

## **Bhikkhuni Ordination – Spirit Rock Meditation Centre 10.17.11**

### **Closing Address from Thanissara**

We have witnessed today a truly beautiful ceremony which is fully aligned with the Buddha's intention to provide a comprehensive Sangha vehicle that enables women to live the Holy Life for the sake of Awakening and for the welfare of all beings.

On behalf of all of us here - and on behalf of all who are unable to attend, which includes many monastic and post monastic sisters in the UK, Australia, South Africa and further afield - and on behalf of many, many beings that delight in the Going Forth of Bhikkhunis, I most sincerely congratulate Ayya Santacitta, Ayya Nimmala & Ayya Anandabodhi Bhikkhunis.

May each of you have long life, good health and much well being. May you, your preceptors, and your communities, be surrounded by wholesome and generous support. May your practice bear many fruits and may all that you do bring peace and harmony into the world. May this also be true for all Bhikkhunis and all nuns that have gone forth in faith.

Today we witness a truly historic occasion, along with the other very recent Theravada Bhikkhuni ordinations in Sri Lanka, Australia, Northern California, and most courageously, those that have happened in Thailand. For over 1,000 years Theravada Bhikkhuni ordination has not been possible. But today, we are seeing the re-emergence of the full and proper place for female mendicants within the Holy Sasana of the Buddha.

It's been a long, long wait.

For many ordained women the journey to full acceptance has been of epic proportions. It has required the negotiation of unimaginable obstacles which, quite frankly, have undermined the pure intention and guidelines the Buddha laid out all those many moons ago.

The sum total of these obstacles created a huge and impenetrable wall of opposition, a dam to withhold the full participation, empowerment and leadership of innumerable female mendicants. It submerged their history, eclipsed records of their wisdom and teachings and made invisible their lives. This wall of resistance is built upon rigid cultural norms, unsuitable for our times, political expediencies, erroneous myths, irrational fears, immature emotions and inappropriate and oppressive distortions of power. In short, it attempts to

control the full and radical nature of the Buddha's inheritance.

The first time I fully felt this wall was as a young mae-chee, a Thai nun in England. One winter night, with a fellow sister, who went on to become one of the first Western Bhikkhunis, her name was Ayya Vimala, when alone in our nuns' cottage. We surreptitiously wrapped ourselves in orange sheets. As I looked into the mirror in front of us, I felt joy at the sense of possibility and devastation at the knowledge of impossibility. I saw through the centuries into the truly impassable nature of this wall. It was overwhelming.

Since then, in the English monasteries of the Forest Sangha of Ajahn Chah, where Ayya Anandabodhi, Ayya Santacitta and Ayya Nimmala's teacher - Ayya Medhanandi - trained, there have been 44 Siladhara who have ordained over the last - nearly 30 years. The Siladhara, who are categorized as 10 precept nuns, actually lived and still live as Bhikkhunis, all but in legal status.

Most of those 44 have now left. Every one of those women who disrobed should feel proud of their contribution and not be diminished by having to leave due to the impossible pain of gender discrimination or for any other reasons that brought about their disrobing. Those who have remained as Siladhara should – also - be highly praised for their unswerving commitment to their practice, their community and to the Holy Life.

Together, counting the Vassas of all the Siladhara, it amounts to just short of 400 years of collective nuns experience in England. This does not count the hundreds of novices and the hundreds of years they also contributed, as well as many other ordained women on other continents, who all offered their pure intentions and their precious life force to this profound dedication to the Dharma.

Reflecting on this titanic offering of faith, pure intention, service, hard work, meditation, understanding, compassion and of course the wisdom honed from the struggle of the Holy Life, one can't help but feel that the collective force of this dedication has significantly contributed to the cracking of this dam and the pulling away of hefty bricks within the centuries old wall that has defended against the full honouring, respect and inclusion of women and of the Feminine within Buddhism.

Reflecting on this today, I feel we can all honour all female renunciants – through time and space, of all lineages - who have struggled against discrimination and who have nether the less, contributed to the Buddha's marvelous inheritance from which we all benefit. We

should also honour the millions of lay women and lay men supporters who have enabled the current of the Buddha's teaching to continue through their generosity, faith and practice.

