

# Mining for Gold

A Bright Vision and Exploration into the Essential Nature and Purpose of the Bhikkhuni Sangha in the Ancient Texts and Lives of the Noble Ones and Brought to Life through Living the Pure and Perfected Holy Life in the Modern World

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## Introduction

When meditating on this paper before beginning it, I set my intentions for the fulfillment of the purpose of the Buddha's Sasana—our freedom from suffering and the welfare of all living beings. The *nimitta*, or image, that came to mind was of *sara*—the heartwood, or essence.

I remembered my own inspiration to undertake bhikkhuni life came when reading this phrase in the Pali Text Society's translation of the *Bhikkhuni Vibhanga*: **"A bhikkhuni is essential."**<sup>1</sup> The Buddha's teaching analogies of heartwood<sup>2</sup> and refining gold<sup>3</sup> are lamps that illustrate the meaning and goal as well as the means of the practice. Consulting with an elder Mahathera mentor of mine in the Bhikkhu Sangha on what would be useful to present to the First Global Congress on Buddhist Women, he repeated three times: "mining for gold."<sup>4</sup> Thus, the title and theme of this paper appeared.

In later reflection, I realized that "Sara" (aka Tessara or Devasara) was also the name of the Sri Lankan bhikkhuni venerable whose service to the Sangha in her fifth century CE trip to China with her peers, recorded both in China and Sri Lanka, has been somehow energetically key in bringing the whole issue of the viability of the original bhikkhuni lineage to life. This paper thus also serves as a tribute to Ayya Sara, to Sanghamitta, and to all the great beings back to the most noble, the Buddha himself, who have served as *Dhammadutas*, "Dhamma messengers" preserving the Dhamma and the Sangha to this day.

## Heartwood and Refining Gold

### The Ancient Analogies

Like mining for gold, we begin with a look into passages of the Dhamma-Vinaya texts of the Pali Canon that have inspired a number of modern Western women to adopt the Bhikkhuni Vinaya and undertake the full and complete living of the holy life, contributing to the contemporary development of a Theravadan Bhikkhuni Sangha in North America.

## Purpose and Intention in Going Forth

First, I would like to bring forth and affirm the essence of our inspiration, faith, and motivation in going forth into homelessness in this Teaching and Discipline.

"Lord, if women were to go forth from the home life into homelessness in the Tathagata's Dhamma-Vinaya, would they be able to realize the fruit of stream-entry, once-returning, non-returning, or arahantship?"

"Yes, Ananda, they would. . . ." (*Culavagga*)

When questioned as to the fundamentals of his Teaching and his Sasana, the Blessed One is said to have answered that he taught only one thing: suffering and the end of suffering, for men and women, human and nonhuman beings. The teaching, divided into path and fruits, has but one taste, the taste of freedom, of liberation. The question here today, as in the time of the Buddha, is whether the going forth of women in the Blessed One's Dhamma-Vinaya, bhikkhuni ordination, will enable this noble purpose. The Buddha's answer is clearly affirmative. This is the basis of our intent.

The entire Doctrine and Discipline, both Dhamma and Vinaya, revolve around and are rightly meant to be skillful means and a practical path to facilitate this one essential purpose. This has been described as the overarching operating principle of the Buddha's Sasana, of his Dhamma, and of his Sangha. We keep the Buddha's intention when we use Dhamma and Vinaya in this way: for facilitating, supporting, and empowering the liberation of women, of men, and of all living beings.

I feel it is important, when coming together as Sangha, to remember and reflect upon this most basic and essential truth, and to affirmatively commit and dedicate our thoughts, words, and deeds to remaining true to this purpose. If we stray from this, we stray from the Path.

