting her. I bowed down to her nine times, not knowing why I did it. She recognized nine bows, from some teachings, as my asking her to be my teacher. She asked, "Do you want me to be your teacher?" I thought about it and from a deep intuition answered yes, almost as a surprise to myself. Despite this deep connection, due to my love for meditative inquiry, she sent me to study and train with another bhikkhuni who is kind of a Dhamma relative of hers who had studied a type of inquiry meditation that in Korean is called *hwadu* meditation and in Chinese Chan Buddhism is called the *hua tou*.

JK: Who was this teacher?

AT: The teacher is the Elder Kyeong Hi Sunim. I was sent by my teacher to serve as personal attendant to her and thus be able to learn from her closely. That was a normal thing in

the Bhikkhuni Sangha, to send a student to an associated bhikkhuni teacher whom she might be able to learn from. It's the same in the Thai Bhikkhu Sangha. You may have heard stories about Ajahn Chah sending his students to a related teacher whom he thought they would learn something of benefit from. So I had the opportunity to study with her as well as a number of the other teachers of the *hwadu* meditation practice. I was learning about practices and teachings, trying to seek out the heart of the Buddhist path via meditation and Dharma understanding.

JK: What was the *hwadu* practice? Is that an inquiry practice like koans?

AT: It's not working with koans but with the heart or essence of the koan. The koan would be the story or the case of an awakening, and the *hwadu* literally means the "head of the word," like the fountainhead of this streaming Dhamma, it is the source.

I know that there hasn't been so much written or so much taught about the *hwadu* practice in the West. In fact, for those who do this practice, to find anyone else to talk with about the practice is rare. I think the late Father Thomas Hand, a partner in monastic interreligious dialogue, was the only one I ever met. He was a Jesuit priest and had learned the *hua tou* practice in Japan and had practiced with it deeply as a Christian. He didn't find it at variance in any way with the essential heart of his Jesuit practice. I learned from him about this in a monastic interreligious dialogue gathering called "Bodhisattva Path/Christ Path." But he was the first and only person in the United States whom I talked to who really worked deeply with that practice (at least as I had learned it) and could speak about it fluently in English. I haven't ever seen anything published about it that seemed accessible or mainstream. It's not well known.

JK: Is it done in conjunction with deep meditation practice?

AT: Yes.

JK: Is it a practice that you bring into retreat?

AT: Yes, and it's a whole life practice. In working with it, you are encouraged to start with the first moment of consciousness upon waking in the morning, then develop

working with the practice with every activity of daily life. It doesn't exclude deep retreat practice. It is a kind of essential practice that is, by nature, before words and hard to put into words, but known within one's heart when it's touched upon.

JK: So you did this practice in Korea. Practicing in this Mahayana country, did you have more of an inclination toward the bodhisattva or arahant path, or did the question even come up?

AT: It wasn't something that mattered so much to me. I knew that there was a lot of concern about that. I developed an appreciation for whoever has the interest and willingness

out of compassion to be available, to be born. It's kind of amazing to think of one who is willing to be born again and again for the welfare of others. There's all this talk about bodhisattvas and arahants and making distinctions between Theravada and Mahayana. I felt a bit of angst about the way some people approached that subject. I heard a saying by Ajahn Chah that I liked very much. When he was asked about being a bodhisattva or being an arahant he said, "Don't try to be anything at all." I appreciated that.

I have a strong appreciation for the core of these matters. To me, that gets down to what's important and what I feel is deeply important on the path.

JK: What would you say is the tradition you teach? Is it a universalist Buddhism, or is there a lineage that you feel is your lineage?

AT: I'm pretty clear that at this time I teach and study in Theravada Buddhism. That is, to my mind, the heart or the essence of the Buddha's teachings. There are all kinds of things in Theravada Buddhism—many cultural aspects and developed traditions and commentaries and ethnic traditions. I'm not trying to do all of that, and I don't think there is any way someone could do all of that. I'm interested in the essential practices of what the Buddha taught.

JK: What is it about Buddhism that speaks directly to your heart?

AT: It's what I find in the Four Noble Truths—about suffering and the end of suffering. Also, about there being



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a practical path, a way to end suffering. I'm interested in the Ovada Patimokkha, the Buddha's first teaching, which is first about reducing and ending suffering, both my own personal difficulty and that of others as well. The Buddha's teachings may match any circumstances, that is, be appropriately applied to any given

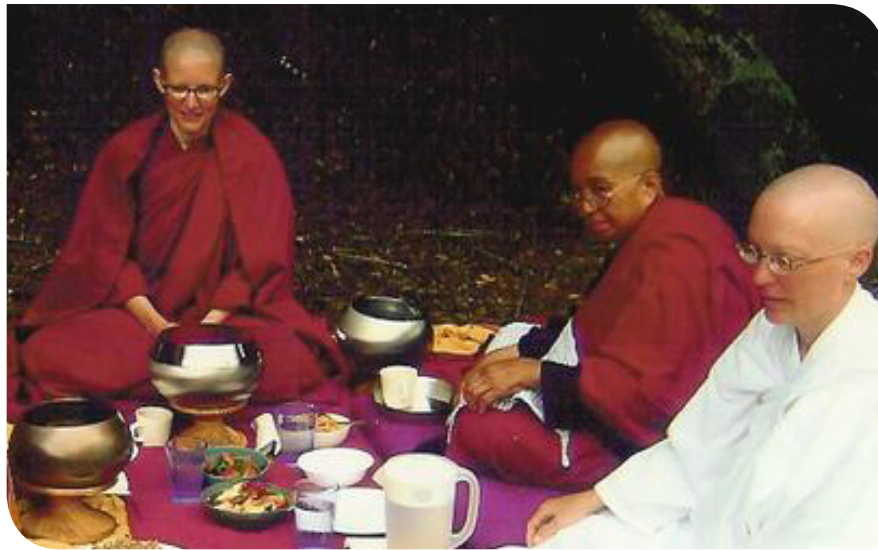


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situation in which there is suffering or "dis-ease" for their alleviation and cure. Second is what makes us happy, the things that not only make for our short-term well-being but that lead to deepening, expanding, and establishing real long-term happiness, peace, and freedom.

The third point of the Ovada Patimokkha goes back to path again, the path of purifying one's mind and heart. Being able to do that is essential for understanding what does work and what doesn't work—and also for strengthening the mind and creating the context in which the work can be done. Once you see what needs to be done, you still need to have the strength, the resource, the container for doing that. The purification, the clarification of the heart, is that.

