



What follows is a full transcript of an interview Ajahn Brahm gave on the bhikkhuni issue (an excerpt was published in the Bangkok Post – 28th April, 2009).

Acknowledgements

Interview

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Q1. It is widely believed that in the Theravada tradition, there is no longer any way to perform valid bhikkhuni ordinations according to the Vinaya. It is said that ordinations need to be performed by a "dual-sangha" of both bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, and as the Theravada bhikkhuni sangha had "died out" in Sri Lanka many centuries ago, this is no longer possible. Hundreds of bhikkhunis, including many Thais, have been ordained since the Theravada bhikkhuni order was restored [in Sri Lanka in the late 1990's with bhikkhunis from Mahayana countries conducting the ordinations]. But they are mostly seen in Thailand as not being legitimate Theravada bhikkhunis. What do you think of this view?

That is a myth. In Thailand, we spend too much of our time believing in our teachers, believing in accepted wisdom rather than investigating and challenging. So sometimes it takes Western monks outside of Asia to question and investigate – even to challenge wisdom that has been accepted for years if there is reason to do so.

I thought too when I was a young monk in Thailand that the problem was a legal problem, that the bhikkhuni order couldn't be revived. But having investigated and studied, I've found out that many of the obstacles we thought were there aren't there at all. Someone like Bhikkhu Bodhi [a respected Theravada scholar-monk] has researched the Pali Vinaya and his paper is one of the most eloquent I've seen – fair, balanced, comes out on the side of "It's possible, why don't we do this?"

One of the biggest myths is that bhikkhunis under the Mahayana tradition are somehow separated from the Theravada. But the truth of the matter is, there is no such thing as a Mahayana Vinaya. In all the Mahayana schools whether in Tibet, China, Korea, or Vietnam, most follow a

Dharmaguptaka Vinaya. Dharmaguptaka is a sister sect of the Theravada. They follow a Vinaya that comes from the same lineage or source as the Theravada Vinaya. If you actually studied that Vinaya and read it, you'd find out how similar it is to the Vinaya that's practiced – or should be practiced – here in Thailand.

If you see an ordination ceremony in Taiwan – I saw a video of one that was recently conducted – you'd see the similarity. I had a copy of the chanting. It was almost identical with the ordination ceremony which is done say in Wat Bovorn here in Bangkok. Any differences are superficial and would not challenge the legality of the ordination.

If any person trained in law, or even in philosophy and logic, examined the case, they would also come to the conclusion that the lineage of bhikkhunis we see even now in Taiwan and China is a lineage that has been unbroken since the time of the Buddha. They are bhikkhunis as far as the Buddha is concerned. They're just wearing different clothes. The teachings, the suttas are different, but the Vinaya is the same. The bhikkhuni lineage may have died out in some countries, but did not die out completely.

In addition, for many years we thought that to reestablish bhikkhunis in Buddhism we needed other bhikkhunis. That argument is not valid. There is an opportunity, another way of reading the Vinaya, to say that it's unnecessary. One of the great discoveries of Bhikkhu Bodhi when he was researching was to find a very famous Burmese monk [Mingun Jetavan Sayadaw, the meditation teacher of the famous Mahasi Sayadaw and Taungpulu Sayadaw] who 50-60 years ago said that it is quite clear in his opinion that the Buddha left an opportunity in the monastic rules for the re-ordination of bhikkhunis just by a group of monks. The Sayadaw argues that the Buddha did that because he

must have foreseen that one day the bhikkhuni sangha would disappear and to reinstitute it he left the opportunity open for just the bhikkhus to do the ceremony to re-ordain the nuns. *If we really want to, we can start the bhikkhuni sangha off again.*

Given this possibility to ordain according to the Vinaya, we can argue that point as scholars, but also out of compassion, to say that if there is some leeway in the interpretation, then let's have the most compassionate interpretation. Because that's such an important part of Buddhist teachings. You have to follow the rules, but if there is an interpretation that is possible which is the kind one, that's the one we should follow because that's the one the Buddha would have encouraged us to follow.

I've helped to publish the Thai translation of Bhikkhu Bodhi's paper, which I want to see distributed to senior monks and thinkers in Thailand. That's just a contribution to changing the thinking of many monks to give them not just the political reasons for ordaining bhikkhunis but to underpin that with a strong argument from the suttas, from the Vinaya, from the original teachings of the Buddha, so they know this is not just Western monks following Western customs, but that this is Buddhism.

It was very easy before to say it can't be done. Now the argument is not whether it can or can't be done, but why it should or why it shouldn't be done. It becomes more a political or emotional issue, not a practical issue anymore. Once the practical problem is seen to not really be there, the question is now: "Why not?"