## Ordination Options

In studying Buddhist history, Indian society appears to have been highly patriarchal in the Buddha's time. Nonetheless, although according to Brahmanical social conventions the Blessed One might have easily had the option to ordain his female disciples as white-robed laywomen devotees with eight precepts or as perpetual novices who lived and practiced by

gaining merit in service to the Bhikkhu Sangha, he did not choose to do so. Nor did he, in the Theravadan texts, ever recommend that women seek rebirth as men.<sup>5, 6</sup> Although the Pali texts do record instances of men being reborn as women and subsequently gaining enlightenment (one example being Mahapajapati Gotami), stories of women being reborn as men and gaining enlightenment do not appear. In fact, in both the Jataka tales and the Theri- and Thera-gathas of the Pali Canon, rebirth in a different gender seems to be quite rare and in several other non-Pali textual renditions, entirely absent. Tellingly, the Blessed One's direction to the aspiring women who had gone forth, as recorded in the Pali texts, was:

“Gotami, as the bhikkhus train themselves, so should you train yourselves.”<sup>7</sup> (*Culavagga*)

Historians have placed the foundation of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, according to the story of the ordination of Mahapajapati Gotami excerpted above, at six years following the Buddha's first teaching.<sup>8</sup> The formation of the first precept of the Vinaya, the explication of which is excerpted directly below, is generally said in Theravadan Buddhist teaching to be dated twenty years after the Enlightenment.

In the Pali Vinaya's *Sutta Vibhanga*, the very first precept's definition of a bhikkhuni (or a bhikkhu) lists the various constituent factors that make one a Buddhist monastic, beginning with the name, form, and livelihood of a mendicant, that is, “she is called a bhikkhuni because she is a *samana* who wears patchwork robes and lives dependent upon alms.” Then, amongst the early types of ordination listed, we find the *ehi bhikkhuni*<sup>9</sup>, the bhikkhunis ordained by the “come bhikkhuni” ordination, and the *tibi saranagamanehi bhikkhuni*, the bhikkhunis ordained through going for the three refuges. Next we find the *bhadra bhikkhunis* and *sara bhikkhunis*, those bhikkhunis who are “excellent” and who are “essential” (who have realized the essence or the heartwood). There are those still in “training,” the *sekha bhikkhunis*; and those “beyond training,” the *asekha bhikkhunis*. At the end, we find the final form of ordination for bhikkhunis in the Buddha's lifetime: the bhikkhunis who are such by having been “ordained by both Sanghas in unison through the unshakable and fully valid act of a motion with three pronouncements.”

The Buddha himself affirmed that his Sasana of four assemblies became complete with the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, as it has also been for the Buddhas of the past. As affirmed by thousands of Buddhist monks around the world each day reciting the *Ratana Sutta* to empower their *paritta* blessing chants and inspire their meditations: *Idam pi Sanghe ratanam panitam; etena saccena suvatthi botu*. “In the Sangha is this precious jewel; by this truth may there be well-being.”

The forms of ordination above are distinctive and important, showing that both the Buddha himself and the Sangha as guided by him, used flexibility in method under varying circumstances.<sup>10</sup> Ordained by whatever valid method, it is the *sara bhikkhus* and *sara bhikkhunis* that are these essential jewels above; this treasure, the unsurpassed field of merit for the world.

For more than twenty-five centuries the monastic Sangha that has been the keeper of this essence—the practitioners, the knowers, and the teachers of the pith, the heart of the Buddha’s teaching and enlightenment, Unborn and Undying. Although there are many elements, the gold is still radiant and discernable. The majority of the Western Buddhist monastics that I know, myself included, were in fact inspired to monastic life by the forth *devaduta* or “divine messenger,” the vision of an inspiring monastic.

With the spread of the lay women’s liberation movement in our modern world, even if there had never been bhikkhuni Arahantas, nor verses of the Therigatha in which women sing their songs of freedom, nor any greatest woman disciples of the Buddha, nor affirmations from the Buddha himself of his Sasana being complete with bhikkhunis, still women of today might aspire to ordain, as in other faith traditions. But Buddhism, from its beginnings, is not such a bereft tradition<sup>11</sup>.