In Zen the last point of these three is different, but in Theravada the last point is purifying the mind. Not to say the people in Zen aren't doing that, not at all. If they are practicing rightly, they are. In a way it's a technical distinction, for if we do that, it naturally benefits all living beings.

JK: That is so beautiful, Ayya. Before we close I wanted to say that I met your bhikkhuni mentor when I was in Thailand for the Outstanding Women in Buddhism awards and spent some time with her. The thrust of the conversation was about how can we support the Thai Bhikkhuni Sangha. Your teacher was strong on wanting to support Thai women.

AT: She's done so much for them. She very much encouraged me and blessed me to go forth and do what I could.

JK: And look what you've done! That's exactly what you've done.

AT: She had been trying and trying in years past and hadn't made much headway. She thought that perhaps someone not

quite so high up might be able to do more. She gave me her blessing and encouragement to do that.

JK: Having seen her and met her, and knowing the skills and practices you were given . . .

AT: She was aware of this and very much wanted me to have those skills. She was aware that

I was already in another tradition before coming to her but wanted me to go through the Korean Buddhist training from the beginning to get the entirety of it, all of the benefit and experience out of that. She said that explicitly. She really wanted that because she thought that it was important to have that experience, not only for myself, my own strengthening and fullness of my own monastic life, but to be able to rightly pass that on to others. She mentioned that explicitly. That's one of the things that is great about her. With regards to community, she has big view in terms of causality and causation. Her Dhamma about these kinds of things is very right. Not only is it big, but it comes down to individual circumstances and timeliness.

JK: This is amazing. She sent her beloved daughter out to widen the circle. I have a deep feeling for that because I've seen her and know her character. She is like a mountain. We spent five days in a funky bus together with her, Dr. Lee, and some others. Dr. Lee took us around to different sites in Thailand. I really appreciate her strength.

AT: She was deliberately trained in that. The monastery I trained at, my home monastery, which she was abbess of, is in the Leaping Tiger Mountain Wilderness of Korea's Gyeong Sang Buk Do province. There were no more tigers in the mountains, but it was said that in the monastery one tigress remains, and she is it. Being a tigress in the mountains is her realm and her domain.

JK: What a great gift she gave us. Thank you for sharing the early years of your path with me. I hope we can talk soon about your journey back to the West.

Jacqueline Kramer is former executive editor and a regular contributor to Present. She is the director of the Hearth Foundation, where she teaches Buddhism to mothers online.

Earth Day Earth Witness

By Ayya Tathaaloka Bhikkhuni

Warm Earth Day greetings, my human friends, and to all forms of life. I share with you a little story—a story within a story. But first, a poem from the Ratana Sutta:

*Like woodland groves in blossom
in the first heat of the summer
Is the sublime Dhamma that he taught
leading to Nibbana, the highest good.
In the Buddha is this precious jewel.
By this truth may there be well-being.*

And now the story:

Earlier on in my life, as a younger person, I despaired of the sufferings in our world: personal sufferings, interpersonal sufferings, global systemic sufferings, illness, disease, poverty, death, conflict, war, the desecration of the forests, pollution of our waters and air, landfills, consuming and turning once pristine natural resources of land, water, and earth into garbage . . . and I sought the spiritual way out. Practicing yoga and forms of meditation to raise the mind out of and above all such crude phenomena, I loved the lightness and clarity that was above and beyond.

Then one day I met a Zen (Seon) meditation master who touched and changed all that. He stopped me in my tracks and called me to attention. He mentioned that the way I was practicing might lead to heaven, but that is not the Buddha's way. The Buddha also taught this, yes, but it was not his path. Rather his path was the touchdown. He asked me to look.

To look at the statuary image of the Buddha. He pointed out the posture. One hand in meditation posture, but the other with hand reaching out, touching the ground. And he told me that I needed to do this to. To touch the ground.

He said that in order to awaken in this world, one must first become truly human. And to become truly human, we need to know not only the sky (heaven), but the Earth. To stop, to touch ground, to know our origin, our root.

Photo: <http://www.fotopedia.com/items/1r2ekv47sdbnq-ydxxVkg9-BY>



Earth Witness Buddha, San Francisco International Airport.

Photo: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/wonderlane/2698841837/sizes/z/in/photostream/>

He asked me to go stand on a little landing on the mountainside, and just stand, feeling into the Earth. Feeling and knowing the Earth, and my connectedness with all forms of life on this Earth. Feeling into and sensing into them all, and knowing my co-being with them. Even all the humans.

In the clear air of the mountainside, I could look down and out and see far in the distance like the city in the Wizard of Oz, the peaks of a city under shimmering haze. I had come up from them. This part was hardest.

I felt I could not blame nature. But humanity, endowed with morality, conscience, and higher mind seemed culpable. It took a long time of working with developing kind and compassionate understanding to begin to really enter or reenter the human world. At his advice, I looked at the Buddha image daily. Awake, with one hand in meditation posture, and one hand touching the Earth.

It is called the *Bhumasparsa* (Pali: *Bhumapassa*) image, which means Touching Earth, or the Earth Witness—the most popular of the statuary and painted forms of the Buddha, more popular than with both hands in meditation. But one could ask, is it the Buddha's witness of the Earth or the Earth's witness of the Buddha?

According to the old Buddhist legends told in Thailand, it is the Earth's witness of the Buddha's awakening, the goddess of the Earth, the great goddess of land and waters, who emerges in witness to the bodhisattva's right to awakening,

washing away the armies of Mara—Death himself—with her waters. The story says that if you are replete in generosity (together with the other *paramis*), and if you awaken, the Earth Mother herself will rise to support you. And as you have watered her soils through your benevolence, she will wash away all destruction wrought by the power of the *kilesas*—the defilements in the human heart. It is a powerful story.

A story not of dominion of the Earth, or of coming to safety and security through conquering her. But a story of a man's coming to ultimate safety, security, and peace through conquering himself. Whence, Earth to him becomes a benevolent protector. She is powerful beneficent protectress.

But in this story, she truly has no supernatural power other than the power of our own kamma, the power of our own moral actions, our moral choices, and their accumulated virtue. She does not need to be propitiated. But rather, we ourselves have the power and the call to clean up our own acts.

We need to turn and look at what we have done, what we have made. We need to develop the openheartedness, and great-heartedness—like the great expanses of the sky, the vastness of the ocean, the great breadth of the Earth—to be able to see the suffering of our world for what it is, truly. The external world and the internal world. The elemental nature of the body. The momentary energetic nature of all phenomena. To see and know all of this as it is. Knowing the senses and the sense bases.