Q2. So why should it be done?

Why did the Buddha establish bhikkhunis? If it wasn't going to help further the Dhamma or give more possibility for women to become enlightened, why would the Buddha have established the bhikkhuni order? We always say the Buddha knows better than us. If the Buddha thought it was a good idea, then why can't we?

Because I'm a senior monk, I have enormous faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Especially enormous faith in the Buddha. If the Buddha established something and it's gone but can be re-established, it's a wonderful gift of faith in the Buddha to try to help re-establish what the Buddha set up, but has been torn down.

It's like a person who sees a ruined temple or an old stupa that has been found in the jungle. It's not destroyed, it's just terribly, terribly damaged. And that person decides they're going to spend so much energy rebuilding that stupa and bringing it back to its former glory. It's a meritorious deed.

And the bhikkhuni sangha is like that stupa. It's been hidden in the jungle. Before, I never thought there were bhikkhunis around. But now I'm rationally convinced that there are bhikkhunis, legitimate bhikkhunis in the Theravada tradition.

They're alive, they're there. We found them in the jungle. They're there, so now we want to build on the remnants of that old stupa built by the Buddha and make it big and strong.

It actually saddens me as a monk that women don't have the support to renounce. If we had bhikkhuni ordinations and monasteries just like we have for monks, women would flourish. That's why we have to work really hard. I've already done enough in my monk's life, making monasteries in the West. To take on another burden like helping establish the bhikkhunis...but it really needs to be done.

We need to persuade the monks that this is important and that if women are given half a chance, and a fair chance, many women would like to live the monastic life. What we've seen in Thailand is that because this is such a rare and historic chance, the women in Thailand make such a wonderful job of this. Because they have something to prove - that they deserve that chance – they'll live up to the chance. They would not abuse the opportunity, they would not destroy the sangha, they would enhance it, embellish it, and they'd do a marvelous service of bringing Buddhism into the 21st century and come to the forefront of Thai society again.

The main reason why people say we should re-introduce the bhikkhuni ordination, is not so much for oneself, but to increase people's faith in Buddhism. It's not a personal thing to become a bhikkhuni, it's something which we can do to strengthen the Dhamma in our world.

Q3. What can bhikkhunis contribute to Buddhism and society?

They'll help modernize it and they'll help teach. And these are things which we need. In Thailand, very often it is said that people in Bangkok and even in the provinces are moving away from Buddhism. children don't go to temples anymore. Having bhikkhunis would be one very powerful, effective way to restore that confidence in Buddhism. It's showing that we're modern. We're not some relic of a bygone age. And show that we are a fair religion. How can we say that we are following reason and truth and fairness? We're hypocrites when we deny fifty percent of the population the same opportunities. Quite honestly – do you really think the Buddha would agree to that? If the Buddha were alive today, I'm confident that he would say it's unfair, it's unjust, it's not Dhamma, ordain those women today!

Many women have told me that no matter how much they respect me, there are some things that they cannot say and some things which I cannot understand, which is why having nuns is so important for the growth of Buddhism. And my organizations in Western Australia and Singapore would never have grown so well without the presence of the nuns. They're essential.

Buddhism is also fading in Thailand because people aren't respecting monks so much. Get the women on board and they can help clean it up.

Q4. What about their possible contributions in the West in particular?

It will help Buddhism find its place in the West. When other religions are introducing equal rights to women and Buddhism doesn't, we're not going to survive in the West. It's culturally unacceptable to have a lack of equity for men and women in Western countries and it's becoming that way in Thailand. Basically, it's not acceptable either to women or to men to have a lack of freedom for women to pursue a monastic life as the Buddha laid it down. In a country like Australia, there is no choice.

If you don't ordain bhikkhunis then Western people are going to stop being Buddhists. They're going to throw away Buddhism. Because they'll say it's hypocritical. It's not compassionate, it's not wise, it's just like another old religion – dogmatic, exploitative, rooted in the past, and can never really adapt to a country like Australia. There's no reason why it can't adapt. When we have bhikkhunis in countries like Australia, England, the US, and Europe, it will give a boost to Buddhism and the Dhamma.