It has been said that women do not become religious leaders in a vacuum, but rather in a cultural context that supports their achievement. Truly, as the Buddha taught, nothing happens without cause and supportive conditions. The present existence of great bhikkhunis and great bhikkhus, north and south, east and west, together with reflection upon the great enlightened ones of old, may be just such a context for bringing forth great faith, great resolve and enlightened Sangha members. The supreme and most fertile ground for cultivation has not yet disappeared from this earth, but remains in our human hearts and bodies—both men and women—awaiting good conditions, watering, nourishing, and cultivation.

### **Sanghanussati: Receiving the Lineage**

In my time training with the Bhikkhuni Sangha in South Korea, as part of our thrice-daily chanting, we recollected and chanted our homage to the “Ten Great Disciples”<sup>12</sup> as *Sanghanussati*, the meditation known as “Recollection of the Sangha.” In fact the Buddha himself recommended that his monastics practice such Sanghanussati daily. Research into the identity of the ten great disciples led me to discover that at one point in the Buddha’s teaching career, when questioned as to the efficacy of his Sasana, he affirmed having more than five hundred Arahant bhikkhu disciples and five hundred Arahant bhikkhuni disciples. The stories of 102 enlightened bhikkhunis may still be found in twenty places in the Pali Canon, in the *Bhikkhuni Samyutta*, in the *Apadana*, in the *Suttas* themselves, and in the collection known as the *Therigatha*.

Among these stories, as varied as the Buddha’s expedient means, we find mention of anywhere from two to eighty great disciples, of ten great bhikkhus and ten great bhikkhunis, and of the Ten Great Disciples—five of them bhikkhus: **Sariputta, Maha Moggallana, Maha Kassapa, Ananda, and Upali**; and five of them bhikkhunis: **Khema, Uppalavanna, Kisagotami, Dhammadinna, and Patacara**—all of them praised for their exemplary cultivation and realization. Of these ten, Sariputta Thera and Khema Theri were known for

their wisdom, Maha Moggalana Thera and Uppalavanna Theri for their supernormal powers, Maha Kassapa Thera and Kisagotami Theri for their asceticism, Ananda Thera and Dhammadinna Theri for their exposition of the Dhamma, and Upali Thera and Patacara Theri for their knowledge of the Vinaya. Arahanta Bhikkhuni Dhammadinna was one of the rare and special persons of whom the Buddha himself spoke of her words and teaching as *buddhavacana*; a “Buddha’s words” or “speech of an Awakened One,” equating her words with his own. The venerable ones Mahapajapati Gotami, Patacara and Anoja Theri are also recorded as each having followings of five hundred (the language of the suttas for a very large number) of their own enlightened disciples.

The Buddha especially recommended two bhikkhunis as examples for all to look to and emulate, the standard by which a bhikkhuni may evaluate herself, the venerable ones Khema and Uppalavanna. In the early days, Ayyas Khema and Uppalavanna shared the leadership of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. While Khema was known for her great wisdom, Uppalavanna was known for her psychic powers. Uppalavanna is also remembered, along with Mahapajapati, Patacara, Dhammadinna, and Thullananda, as one of the first bhikkhunis authorized by the Buddha to confer bhikkhuni ordination. The good word of the revered Khema was that she was “wise, competent, intelligent, learned, a splendid speaker and ingenious,” causing even the great King Pasenadi of Kosala to come to meet her and pay his homage to her.

To end all doubts<sup>13</sup>, finally we find in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* that near the end of his life, the Buddha revealed that from the very beginning of his Dispensation, he had determined to not pass into Parinibbana until his Four-fold Sangha had been fully established— with not only bhikkhus, lay men and lay women, but with bhikkhunis as well:

“And the Blessed Lord has said: ‘I will not take Final Nibbana until I have bhikkhunis, female disciples, who are accomplished, trained, skilled, learned, knowers of the Dhamma, correctly trained and walking the Path of the Dhamma, who will pass on what they have gained from their teacher, teach it, declare it, establish it, expound it, analyze it, make it clear; till they shall be able by means of the Dhamma to refute false teachings that have arisen, and teach the Dhamma of wondrous effect.’” (*Digha Nikaya 16*)