With this occasion today, we can truly celebrate and participate in this Sangha Karma of Bhikkhuni ordination. We should no longer have to witness nuns battling an overwhelming obstacle course - where goal posts are moved ever beyond reach - in order for them to receive full acceptance into the ordained Sangha,

From today on, nuns who have undertaken full ordination, should never again be marginalized, doubted and sometimes even vilified or imprisoned.

From this time onwards, we should, without any hesitation, in the full light of day, bless, support, honour and respect those brave women who Go Forth into the mendicant life as encouraged by the Buddha.

We should all collectively make sure that never again the path to full ordination for women is obscured, lost, or littered with untrue myths and erroneous narratives. Further we should find ways to support the deepest aspirations and practical needs of these emergent Bhikkhunis and of all nuns, wherever they live.

In these times, the example and life style of mendicant nuns is truly a teaching and a blessing in itself.

We are on a cusp. The very sustainability of our lives and the lives of all species upon this earth is in danger of being lost through the ecological degradation on a scale never known before. In times like this, the principles of monastic life such as renunciation, harmlessness, selflessness, inner contemplation, depth of faith and compassionate response - are truly a light for the world.

Once when Ajahn Chah visited his first Western monastery in England in 1978, he asked 'How are you doing?', 'Oh', he was told, 'We are all doing fine.' 'Well' Ajahn Chah replied, 'There won't be much wisdom here then!'

Clearly we all underestimated the depth of struggle required to decant this precious wisdom.

Ajahn Chah often said our challenges are the sharpening stone for wisdom. Though let us – also - not forget compassion. Awakening that embraces the suffering of the world through compassionate response is crucial in our times.

The two great wings of Buddhism are wisdom AND compassion. These generate a perfect balance enabling freedom and integration. Then... not only is there the emptiness of transcendence, but also the emptiness that opens into intimacy with all of life.

And while in truth gender is an arbitrary designation, the wholeness of our humanity is realized when masculine and feminine, compassion and wisdom are held in balance within our OWN hearts. Without this balance we descend into a partial and split reality.

Reflecting THUS, we come to understand that Buddhism and Buddhist monasticism needs to hold women in equal regard to fulfill its true potential.

Therefore on this day of such archetypal significance, may we truly bless and welcome Ayya Anandabodhi, Ayya Santacitta and Ayya Nimmala. May we also warmly welcome all Bhikkhunis and all nuns and may we continue to support the full emergence of the deep Feminine within Buddhism.

Finally, on behalf of us all, I would like to most sincerely thank and offer our profound respects to the witnessing and attendant Bhikkhus who have helped enable this - and other recent Bhikkhuni -ordinations. We greatly appreciate your support, sponsorship & blessings.

On behalf of us all, I would like to thank Preceptor Ayya Thathaaloka and the attendant Bhikkhunis who have helped open the pathway for full ordination. We deeply honour and respect you.

On behalf of us all, I would like to thank all those courageous monks who have helped enable Bhikkhuni ordinations and who have spoken out clearly in support of womens' full and legal participation in the ordained Sangha. We graciously thank you.

On behalf of us all, I'd like to thank Jill Boone and the Saranaloka Board, past and present, for helping create a bridge for our nuns to walk over.

On behalf of us all, I would like to thank Jack Kornfield for bringing the spirit of Ajahn Chah to bear upon the phenomenal emergence of an empowered lay and teaching Sangha: A tremendous contribution to the Buddha's vision of a strong 4-fold Sangha.

On behalf of us all, I would like to thank Gil Fronsedale and the Spirit Rock Teacher

Council and Sangha for making this ordination possible.

And on behalf of us all, I thank all the lay supporters for your awesome & tireless work.

Lastly, as Ajahn Chah reminded us, 'Buddhism - is a religion - of the Heart'

We join - all our hearts - to honour our newly ordained Bhikkhunis and all those that have gone forth into the Holy Life in faith.

May the blessings of this consecrated occasion be shared for the welfare of all Beings; past present and future.