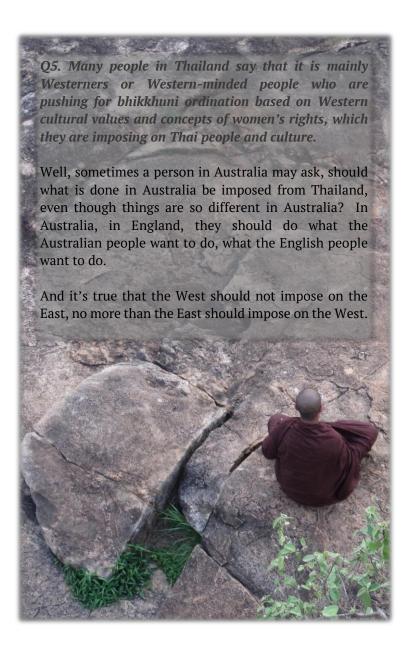
Part of my job in Australia is not just to practice Buddhism, but also to spread Buddhism. That's my job, my role. One way of achieving that role is to encourage the inclusion of women in Buddhism at all levels.

And having taught in a Western country for such a long time, I really do work incredibly hard. 7 days a week. The whole year (except two weeks on retreat by myself). Apart from that, it's an incredibly hard schedule that I keep. The reason I do that is because there are not enough English-speaking teachers who can teach Buddhism. Why on earth do we cut off half the

population? Basically, I need women teachers to help spread the Dhamma and Buddhism in the West. There's not enough male teachers to teach.

In the Buddhist Society of Western Australia, monks and nuns take turns giving Dhamma talks to the community. Because we have more monks and I am more senior, for the moment it's usually 3 weeks a monk teaches, one week a nun teaches, but I can see in the future as more nuns become teachers and become more popular, there'll be an equity and who knows maybe the nuns might take over and there'll be a monk every three weeks! But it does not matter, because most people have told me that they don't care whether it's a monk or a nun. They don't even care whether its Theravada, Mahayana or Vairavana. They don't care whether it's Asian or Caucasian or African. If a person gives a good talk and it's meaningful and makes sense to them, they want to listen. Women can give good talks as well as men. Of course they can, it's obvious! And maybe they would even give talks to a higher standard than me!

In other religions, like say Catholicism, most of the monastics are nuns. Also in the Mahayana school, there are far more bhikkhunis than bhikkhus. And basically, they do a better job. They do! If you look at it. That's why there are so many of them there.



Q6. There are already many lay women Dhamma teachers and nuns holding 8-10 precepts* who are not fully-ordained bhikkhunis all over the world who are highly respected and content with their role. Many people say that it doesn't matter to them if someone is wearing the monks' robes or not. As you yourself just said, if someone is a good teacher, they would be interested in her teachings, and give her their respect. And many say if that person has practiced Dhamma well and cultivated virtuous qualities (gunadhamma), they can also serve as a field of merit, meaning one would also get a lot of merit from supporting them. So why do women need to become bhikkhunis?

*In Thailand, they wear white robes and are called maechees; in Burma, they wear pink and are called thilashins; and in Sri Lanka, they wear brown and are called dasasil matas)

Even in say countries like Australia or the US where there are many lay teachers, and monk teachers, and monks who don't teach – even the monks who don't teach get more support than the laypeople who do teach. This is even true in Australia, let alone in Thailand. People would give support to the sangha, not just because it's in their blood. But because the Buddha said in the Dakkhinavibhanga Sutta, any gift given to the bhikkhu and bhikkhuni sangha earns much higher merit, a huge amount more merit, than a gift given to a layperson. The idea that it could be otherwise – that's not what the Buddha said.

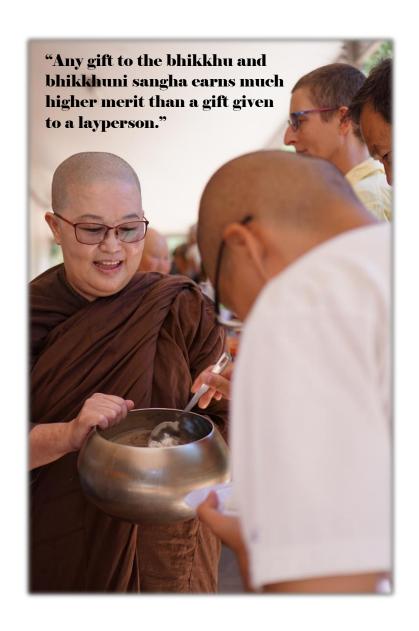
Why are monks more of a field of merit than a layperson who practices well? The reason is because you're supporting a tradition. You're not supporting a person; you're supporting a vehicle. The vehicle of the bhikkhu or bhikkhuni sangha. And people should have more faith in what the Buddha said and

take what he said more seriously than their own thoughts and ideas.