And in case any doubt remained, in *Mahavagga III*, amongst the allowances for a bhikkhu leaving his vassa boundary for up to seven days, we learn that the ordination is so important and urgent that, for the sake of ordaining a woman as a sikkhamana or even as a samaneri (novice), if no bhikkhuni is available to conduct the ordination a bhikkhu not only may but *should*, as his affirmative duty, leave his site of retreat to do so.<sup>14</sup> This required him to travel by foot through sodden territory during the monsoons. Contrary to the words of some popular modern teachers who say that being ordained (or not) for women just does not matter,<sup>15</sup> this passage speaks enormously to the great respect and great importance given to each level of ordination (being given as soon as possible!) and the living of the monastic life as the Buddha taught it, in its completeness and purity, in both essence and convention, for the complete ending of all suffering.

It is said that virtuous thoughts arise rarely and transitorily in the world, like a flash of lightning in the dark of night. How important the above Vinaya injunction makes it seem to take full and expedient advantage of the precious opportunity we have in human birth and the still more precious aspiration to bodhi *when it arises*.

As the Buddha said to Sundari Theri:

**“Then welcome to you, good lady; you are not unwelcome.  
For in this way the tamed come, to pay homage to the Master’s feet.  
Free of desire, unfettered, their task done, without taints.”**     (*Therigatha*)

*The Recollection of the Ten Great Bhikkhuni Disciples is as follows:  
Khema of Great Wisdom; Uppalavanna, Foremost in Psychic Power;  
Kisagotami, Foremost in Asceticism; Dhammadina, Foremost in Exposition of the Dhamma;  
Patacara, Preserver of the Vinaya; Bhadda Kundalakesu, First in Speed to Gain Nibbana;  
Sundari Nanda, Foremost in Meditation; Sakula, Foremost of those with the Divine Eye;  
Bhadda Kapilani, Foremost in Recollecting Past Lives; and Sona, Foremost in Valiant Effort.*

## **The Real Living of the Holy Life: Essence and Convention**

### **In Comparison<sup>16</sup>**

I have spent extended periods of time living as a monastic in South Korea, where there is a thriving, strong, and long-established Bhikkhuni Sangha, as well as with Thai Buddhists (both in America and Thailand) where the tradition of full ordination for women has lapsed (and is often mistakenly said to have never existed<sup>17</sup>). In Thai Buddhism it has been replaced by an organic tradition of *maechees*, white-robed female ascetics with the eight precepts, and a very few bhikkhunis, mostly ordained abroad in recent years. Here I would like to compare my experience of these two traditions from the internal perspective of a woman living the holy life, giving consideration to the primary emphasis of the Buddhasasana—that is, to the conditions institutionalized within these Sanghas and whether they engender and perpetuate suffering and the unwholesome or perpetuate values spoken of as wholesome and liberating.

When I was preparing to leave India in robes nearly two decades ago, tickets were offered to either Bangkok or Hong Kong. I was warned that the situation for women in Thailand was difficult, and although the men were well-supported in monastic life (there were many truly inspiring masters) the women were not ordained and had no structural support for the holy life within the Sangha. I was told that I would have to fend for myself and “good luck!”

because I would need to support myself, both morally and materially. This was the rumor and the reputation—often experienced, well-known.

On the other hand, I heard that in Northern Asia, the ancient Bhikkhuni Sangha still flourished and that there were opportunities for training and education, for ordination, and for meditation and teaching. The situation in South Korea was then praised as most gender-equal and supportive, with full training and a strong and ancient mountain-forest meditation tradition. A traveler I met spoke of seeing a great bhikkhuni lecturing in the capital on the high seat at the main temple of the country's prevalent monastic order at Jogye-sa in Seoul. (Only a decade later did I learn that she was the very same woman who was to become my bhikkhuni teacher.) Considering rumors of the high casualty and disappointment rate for ordained but unsupported Western women in Buddhist traditions without Sanghas for women, and the call for research into the great and still-existing bhikkhuni lineages, I chose to go north.