Phra Mae Thorani, Thai Mother Earth Goddess

Photo: <http://theworldofstatues.blogspot.com/2010/04/phra-mae-thonaree-chiang-mai.html>

Work with mindfulness of the body and the elements can be very helpful for this work of touching in, touching down, and waking up.

The breath that flows through this body, through you and me, is the breath of the world. The breath of the oceans and of the trees. The light in my eyes and your eyes is the light of the sun and moon and all the stars, the light deep within the Earth, the light within each cell—each dancing particle—the life. The bones of this body like rocks, rocking outcroppings on the hillside visible where flesh of green and earth has worn away.

They are all the same elements.

Our lives are all a part of this, and all a part of each other. Touching ground, touching the Earth, in the space of loving kindness, we can have the heart to bear and to be with it all. And witnessing all intimately, awareness grows and awakening can happen.

It has been said masculine and feminine elements are fused in these stories, each becoming complete in themselves. No longer at war with, and no longer needing to dominate one another. But in harmony, full, complete, and replete in themselves.

And still, knowing our interdependency, knowing the truth of our interconnectedness, and that of all life, living with great honor and great care for one another. Loving all forms of life. With love, compassion, joy, and ease with one another. Not heaven, but here together with one another.

The Earth Witness challenge.

There are the times that it is needed to turn away from the world, to walk into the hills, to go within. And the time to turn back, to embrace the world, with clear view and mindfulness, and with right effort, to respond—to whatever the path calls for, whatever needs to be done—to care well and most wisely for ourselves and each dear other.

*As a post firmly rooted in the earth
cannot be shaken by the four winds,
So is the superior person, I say,
who definitely sees the Noble Truths.
In the Sangha is this precious jewel.
By this truth may there be well-being.*



Ayya Tathaaloka on an Earth Day morning hike up in the hills of the San Francisco Bay Area regional wilderness at Dry Creek. Photo credit: Luisa (Lulu) Garrett

Reprinted from the Dhammadharini website, <http://www.dhammadharini.net/dhamma-talks-from-the-bhikkhuni-sangha/aranya-bodhi-hermitage/earth-day-earth-witness>



Photo: © Ed Ritger, www.edritger.com

Can the Theravada Bhikkhuni Order be Re-established? **It Already Has** By Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi

In March 2012, Sri Lanka's national newspaper, the Ceylon Daily News, printed a statement issued by the Concise Tripitaka Editorial Board, which discusses whether the Dhammavinaya allows the re-establishment of the Bhikkhuni Order. The statement begins:

The re-establishment of the Bhikkhuni Order which was the subject of debate a few decades ago has surfaced once again. Agitation and press conferences were held recently by the parties who claim to have established the Bhikkhuni Order, in a bid to pressurize the Government to recognize the Bhikkhuni Order. Already the Most Venerable Maha Nayaka Theras have informed the Commissioner-General of Buddhist Affairs that it is not possible to establish a Bhikkhuni Order according to the 'Dhammavinaya' the doctrine of the Buddha.

American scholar-monk Bhikkhu Bodhi submitted the following response (which was not published in the Ceylon Daily News).

I am writing in response to a statement published in the *Daily News* on March 29, 2012, "Can the Theravada Bhikkhuni Order be Re-established?" issued by the Concise Tripitaka Editorial Board. The Board offers a negative answer to this question, but I find its statement to be grounded upon biases and assumptions that are not absolutely convincing. I have already addressed these in detail in a booklet I published titled "The Revival of Bhikkhuni Ordination in the Theravada Tradition" (available online at: <http://tinyurl.com/7n49otq>). In this short article, with all due respect to the Mahanayaka Theras, I wish to contend not only that the Theravada Bhikkhuni Order *can* be re-established, but that it *has already been re-established* and

that by taking a liberal point of view, the ordination should be regarded as legitimate.

The main legal objection the Mahanayaka Theras raise against a revival of the Bhikkhuni Sangha stems from the fact that the Vinaya holds that women are to be ordained by both the Bhikkhuni Sangha and the Bhikkhu Sangha. In their view, to be a purely Theravada ordination, it must also come from an existing Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha. This leads to a predicament. In the absence of an existing Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha, a legitimate Theravada Bhikkhuni ordination cannot be granted, and since, in their view, there is no existing Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha,

they conclude that “setting up a Bhikkhuni Order cannot be done under the Dharmavinaya.”

It is just this conclusion that I wish to contest. The first step in doing so is to note that Theravada Vinaya theory often merges stipulations that stem from the canonical Vinaya and Commentaries with interpretations and assumptions that have gained currency through centuries of tradition. I do not want to undervalue tradition, for it represents the accumulated legal expertise of generations of Vinaya specialists. However, we also must remember that tradition should not be placed on a par with the canonical Vinaya or even the secondary authorities, the Vinaya Commentaries.

to apply under all circumstances without exception; (2) the Theravada is the only Buddhist school that preserves an authentic Vinaya lineage stemming from the Buddha. These two assumptions are only traditional beliefs without canonical support. Both can be challenged by making two contrary stipulations.

The first is that under exceptional circumstances the Bhikkhu Sangha alone can ordain women as bhikkhunis, based on the Buddha’s statement: “I allow you, bhikkhus, to ordain Bhikkhunis.” This allowance was never rescinded by the Buddha. The legitimacy of ordination by bhikkhus alone, when a Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha does not exist, was



Photo: Courtesy of lightmeister <http://www.flickr.com/photos/lightmeister/7164478548/>

We can illustrate this point with an analogy from geometry. If we draw a straight line through a point and extend the line, the distance between its two ends increases and it seems logical to hold that the two ends will never meet. But this is so only because we are thinking in the framework of Euclidean geometry. If we adopt the standpoint of spherical geometry, we can see that a continuous line drawn on a sphere eventually winds back on itself. Thus, if I break away from my familiar assumptions, a new range of possibilities suddenly opens up.

The same applies to the Mahanayakas’ position regarding the possibility of bhikkhuni ordination: they are based on implicit assumptions. The two assumptions behind their position are: (1) the dual-Sangha ordination was intended

recognized—even advocated—by no less a figure than the original Jetavan Sayadaw of Burma, one of the most learned monks of the twentieth century, the meditation master of the famous Mahasi Sayadaw (I have translated the text from Pali into English in my booklet referred to above).

The second stipulation is intended to preserve the form of a dual-Sangha ordination. It holds that the Theravada Bhikkhu Sangha can collaborate with a Bhikkhuni Sangha from an East Asian country such as Taiwan in conducting a dual-Sangha ordination. The Mahanayaka Theras think that what the Chinese Buddhists confer is a Mahayana ordination, but this is a misunderstanding. While Chinese monks and nuns for the most part follow Mahayana Buddhism, the Vinaya tradition they observe is *not a Mahayana Vinaya* but the Vinaya of the

Dharmaguptakas, an early Buddhist school that prevailed in northwest India. The Dharmaguptakas also originated from the Asokan missions and belonged to the same Vibhajjavada tradition to which the Theravada school belongs.