Maechees [even if they are good teachers] are not a field of merit as such. [Note: even though maechees are often referred to in English as 'nuns', in Thailand they are still not technically classified as monastics, but as *upasikas*, or lay devotees]. Some people may not like to hear this, but it's not a matter of upsetting people or not upsetting people, it's about being true to the teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha never established a maechee order. He established the bhikkhuni order. You can't argue with that.



The next question is why did the Buddha establish the bhikkhuni order and not a maechee order? It's obvious that the Buddha thought it was preferable, a better vehicle. So we should respect the Buddha's wisdom until we're as wise as the Buddha ourselves.



Q7. How is being a bhikkhuni a "better vehicle"? Strictly speaking, it is not necessary to be a bhikkhuni to realize enlightenment – some laywomen and maechees have done it. So how can being a bhikkhuni help one to progress in Dhamma and reach the highest goal, nibbana?

This is related to the issue of support. The Buddha said you need *sappaya* (conducive conditions) for practice – a quiet place, good support, and not too many duties to perform. Currently it's very hard for women to find places where they can have seclusion and sensory restraint. Monks have more places.

The reality is in Thailand maechees – the only nuns which are legally acceptable – do not have the prestige, and with it, the support, to be able to practice Dhamma in as free and conducive a way to get to the furthest of goals, enlightenment.

Perhaps if there were bhikkhunis, there would be more support for women, as we'd have something that is traditional. Because the maechee doesn't come from the time of the Buddha, perhaps that's one of the reasons it doesn't get support. If we have an order that has a history of 2500 years and was established by the Buddha himself, maybe that would give rise to more faith amongst our laity. And from that faith may come more support.

Another important benefit is the inspiration it gives you – as a monk, I know I'm in a lineage which goes back for 2500 years. Recently I was in Sri Lanka and there you could stay in a cave and above the cave wall there were inscriptions showing that it had been offered to the sangha 1500 years ago. And you could sit in that cave and know that there'd been monks who'd been sitting in that cave for the last 1500 years, meditating.

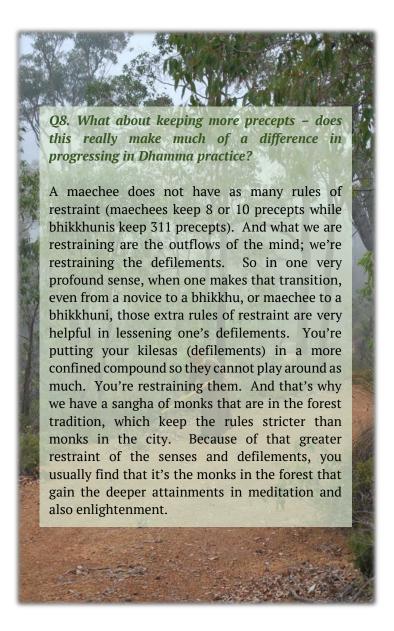
Keeping the same precepts that I was. That gave me such an inspiration. It's like you may have a family heritage. You're proud of your ancestors and you keep up that ancestral tradition of honor.

If you have a lineage, for me the bhikkhu lineage, you feel you have to keep up that tradition and honor those ancestors. Honor those other monks who sat in that cave for 1500 years before me. That's a huge help to my own practice.



"Imagine if there was a bhikkhuni, she'd know that for 2500 years, there has been women practicing the same tradition that she is."

Imagine if there was a bhikkhuni, she'd know that for 2500 years, there has been women practicing the same tradition that she is. It's keeping up that ancestral tradition and honoring all those women who'd worn those robes before her. That's a very powerful support. It's the support of heritage, of tradition, of honor. It's powerful.



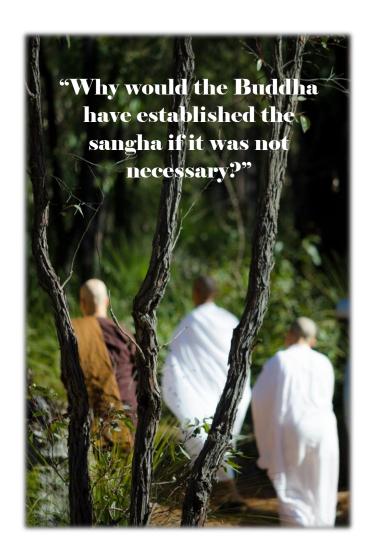
Q9. Some people say that women practitioners can just study the bhikkhuni rules and keep them on their own, without needing to be bhikkhunis.

You might as well say "no one really needs to ordain as a bhikkhu. They can just study the Vinaya and keep the 227 precepts (bhikkhu's rules) at home as a layperson." The argument is unsound.