The Bhikkhuni Sangha that has recently sprung up in Sri Lanka derives from a grand ordination held at Bodhgaya in February 1998, conducted under the auspices of Taiwanese Buddhist elders working in collaboration with Sri Lankan elders. First, the grand ordination ceremony assembled bhikkhus from several countries and traditions—mainly Taiwanese and Sri Lankan—along with Taiwanese and Western bhikkhunis to serve as the Bhikkhuni Sangha. The women who were ordained included Theravada ten-precept nuns from Sri Lanka and Nepal, as well as Western nuns following Tibetan Buddhism. A full dual-ordination was conducted in accordance with the Dharmagupta Vinaya tradition. In Vinaya terms, the women that were ordained became full-fledged bhikkhunis inheriting the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya lineage.

To make them heirs to the Theravada Vinaya lineage, the Sri Lankan bhikkhus took the newly ordained bhikkhunis to Sarnath and conferred on them another ordination based on the Pali Vinaya Pitaka. This ordination did not negate the earlier dual-ordination received from the Chinese Sangha but supplemented it, inducting the bhikkhunis into the Theravada Vinaya lineage. This procedure was very similar to the *dalhikamma* often given in Sri Lanka to allow bhikkhus from one Nikaya to change over to another Nikaya or to join another monastic community.

It may be of interest to note that while the Concise Tripitaka Editorial Board ends by quoting Venerable Madihe Paññasiha Mahanayaka Thera to support its repudiation of bhikkhuni ordination, the Ven. Paññasiha's close disciple, the late Ven. Dhammavihari, a Vinaya scholar, came to recognize the validity of bhikkhuni ordination late in his life and defended it at the 2007 conference in Hamburg. Thus, different views are possible even between close colleagues in the Sangha.

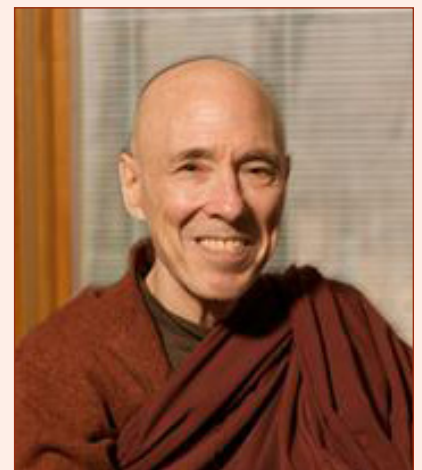
As I see it, the Vinaya itself cannot be read in a fixed manner as either unconditionally permitting or forbidding a revival of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. It yields these conclusions only as a result of interpretation, which often reflects the attitudes of the interpreters and their framework of assumptions. In my opinion, in dealing with this issue, the question that should be foremost in our minds is this: "What would the Buddha want his elder bhikkhu-disciples to do in such a situation, now, in the twenty-first century?" Would he want us to apply the regulations governing ordination in a way that excludes women from the fully ordained

renunciant life so that we present to the world a religion in which men alone can lead the life of full renunciation? Or would he instead want us to apply the Vinaya in a way that is kind, generous, and accommodating, thereby offering the world a religion that truly embodies principles of justice and nondiscrimination?

The answers to these questions are not immediately given by any text or tradition, but I don't think we are left entirely to personal opinion either. We can see in the texts how the Buddha displayed both compassion and rigor in setting up the Vinaya. We can also see how, in laying down rules for the Sangha, he took account of the expectations of lay people in the wider society. In working out a solution to our own problem, therefore, we have these two guidelines to follow. One is to be true to the spirit of the Dhamma. The other is to be responsive to the social, intellectual, and cultural ideals of people in the present period of human history.

Looked at in this light, the revival of a Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha can be seen as an intrinsic good that conforms to the spirit of the Dhamma, helping to fulfill the Buddha's own mission of opening "the doors to the Deathless" to everyone, women as well as men. At the same time, the existence of a Bhikkhuni Sangha allows women to make a meaningful contribution to Buddhism as preachers, scholars, meditation teachers, and also as counselors and guides to women lay followers. A Bhikkhuni Sangha will also win for Buddhism the respect of people in the world, who regard the absence of gender discrimination as the mark of a truly honorable religion in harmony with the worthy trends of present-day civilization.

The author lived as a monk in Sri Lanka for twenty-three years and was editor of the Buddhist Publication Society for eighteen years. He now lives in the United States. He is translator of the Saṃyutta Nikāya and Aṅguttara Nikāya and other works from Pali into English.



To read the full statement of the Concise Tripitaka Editorial Board, visit <http://www.dailynews.lk/2012/03/29/fea40.asp>.

Developments in Recent Sri Lankan Bhikkhuni History

- On 8 December 1996, at the Mahabodhi Society temple in Sarnath, India, Sri Lankan bhikkhus, aided by Korean bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, ordained ten Sri Lankan women. This event heralded the revival of the Sri Lankan Bhikkhuni Sangha.
- In February 1998, at Bodhgaya, India, monastics from Taiwan's Fo Guang Shan monastery held a large, dual-platform ordination that included Mahayana as well as Theravada ordines from twenty-three countries. Of the 132 women who ordained as bhikkhunis, twenty-one were Sri Lankan women who had been dasa sil matas (ten-precept women).
- On 14 March 1998, Inamaluwe Sumangala Thero organized the ordination of women on Sri Lankan soil, the first such event in over a thousand years. At the Rangiri Dambulla Monastery, in the same hall where men ordain, twenty-two former dasa sil matas ordained. Five senior bhikkhus and the newly ordained Sri Lankan bhikkhunis, who had ordained the previous month in Bodhgaya, performed the ordination.
- Since 1998, bhikkhuni ordinations occur annually in Dambulla, Navagula, and at the Dekanduwa Meditation Centre at Horana. Women can also receive training at the Sakyadhita Training and Meditation Centre in Panadura and at the Ayya Khema Mandir in Colombo, with additional training centers in the planning stage.
- It is estimated there are well over a thousand Sri Lankan bhikkhunis and over two thousand samaneris. Since there is no central registry of ordained women, an exact figure cannot be determined. Additionally, dozens of Sri Lankan women ordain yearly.
- Unlike Sri Lankan bhikkhus and dasa sil matas, Sri Lankan bhikkhunis do not receive any funding from the government for their pirivenas (monastic training centers), which prepare bhikkhunis to sit for the nationwide examination. Bhikkhunis must rely entirely on donations to manage these centers.
- Despite lacking any official recognition from the government or the monks' hierarchy, Sri Lankan bhikkhunis are now routinely invited to participate in religious services, serve as Dhamma teachers and counselors, give meditation instruction, and are accepted by the monks and supported by the laity in their communities.