When you keep the rules while you're living in a community [of bhikkhus], then you really do keep the rules. Because there are other monks checking on you. And you're in a situation where you're supported to keep the rules. For example, in Australia, when we first went there, people didn't want us to keep the rules - things like having to have all your food offered. Or having to have another man in the room when you're talking to a woman. Many Australians think that's troublesome – why do you bother us with all these rules? We did not have the support, we monks had to be very strong. If you try to keep these rules by yourself, other people who don't understand their importance will argue with you, and you will lose those rules. You need the mutual support of other people in the same community keeping those same rules. Otherwise those rules will not withstand the defilements of other people around you.

This is why the Buddha told the monks to live together for the first five years at least.

You weren't allowed to be by yourself until you'd finished those first years of training. By yourself, in the beginning, you're not strong enough.



Q10. Similarly, women are commonly told by many monks and even other laywomen "it's not necessary to ordain to practice. You can ordain in the heart and practice wherever you are."

If monks say [to women] that it's not necessary to ordain to practice well, then they should disrobe and practice as a layperson.

Then they'll at least be true to their word. The reason why they *are* monks is because it *is* easier to practice as a bhikkhu or bhikkhuni.

And you always ask the question – why did the Buddha establish the sangha? I was there with Ajahn Chah one evening when Christopher Titmuss, who was then a monk and was about to disrobe, went to tell this to Ajahn Chah. Ajahn Chah said, "Why?" And he said "Because I want to teach the Dhamma in the West, and it's easier to teach as a layperson rather than a monk." And Ajahn Chah responded, "Then why did the Buddha establish the sangha?" To which Christopher Titmuss had no answer. He made a very strong point, that the reason why the Buddha established the bhikkhu sangha is because it is the best vehicle for a man to practice and reach enlightenment. It's also the best vehicle to teach the Dhamma. The same goes for the bhikkhuni sangha. Otherwise, as Ajahn Chah asked Christopher Titmuss, then why would the Buddha have established the sangha *if it was not necessary?*

Q11. Do you think that during the time that the bhikkhuni order was discontinued for centuries in the Theravada tradition, fewer women have attained enlightenment than would have otherwise been possible?

Reason tells me that the spiritual attainments of women would have been less without the bhikkhuni sangha. The spiritual attainment of men would have also been less (without the bhikkhu sangha).



Q12. So in a way is it just "lip service" to say "women and men have equal spiritual potential" if there are not equal supporting conditions to realize that potential?

I agree – I'd use a simile. We may say that women are as intelligent as men so they could go to university, but then have no universities that accept women, which was the case in many lands. For example, when I went to Cambridge University, there were about thirty colleges for men and only 3 colleges for women. So women had a ten to one harder chance of getting into Cambridge. Yes, they were equally intelligent but they never had the same opportunities. And no one agreed that that was correct. So today, almost forty years after I went to Cambridge, there is an equal representation of men and women throughout that university. If we'd have said, "Yes, women are as intelligent as men" but still kept thirty men's colleges to three women's colleges, would that be acceptable?

And now we're saying, "Well, women have got equal potential to be enlightened" but we've only got I don't know how many monks' colleges and just a small number of bhikkhuni colleges.

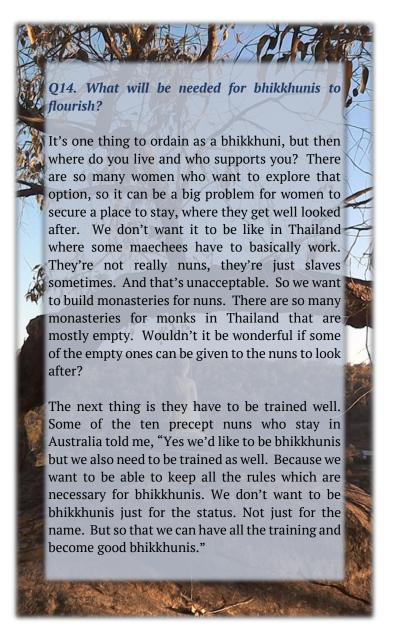
By "college" I mean not just educational institutions or places where women can practice well, but also the vehicle, the higher restraint and higher precepts.

Q13. In establishing nuns' monasteries, why is it important to make them independent from monks' monasteries?

(Note: The Buddhist Society of Western Australia of which Ajahn Brahm is Spiritual Director supports Bodhinyana Monastery for monks [Ajahn Brahm is the abbot] and Dhammasara Monastery for nuns [Venerable Hasapanna is the abbot and Assistant Spiritual Director of the BSWA.]