—Susan Pembroke

See also "In the Company of Spiritual Friends: Sri Lanka's Buddhist Nuns" by Susanne Mrozik in the Summer 2011 issue of Present, and the 2008 article "Contemporary Bhikkuni Ordination in Sri Lanka" by Ayya Sobhana Bhikkhuni.



The Reading Habits of One Bhikkhuni

by Ayya Sudhamma Bhikkhuni

Present requested that I describe my reading habits in case it may offer a little insight into the life and intellectual development of a bhikkhuni.

The bedrock of my readings remains the thirty-something books of the Pali Canon (in English). I've gone through most of the books at least once, but the deeper teachings come across differently in later readings and little is retained the first few times anyway, so they remain a source of interest, always new.

When I want a good source of reading-in-bed pleasure (yes, I still do that at times), I can turn to our tradition's rich storytelling legacy: the three volumes of the Jatakas' entertaining tales on the Buddha's past lives, the Dhammapada Commentary's colorful stories behind the Dhammapada verses, the inspiring Udāna stories and verses, and the Therigatha Commentary's sobering and uplifting stories behind the verses of the elder bhikkhunis.

While shaping up the library at Santi, I found a draft copy of Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's long-awaited, soon-to-be-released translation of the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* (Numerical Discourses), and occasionally delve into it with delight. Aside from that, these days I open the other books of the Canon such as the *Majjhima Nikāya* (Middle Length Discourses), the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Collected Discourses), the *Sutta Nipāta*, and the *Vinaya* (Code of Discipline) in order to do research—either to answer questions that have arisen or prepare teachings for others. Once I've cracked open one of these

books for a research purpose, I usually go on to read nearby sections because they catch my eye and make me think.

I keep a journal with a personal collection—my own anthology—of words of Dhamma that greatly inspire me. This has become central to my personal development both as a student of Dhamma and as a teacher to others. My efforts started a couple of years ago with encouragement from a good spiritual friend, a *kalyana mitta*, who pointed out a new website that teaches how to make the best use of scriptures (including keeping a journal), called **Reading Faithfully**. He then lovingly nagged me until I chose a small pseudo-leather-bound journal and began writing my favorite scriptures into it. Now I carry the potent little journal with me when traveling and use it when giving teachings (since these words inspire me the most, these teachings come across well). I refer to it often and find it most helpful when feeling dull. I recommend everyone check out Reading Faithfully and start their own anthology of scriptural passages that speak to them.

At Santi Forest Monastery, I discovered that residents rely upon an amazing resource book by Ven. Analayo: *A Comparative Study of the Majjhima Nikāya*, referring to it frequently when we study a discourse. This reference book compares, chapter by chapter, the contents of the Pali Canon's *Majjhima Nikāya* with similar Indian scriptures (some just fragments) recorded in ancient Chinese, Tibetan, Sanskrit, and a few more languages. Since the various versions of each discourse tend to be nearly identical, any variations between

them become fascinating bits of evidence of changes made to one or more texts, often—but not always—with the more believable reading coming out of the Chinese version. Now I cannot imagine attempting to study the Majjhima Nikāya without access to Ven. Analayo's valuable work. (Note: This book isn't easy to obtain. It is listed first among Ven. Analayo's 200-plus writings here: <http://www.buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de/fileadmin/pdf/analayo/publications.htm>.)

In addition to frequent brief forays into the Canon, I'm now reading, or re-reading, Bhante Sujato's books—all of them—as fast as I can. He recently announced his intention to retire from leading his community (where I'm currently staying), Santi Forest Monastery, before this Vassa to go into seclusion as a lone monk. All my questions about his teachings must get answered now, I'm afraid; therefore I'm pursuing this effort with urgency. His writings are brilliant, oftentimes too chock-full of detailed research to be of interest to a wide audience (not to mention his complex wording that conveys every nuance to maintain an exacting accuracy). It is worth the effort to glean what one can. Bhante Sujato's writings challenged, perhaps crumbled, my earlier simple faith in the Pali Canon and hence in Buddhism; perhaps that is partly why I wanted to come study with him, to learn the basis of his faith, which clearly didn't rest upon any easily refuted assumptions. Now, absorbing his discoveries and perspectives both from his writings and in person, my understanding has become

more nuanced, less righteous, less isolated, and broader. (A collection of his writings can be found at: <http://sites.google.com/site/santipada/bhantesujato%27swork>.)

Just yesterday I re-read Bhante Sujato's unique, highly creative novel based on the life of one of the early arhat nuns, entitled *Dreams of Bhadda*. Though short enough to read in one sitting, the book's haunting imagery—based upon a true story—will not soon leave you. My one complaint about the book is that it gives the impression that the nun's success as a debater of

religious philosophy came directly from her loss in love, whereas according to tradition, she was actually a highly educated master of religious traditions.

Foremost among Bhante Sujato's writings in its impact upon me personally has been *A History of Mindfulness: How Insight Worsted Tranquility in the Satipatthana Sutta*. It's not found online right now only because he is currently editing the book. Be patient; it will reappear. When I read the book

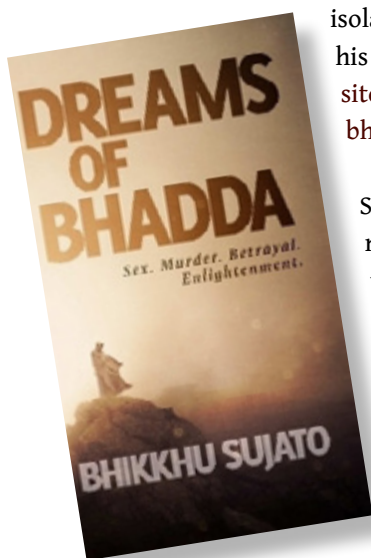
in early 2010, I skipped the difficult parts and focused on the main message of the second half of the book, where Bhante dissected parts of the Satipatthana Sutta to argue effectively that much of the text was added in later times to the Buddha's basic sutta. I found the resulting new—yet older—stripped-down version more useful to my practice. This was my first real introduction to text-critical studies of Buddhism and the beginning of the end to my comfortable unquestioned beliefs as a Buddhist fundamentalist. Now I am going back to the beginning of the book, trying to understand it all, particularly Bhante Sujato's detailed explanation of how to analyze text using other ancient recensions of scripture as a basis of comparison.