I have deliberately kept out of it [Dhammasara Nun's Monastery] even though sometimes they have said, "Please come and teach us, please come and look after us." [I say] "No, you have to learn how to stand up for yourselves and be completely independent." Otherwise, it's never going to work. And I'm very proud of the nuns in that monastery. They are independent. They run their monastery and they run it well and they're teachers in their own right. They teach retreats and give wonderful talks. And that inspires me. That women can do as well as or even better than men in monastic life.

One of the things I was very keen on was to make the nun's monastery completely independent because I've seen too many nuns' monasteries where the nuns defer to the monks. I don't think that's all that healthy, frankly. So I much prefer the nuns to have their monastery. They run it. If they do it well, fine. If they don't do it well, it disintegrates. But I'm not going to help. They have to learn. It's like bringing up a child. You have to allow that child the freedom and independence so they can become responsible.



Q15. How can the first groups of women ordained as Theravada bhikkhunis in this contemporary revival receive adequate training if there are no existing senior bhikkhuni teachers to teach them?

The initial training can be done by monks. The vast majority of the Vinaya is the same between bhikkhus and bhikkhunis – we share so many rules, especially monastic procedures (*sanghakamma*). So the senior monks like myself who know Vinaya very well can train the nuns in the same rules that monks also keep.

My job would be to train them and then turn them back. The nuns could come train at the male monastery a couple of hours a week. Get special instructions on things like sanghakamma, rules for managing monasteries and ceremonies that need to be done and a few other things like establishing simas or what happens if serious offences have been committed. Those rules and procedures are identical, almost exactly the same, between male and female. It's the same as what I've learned and know. So it'd be easy for me to teach that part of the Vinaya to nuns.

And the rules that are special to the nuns, there's only a minority of those and those are quite clear how they are to be practiced. So it's not that difficult to do.

Many maechees even now will go to see monks for training in meditation and Dhamma, and they find they're able to do that. As, even in the time of the Buddha, men and even monks would go to bhikkhunis to ask questions on Dhamma. That was there then, that is there now.

The training question is a question that can very easily be solved. It's just like a tree that's being nurtured in a nursery before it is planted in a place where it will grow and live 'til it dies. Bhikkhunis, the young ones, will go to the monks almost like it's a nursery although they'd still be staying in their own place. Going to the monks to be trained, to be advised, until such time that they can be totally self-sufficient. In the same way that a tree is cared for in a nursery before it can live by itself.



Another alternative – there are wonderful communities of nuns living in places like Taiwan who keep almost exactly the same rules as Theravada bhikkhunis. Even though their robes are different, what they do and how they behave is regulated by exactly the same rules. So the second possibility is to send the first of those bhikkhunis to Taiwan for training and come back and train other bhikkhunis in how to keep their rules.

Q16. One concern raised by some monks is that there are certain bhikkhuni Vinaya rules that are too difficult or impractical to uphold today, so if the bhikkhuni order were revived, the bhikkhunis wouldn't be able to follow Vinaya strictly and thus would not be truly well-practicing bhikkhunis. This in turn may weaken the standard of how well monks in the same tradition keep the Vinaya. What do you think?

Those rules can be upheld today. When we look at the bhikkhuni Vinavas from the different traditions, we find out that the Pali-language version (followed by the Theravada) is not always the most accurate. In the same way that scholarmonks are discovering by comparing the Chinese Agamas to Pali suttas that the Pali suttas are usually most accurate in 98% of the cases but in 2% of the cases, the Chinese version, which was translated from the Pali, is more accurate. It's the same with the Vinaya as well. If you actually compare those different Vinaya traditions, you can get much closer to the Vinava that the Buddha taught. The Pali is not 100%. When you compare those other traditions, you'd be surprised that those rules which were almost impossible now become practical. You'd wonder why the Buddha in his great wisdom would have set up such rules if they would be so difficult to keep, even in the time of the Buddha? And the answer is, perhaps it's not how he set it up. If you look at the other versions, then you find that actually they are very practical.

For example: Traveling alone is supposed to be a *sanghadisesa* offence (serious offence) for bhikkhunis. We find that in the Pali (Theravada) Vinaya – but even in the Pali, it is ambiguous and not clear – it seems to say if you travel without another bhikkhuni, you create a *sanghadisesa* offence. But in the other versions, it says if you travel alone by yourself but there are

other women and men around you are free from such an offence.

Another example: In the Pali (Theravada) Vinaya it seems to say a bhikkhuni, even with other bhikkhunis, can't stay in a forest, in an aranya. In the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya – which again comes from the same lineage as the Theravada Vinaya - it says that as long as there are huts with lots of women, as long as there are other bhikkhunis in that forest, then you can stay in that forest.