When the PDF version of *A History of Mindfulness* was first linked onto the Santi website, it came with a warning: "This is a complex and scholarly work, not for the fainthearted." A few days ago, after puzzling over it for some time, I resorted to asking Bhante Sujato how to understand one of his charts in the book; despite several minutes of explanation, I'm still not clear what he meant. Even Bhante came to notice the difficulties plowing through his text and conciliatorily offered a brief synopsis, writing in his blog with his usual self-effacing style: "I've been revising . . . *A History of Mindfulness*, and I'm kind of amazed that anyone actually read it. It's hard going." For those with better things to do than wade through oceans of textual references, here's the *sankhittena* (short version): <http://sujato.wordpress.com/2011/01/18/a-brief-history-of-mindfulness/>.

Next on my list of to-read books are background histories of Indian thought that may explain some social expectations and pressures to which the Buddha responded, as well as the classics in text-critical studies. These include Richard Gombrich's *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* and Erich Frauwallner's *The Earliest Vinaya and the Beginnings of Buddhist Literature*.

Human-interest writings such as autobiographies and travel accounts also catch my attention easily, and we have seventy such books on the shelves here at the Santi library. One that I often recommend to visitors is Ajahn Sucitto and Nick Scott's hilarious yet deeply moving two-volume account of their travels in India, *Rude Awakenings* and *Great Patient One* (both available as [free downloads](#) or as print editions).

That Bird Has My Wings, the autobiography by Jarvis Jay Masters, a death-row inmate who found a refuge in Buddhist practices, caught my eye one day when someone left it on the library table; it turned out to be a page-turner that I hardly set down until done. Jarvis offers a moving account of the terrors of his early life, with an honest, insightful assessment of how early influences led to his bad choices and ruin. Efforts to free him have been in the news recently.





Despite trying to make quick progress with Bhante's works, I cannot yet put down the autobiographical travel account that I'm currently reading: *Ten Thousand Miles Without a Cloud* by Sun Shuyun. This book is further broadening my worldview, so I want to describe it in more detail. Ms. Shuyun, a highly educated Chinese woman raised under Communism, hoping to better understand her Buddhist grandmother's religion, decided to personally retrace the epic journey taken in the seventh century by the famous Chinese monk traveler, Ven. Xuanzang (also known as Hsüan-tsang). This monk helped establish Mahayana Buddhism for future generations by going to India to retrieve many scriptures not yet known in China, which he later translated. He also kept such remarkably accurate accounts of the lands through which he traveled that historians rely upon them to understand the habits of people long ago, and modern archeologists continue to use them to dig for lost cities and holy places. We owe our current knowledge of the primary Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India to British men in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who used this ancient Chinese Buddhist master's precise and detailed records.

Ms. Shuyun's travels take her across mountain passes and deserts, into the middle of war-torn regions, through abandoned ancient cities, and into bustling modern tourist sites. While traveling through Central Asia to India (passing through western China, Afghanistan, and more before exploring India and heading home again), she weaves together a tale of her family history, the history of the lands and people she encounters, and the modern forces affecting them. Ms. Shuyun draws such a sympathetic picture of the individuals in every land that the reader is left caring for these people as if they were her own relatives. Meanwhile, the author explores the Mahayana Buddhist beliefs that drove Ven. Xuanzang to bravely undertake his nearly impossible journey. She discerns a continuing, subtle impact of the Dhamma upon the countries that later lost

their memory of Buddhism while trying to truly understand the Dhamma for herself.

Ten Thousand Miles Without a Cloud is autobiography, travelogue, history, and spiritual journey, all in one go. I gained a much greater understanding of the history and modern problems of every land through which Ms. Shuyun passed, a deeper appreciation for how history generally unfolds over the centuries, and more respect and interest towards Mahayana teachings.

One more area to address: What do I read online? I use the Internet to look up specific suttas, the other day joyfully beating Bhante Sujato in locating a debated quote. (As he quickly flipped through the pages of the Connected Discourses, I used Google.) Occasionally, I read articles sent to me by monks and nuns on Facebook. I check headlines, read up on social changes, and find I am drawn to dramatic stories, particularly news of generosity or heroism. If I have some time, I read the news analyzed in more depth on Slate.com, which also helps me catch up on what is happening in the U.S., but the human-interest and storytelling angles continue to grab me: Doonesbury and Slate's advice column ("Dear Prudence") both continue to rate high among my favorite reading material.

With the mid-year months here in New South Wales, Australia, bringing a chilly, dreary, damp winter quite unlike the sweltering summer heat of my hometown in the U.S.A., a hearty fire in the library's wood stove warms the room. I pull off my woolen things and perhaps break into a sweat while settling in comfortably to read. In the morning we work; in the afternoon, we often find leisure to meditate or read. Time passes too quickly while reading in the library, and often the daily evening teatime catches up with me. As other residents arrive for refreshments, I must move my books aside to make room for the trays.

Ven. (Ayya) Sudhamma Bhikkhuni was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1963, and educated at UNC-Chapel Hill and NYU School of Law. She was married and enjoyed a brief career as an attorney in San Francisco. She encountered the teachings of the Buddha while suffering personal losses that forcefully drove home the truth of the Dhamma on impermanence and suffering. Soon she wished to ordain. In 1999 she gratefully received from the elder Sri Lankan monk Ven. Bhante Gunaratana the opportunity to enter the holy life as a novice at his monastery, the Bhavana Society, in West Virginia. She obtained higher ordination as a female monk (bhikkhuni) in Sri Lanka in 2003. For eight years she served as the resident monk at the Carolina Buddhist Vihara in Greenville, South Carolina. Currently, on the invitation of out-going abbot Bhante Sujato, she is helping the Santi Forest Monastery in New South Wales to establish a Bhikkhuni Sangha leadership for the monastery.



BLESSINGS:

The Tsoknyi Nangchen Nuns of Tibet

Reviewed by Kathy Jean Schultz

Directed by Victress Hitchcock
Chariot Videos, 2005, DVD, 90 minutes
Sound-track music from the CD *Chö* by
Choying Drolma and Steve Tibbetts

Blessings: The Tsoknyi Nangchen Nuns of Tibet, a documentary film directed by Victress Hitchcock, is an account of a 2005 journey up into the mountains of Nangchen. Hitchcock and a group of Westerners, mostly women practitioners from the U.S., arrive in Tibet to visit Nangchen's remote monastic nunneries, which are home to some 3,000 Tibetan nuns. The group travels with Tsoknyi Rinpoche III as their guide. He is a lama who ministers to the monastic women. The party sets out with some trepidation about what they already know from their preparations will be a journey into mixed metaphors: It will be life in the slow lane—and it will be that on steroids.