Q17. How can you tell when the Chinese version is more accurate?

Usually those that are more simple and make more sense are the more accurate. Usually we start with something simple and we tend to complicate it. So rule of thumb: the simpler version is usually the most original. People tend to add things to the Buddha's teachings, they never really take away from what the Buddha said.

Another point is that because the Pali version of the bhikkhuni Vinaya is very abbreviated, it can be just that things were left off. Because it wasn't really relevant. They just kept on chanting it even though in Sri Lanka there were no bhikkhunis. Because it wasn't so important for them in their life, there's a good argument that they never preserved it with the same degree of care with which they preserved the bhikkhu Vinaya.

Q18. Many people have a negative perception of those seeking bhikkhuni ordination, viewing them as strident feminists who are demanding equal rights.

The ones I've met who are seeking ordination are not like that at all. I think that's another myth from people who've never actually seen someone who wants to become a bhikkhuni. They're not demanding at all. They've come to me and said "I'm not doing this for myself." There's almost a sense of mission for other women, to make it possible in the future, not maybe for them, but for other people who may be able to live the Holy Life in its purity. So there's a sense of sacrifice, a selfless mission to establish something that was there in the time of the Buddha and thus they want to see it there again.

It's like myself going to Australia and setting up Buddhism in Australia. I was crazy to do something like that. I should have stayed in Thailand and had an easy life. But I thought it needed to be done. I wanted to spread Buddhism in a foreign country. And that's a huge amount of work. A great amount of effort. Why did we do that? It wasn't for ego, or just to prove something for myself, it was a sense of service to Buddhism.

Most women I've met have the same sort of attitude. And what they're going to do is going to be tough, tough as ever, but they want to do it as a service. Many Buddhists are idealistic, not selfish. They see a bigger picture, a picture of serving their community, of helping others. People who want to become bhikkhunis that I've met are very selfless. They're doing this out of high ideals, not out of personal gain. And they're not demanding at all.

"You don't change these things overnight. But you never change them if you don't start. So you start, and over the years, the decades, I'm sure [the bhikkhuni sangha will take root and grow again and be a great inspiration for people in Thailand and the rest of the world."

Q19. In Sri Lanka, the bhikkhuni order was revived in the 1990's. Still, it is not really accepted by many laypeople and senior monks. Is it going to be similar in Thailand? Will there be support for bhikkhunis?

Of course it will be similar in Thailand. It will take many decades to become strong. For example, when Ajahn Chah started Wat Pah Pong, for the first two decades, it was always considered to be a bit extreme. Just before I left for Australia, there was a delegation of monks from Bangkok that came to check him out, actually to see whether he was a good monk or not. And it had been going for twenty years already. It took a long time to establish the credentials of Wat Pah Pong and that type of tradition.

You don't change these things overnight. But you never change them if you don't start. So you start, and over the years, the decades, I'm sure it will take root and grow again and be a great inspiration for people in Thailand and the rest of the world.

Thailand looks to the West for some of its innovation. If they see an amazing bhikkhuni monastery in the West, maybe they'll want to build one over in Thailand.

Q20. To what extent is it the duty of a teacher to do their utmost to help their female students to realize their potential, recognizing that what is currently available is not enough? To what extent is it the responsibility of anyone who sees the value in having bhikkhunis to help in some way?

Wherever in life there is a problem and there's something you can do about it, you should put forth effort and try to change that problem. Actually, I think that's our duty as human beings. Just doing nothing when you can do something is irresponsible. People complain about the state of world, about economic, political, climate crises. If there's a crisis, would it be solved by people not doing anything about it? So it's up to us to do whatever we can to try and solve the crises of our world. To try to heal pain and solve problems.

The argument that it's a big thing to change what's been held in people's minds for a long time is not valid if what's been held is somehow unethical.

So it's been a long time since Thai people have been drinking alcohol. It's been a long time that governments have been corrupt. It's almost a tradition. So we should just let that tradition carry on, with corruption in our government and civil service. "It's too hard to change these things." So you see that argument is not valid.

If something *can* be done to improve society, to improve the government, improve the police force, improve the army, it should be done. These simple things should be done.

Q21. But many people, even those sympathetic to bhikkhunis, feel powerless to do anything because of the Thai Sangharaja's ruling (laid down in 1928 but still in force) forbidding Thai monks from ordaining women and the still weak societal acceptance of bhikkhunis. What can people – both monk and lay – do to help support the bhikkhuni revival?