As they climb into several jeeps at 3:00 A.M. and prepare to travel twelve hours up the mountains, away from Tibet's populous areas, the soundtrack's ghostly music melts into the breathless, arid, clear, and wondrous landscapes that can't help but alter the heart of anyone in their thrall. Hitchcock's pacing is never slow, but rather matches the climb, marbles into the scenery, and sets a suspenseful tone.

The travelers' courage in attempting this venture is tested only a few miles out. Their vehicles predictably get stuck in deep mud, and there are other car troubles that nomads met along the way help out with as well. An umbilical sensation rises, a knowing the cord has been cut. We can almost feel the pinprick of there being no safety net, no road service to be phoned, no tow truck mechanic in rescue mode. The people here do everything for themselves

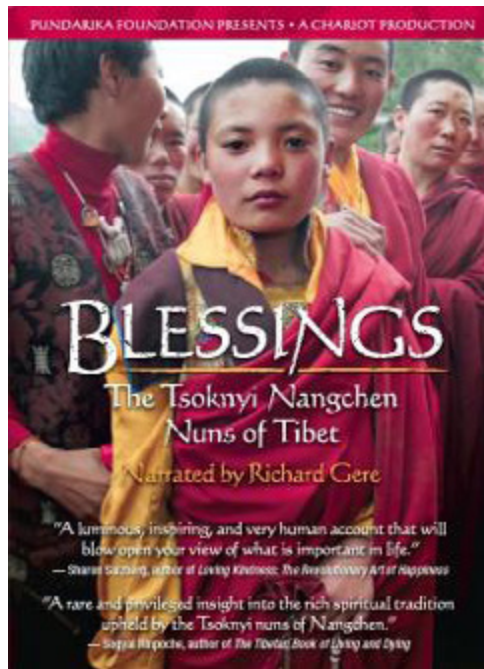
and live completely on their own, even rebuilding a bridge if and when needed. Off the beaten path and off the grid, in a place where there is, indeed, no path and no grid to be off of anyway. Fittingly, we learn the Nangchen mountains are known as the Land of Meditators. Why would such a place have a repair shop?

With deft touches, Hitchcock captures the travelers as they laugh, joke, and demonstrate acceptance and simplicity while pushing their vehicles out of deep ruts. But in more than one set of eyes, concern for the growing distance from civilization is evident. When the road ends, the last few hours of the journey are made on horseback. In the rain. The now-travelers-on-ice experience the physical pain and hardship that Tibetan mountain people live with every day, albeit with a still-jolly ethos.

Richard Gere narrates portions of the documentary, filling in the blanks non-Buddhist viewers might not know. Basic tenets include the understanding that all of life is suffering, and detaching from suffering is the goal. The urge to cling—to conditioning, delusions, new cars, designer clothes, socioeconomic

pecking order, glory, and more delusional thinking—is not the Buddhist road to peace of heart. Indeed, clinging stands to be seen through new eyes on this trip. Relaxing into things as they are—and not what someone dictates they should be—brings relief.

For the nuns the travelers are seeking to visit, being born female in eastern Tibet means being born to hardship. The local dialect's word for woman





Tsoknyi Rinpoche and Mingyur Yogini

Photo: <http://www.tsoknyirinpoche.org/monestaries/questions-and-answers-about-the-nangchen-nuns/>

literally means “lower birth” or born into a lower status than baby boys. In the late 1800s, a local guru quite startlingly directed a wealthy spiritual seeker to build monasteries for women and to care for the women. This was a highly unusual rupture away from the history of male-dominated Tibetan practitioners. The seeker was Tsoknyi Rinpoche I, the current lama’s first incarnation. By the mid-twentieth century, there were 4,000 nuns living and practicing in the area’s monasteries.

In 1959, these monasteries were attacked and destroyed by Chinese soldiers of the Cultural Revolution. The lama at that time, Tsoknyi Rinpoche II, was jailed and then died in prison. Some of the nuns were sent to labor camps. Many of them scattered to their nomadic families. A few of them escaped to hide in caves, where they lived and continued to practice secretly for nearly twenty years in the harshest of climate conditions.

In the 1970s, the surviving nuns began to emerge from hiding. They rebuilt a monastery, and then another, brick-by-brick and wood slab-by-wood slab. These monastic women managed to rebuild their monasteries with their own labor. Understating that history, Hitchcock notes their struggle “shows me how much superfluous stuff I do not need.”

Along the road, the travelers meet nomadic peoples eagerly awaiting a blessing from the lama. Tsoknyi Rinpoche III is welcomed everywhere, like any beloved traveling friar, rabbi, priest, or pastor. A universal human need for spiritual solace and a strong belief that his blessings will help them through their travails wafts through the sights, sounds, and music here in the Land of Meditators. Nomadic peoples in primitive villages gather around, approaching the lama for blessings, and their confidence the lama can help them is

ironclad. The question arises: Is this naïve, quaint, and pre-scientific—or something the world could use in an era of endless war and terrorism?

As the travelers finally arrive at the first of several monasteries they will visit and hear the nuns’ stories, the thread of suffering runs prominently through each. When questioned about why they chose to live monastically, several of the nuns recount tales of suffering and pain within their families. Seeking a life of prayer, meditation, and preparing their own food and shelter, they felt their lives were actually easier than those of their neighboring villagers. The nuns’ lives of serenity and joy, as well as compassion for each other, seemed the better choice when faced with the choking circumstances of their birth. Moreover, in the monastery, the women—the lower births—could read and sing, whereas women in the nomadic groups were illiterate and without any scholarship in their lives. As more of the nuns recount through translation how they came to join the monastery, more speak of the suffering their tribes endured, poverty, and family strife in a milieu where they are doomed as lower births. For them the monastic life seemed more peaceful and serene by comparison. What looks like isolation and hardship to the visitors is joy to the nuns.

The visitors witness the nuns lugging their water up a hill in the damp and cold, and it’s yet another reminder of the Grand Canyon-esque contrast between lifestyles. The visitors remark on how they practice in their own lives, how they try to deepen their practice, and how they do grasp that the concept of renunciation in the historic Buddhist framework would include physical discomforts unknown to them. How often do we leave a meditation class or retreat and warm up our cars immediately because it is so cold? If they had come

on this trip to truly wrap their heads around “renunciation,” they got more than their money’s worth.