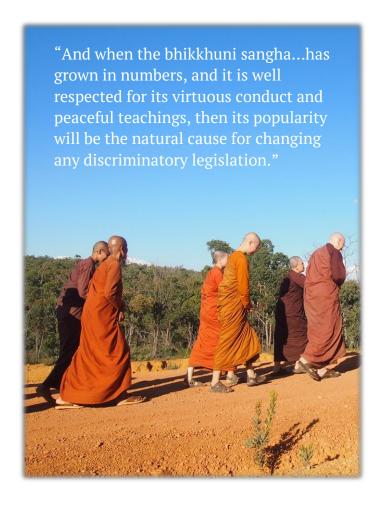
It's never the case that "nothing can be done". It's just that you haven't thought of it yet. Keep on thinking, keep on investigating, and eventually solutions come up. Never give up and say it can't be fixed.

The main obstacle is ignorance of the fact that the bhikkhuni lineage has already been revived and is legitimate. So, we should spread this news to the Buddhist institutions and societies, and also to the media. Keep the pot warm, keep on talking about it, write articles about it to persuade the monks that this is important.

Next, the small bhikkhuni sangha requires special material support to grow from almost no resources, so give offerings to the sangha of both genders just like laypeople did in the time of the Buddha. Instead of only giving money to all these fancy monasteries to build another uposatha hall that only gets used once a year and maybe has only one or two monks living there, then why not help build some really nice monasteries and facilities for nuns. Nice ones with proper facilities.

And when the bhikkhuni sangha in a country like Thailand has grown in numbers, and it is well respected for its virtuous conduct and peaceful teachings, then its popularity will be the natural cause for changing any discriminatory legislation. It's not hard to establish the bhikkhuni sangha, if there are women wanting to do it and monks willing to perform the

ordination ceremony. It's legally valid. Why not? It's an experiment. Have an open mind, give it a chance, see what happens. And if it *is* true that it's not really necessary and that laypeople can practice just as well, then it won't last very long. **So why not give it a try and see what happens?**



Q22. How many other monks share your view?

It really depends whether a monk is isolated and lives just surrounded by other monks or a lay community that never challenges or questions them. In Thailand, and sometimes in foreign countries too, a monk is surrounded by a group of basically "yes" people, who respect the monk so much they never challenge him. In Australia monks are constantly challenged. In fact, I think this is a much healthier place for a monk to practice. You're kept on your toes. You have to justify your positions in public. People ask the toughest of questions, which makes you think and question. Those monks who aren't questioned don't have to leave their comfort zones.

So why not? What's the reason why we should stop women becoming bhikkhunis? Why? The legal reason has been exploded, scholarship says it can be done legally. If you say they don't want to be bhikkhunis, that's exploded too – many women do want to become bhikkhunis. If you say it's only because of ego, that's not valid either – if you go and investigate, you'll find that women who want to become bhikkhunis are doing it for selfless reasons. If you say that, well, they can just practice as they are – it's a much better practice being a bhikkhuni. If you investigate and ask the tough questions and are honest, then those monks will be convinced.

Why not?

Further readings:

- 1. The Revival of Bhikkhunī Ordination in the Theravada Tradition by Bhikkhu Bodhi http://inwardpathpublisher.blogspot.com.au/2011/12/this-is-wonderful-slideshow-of.html
- 2. The Revival of the Bhikkhunī Order and the Decline of the Sāsana by Bhikkhu Anālayo https://www.buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de/pdf/5-personen/analayo/revival-bhikkhuni.pdf
- 3. On the Bhikkhunī Ordination Controversy by Bhikkhu Anālayo https://www.buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de/pdf/5-personen/analayo/bhikkhuni-gontroversy.pdf
- 4. The Cullavagga on Bhikkhunī Ordination by Bhikkhu Anālayo https://www.buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de/pdf/5-
- personen/analayo/cullavagga.pdf
- 5. The Legality of Bhikkhuni Ordination by Bhikkhu Anālayo
- https://www.buddhismuskunde.unihamburg.de/pdf/5-personen/analayo/legality.pdf



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"So why not? What's the reason why we should stop women becoming bhikkhunis? Why? The legal reason has been exploded, scholarship says it can be done legally. If you say they don't want to be bhikkhunis, that's exploded too many women do want to become bhikkhunis. If you say it's only because of ego, that's not valid either - if you go and investigate, you'll find that women who want to become bhikkhunis are doing it for selfless reasons. If you say that, well, they can just practice as they are - it's a much better practice being a bhikkhuni. If you investigate and ask the tough questions and are honest, then those monks will be convinced. Why not?" - Ajahn Brahm