To the video makers’ great credit, as viewers we are on that same quest. Hitchcock frames each scene with such nuance—of shadows and light conveying the lack of electricity and the candlelit world—that when we learn another constant medical problem the nuns face is eye trouble due to reading in candlelight for so many years, we can almost feel it, and certainly understand how it happens. And so there is another example of physical hardship and primitive medicine to help us reimagine the Western concept of renunciation. Not for the fainthearted, this renunciation—or the coddled. Renunciation can seem to be separated from practice in the West, but not here. One nun witnessed a woman enduring a long childbirth that was so painful and fruitless, with the baby stuck and not able to be born, that the mother grabbed a knife and cut her own throat. Many of the nuns came to the monastery after witnessing some terrible tragedy. One says there is “no comparison” between living the peaceful life of a monastic and living in the world.

Lama Tsoknyi Rinpoche III explains that in the regions surrounding the monasteries, the communities welcome

during the twenty years they spent in hiding, living in caves, guarding their traditions. The younger nuns learn from the older ones in this regard, with great determination. “They never give up,” Lama Tsoknyi says. Near the end of their trip the visitors are taken to meet the oldest nun, who dwells high up in a cave-like shelter. She prays every waking moment and believes “Every moment you can benefit other beings.” Although this statement may have been heard in a Pollyannaish tone in any number of Western retreat houses, standing atop the mountains in the cold mist, meeting someone who personifies the teaching, it takes on a different perspective. The shallowness of its Western meaning can almost be smelled, and it feels like the visitors are literally inside a prism, recasting perspectives.

The nuns’ collaborative lifestyle serves long retreats and periods of meditation with apparent ease. Some sit in retreat for weeks, months, and in one example, years, while the others manage the household by tending to the food, maintenance, and garden. Then they switch places. Upon visiting a monastery where some nuns had just completed a three-year-long retreat, the visitors naturally had questions. Imagine a Westerner not talking for three whole years? The

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the nuns and what they are trying to achieve. They respect that there are these little pockets of residents praying for all the others. He says that since the monasteries or nunneries have grown, crime has actually decreased. The nuns serve the surrounding peoples by bringing solace. “Having a kind heart” works, he notes.

The nuns make the point that they are always meditating, whether cooking, weeding their food gardens, or talking with visitors and locals. Their goal is continuous practice. In this regard they proceed with tremendous confidence. Because they have the older nuns as guides and teachers, they are able to believe they are capable of achieving understanding and enlightenment, capable of bringing spiritual peace to their neighborhood. In this manner they can overcome the destiny of their birth, the lower birth of women in Tibet, and know that they are entitled to self-confidence and self-esteem, like men are.

The older nuns kept alive methods of concentration

retreaters explained, “If we don’t practice, we let down all sentient beings.”

One of the practice-deepening gifts of the film is the visitors’ respect and awe for their hosts, evident in shots steeped in both contrast and silence. Four weeks into their journey, the visitors notice that “having no personal space” has become an irritant. Chuckling at their discomfort over being crowded into sleeping spaces after long days of hiking or horseback riding, they are able to vividly see that the nuns live in close quarters all the time—close and primitive.

“Is this the same practice I’m doing?” Hitchcock herself laughs.

It’s inspiring, one visitor notes, to see people so devoted to practice, people who embody a quality of un-self-consciousness. “I could not be a nun,” one of them decides, acknowledging the cultural divide. “They’ve truly achieved something,” another observes. Yet the Westerners are not sure what it is. What the nuns have achieved seems untranslatable. The genuineness

of loving kindness and compassion strived for by the nuns is striking to the point of seeming surreal or unreal to the visitors. How could this be taken back home? The answer is that one doesn't know. It may take a lifetime to figure that out. Deepening practice is challenging for Westerners, and to see the real thing in action is akin to nothing most Westerners have experienced.

Lama Tsoknyi notes it is helpful when Western practitioners can "slow down their engines." Hitchcock demonstrates just how ingrained fast-engine ruminating is when she asks him, "How do the prayers of these nuns impact others?" He explains that while the mind has obstacles, the heart sees that there are these "pockets of practitioners" here in the mountains who can actually benefit the peoples around them. "More pockets of kindness could completely transform the world," in his view.

On their last night before leaving Tibet, the visitors and the nuns sing songs to each other in a cultural exchange. The visitors sing the pop song "Girls Just Want to Have Fun," which greatly amuses the nuns, followed by "You Are My Sunshine." The lyrics, "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine," translated for them, prove even more thought-provoking for the monastics. The little songfest is a moment where Hitchcock's vision truly shines. She captures this slice of life with both nuance and thunderbolt at the same time: One wonders what in the world the nuns must truly have thought of this performance. An astonishing level of acceptance and respect, from and for all parties, flowing in all directions, soaks right through the viewer's screen, inducing yet another of Hitchcock's visual mixed metaphors—gentle shock. This moment is why the filmmaker came here; this is why she made this arduous journey. She captures the attempt so many Westerners make of trying to practice an ancient tradition wrapped and hidebound in Asian history, its many hills and valleys highlighted in this moment of music-sharing. So far

apart the two groups of women are, yet so mystically alike in their goal. All roads lead to Rome, we'd say in the West. Here, all roads lead to Buddha.

Well, not roads actually, but horse paths.

If there is to be any minor quibble with the film, it might be that sexuality is not addressed and at some points in the story seems a bit of an obvious omission. When the lama speaks of lower crime rates and less alcoholism in the neighborhoods near the nunneries, he doesn't mention whether local men ever try to break in or force sex on the nuns, and the filmmaker also never addresses homosexuality in a story of many women living in close quarters for all of their lives. One of the visitors, when talking about whether she could live the Tibetan lifestyle, answers no because she "is a sexual being." From her perspective this precludes her ever being able to live in a Nangchen nunnery. This would have been the perfect point at which the filmmaker might have doled out just a slice of information. The nuns seem somewhat ethereal and perhaps even over-blessed by the end of the film, but we know they must be quite human.

In all, *Blessings* can't help but deepen our practice and be intriguing for anyone seeking transformative metamorphosis. It is the diary of that quest. Director Victress Hitchcock, with the combination of her camera angles, lighting that could tell the story by itself, haunting music, and perfectly paced editing, takes us to a place we really could not possibly have gone before.

Kathy Jean Schultz is a writer, editor, and video maker living in Ventura, California. She co-authored the book *Intuition: Finding the Healer Within*, available on Googlebooks. Her short video *Perishables in Love* was screened at the 1998 Channel Islands Indie Film and Video Fest. She has authored dozens of magazine and newspaper articles, as well as written and produced programming for public-access TV.