## **Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha**

I would like to emphasize that my northbound decision at that time had nothing to do with sectarian preference for any particular Dhamma lineage or tradition. Rather it was guided by practicality and fueled by a typically strong Western Buddhist faith in meditation, coupled with a strong energetic determination to seek out and realize the heart of the way.

In South Korea, my inspiration was furthered to find ancient mountain-forest monasteries dedicated to meditation, Dhamma study, and monastic life training with strong, steady, clear-eyed bhikkhunis, well-educated, trained, supported, and deeply dedicated to realization of the Buddha's Path. There was a sense of it being a very old tradition carried on from antiquity, with its heart still very much alive in the modern world, particularly in the meditation traditions. Many women entered the Sangha in their twenties, inspired to come into and be purified and dyed by the waters of the monastic community for life. Wise women, elder teachers in the Sangha, were revered and treasured. There was a deep love and appreciation for the treasure of monastic community, and for the great potential and preciousness of the rightly motivated beginning aspirant's mind. There was full support, in friendship and encouragement as well as in education and requisites. It was naturally assumed that after preparatory training, I and my fellow samaneris would go for full bhikkhuni ordination. After all, that is just the way of the Sangha.

Protected by the greatness of the vehicle created by my elder bhikkhuni teacher, her peers, and the Bhikkhuni Sangha itself, I rarely felt a tinge of the shadow of Confucian ethics towards women in Chinese-influenced society (as in a story I was told: a husband might walk first down a path, her son second, the ox third, and then the woman behind). Rarely, I came across bhikkhunis whose main practice was repentance for the sin of their womanly birth and who dedicated the merit of their practice for the sake of being reborn as a man, finding

ostensible justification for such attitudes in a very small number of the many Mahayana texts on either the Bodhisattva Path (one in which, contrary to other texts, a being must incarnate as male as a prerequisite for bodhisattva-hood) or the Pure Land (which recommend aspiring towards reincarnation in the woman-free Western paradise of Sukhavati). Occasionally, I encountered a sense of the bhikkhunis being more humble or having to try harder to earn the same respect afforded bhikkhus. Sometimes the sense of less popularity, glamour, or support (particularly for those who spent a great deal of retreat time in meditation monasteries) came together with a sense of relief and gladness (even pride!) in simplicity and renunciation, as it was well-known that great support and great fame can potentially be a corrupting influence or a downfall, destroying the purity of one's aspirations to relinquish all worldly snares for the freedom of bodhi.

### **Reclamation of an Ancient Tradition**

When I began to learn more of the Korean and Sino-Korean languages and history, it was my great surprise to learn that my bhikkhuni teacher's 1,600-year-old Shilla Dynasty period monastery had, until fifty years prior, been all but destroyed during the Korean War. This was the case for the majority of monasteries; the ones turned over to the Bhikkhuni Sangha had often been the most devastated. The trees of our beautiful forest, cut down during the Korean War to prevent communists from hiding, had almost all been replanted. As there is a deep symbolic connection in the culture of the mountain-forest meditation traditions between the individual trees of the forest with the individual members of the Sangha and the monastic community, seeing the regrowth of the forest was an awakening to the reality of the situation and to the possibilities that exist. Although the fully ordained Sangha is now more than twenty-thousand strong (almost half bhikkhunis), I learned that less than 200 bhikkhunis and less than 100 bhikkhus had survived Japanese occupation and the following Korean War. The great history, great sense of tradition, faith, energy, and courage that sprang forth from the ashes and blossomed again, has all been reclaimed from charred and broken ruins with the incredible dedication, energy, and vision of a small number of monastics, male and female<sup>18</sup>. For this I deeply appreciate and bow down to my Korean Bhikkhuni *Eun-sa*, Myeong Seong Sunim, her peers, and her own ordination masters, especially the Venerable Bhikkhu Ja Un Sunim who traveled abroad to reordain in Sri Lanka in order to bring back and reestablish the ordination lineage as National Upajjhaya (*Śeṭṭhi Upadhyaya*). I understand there will be more in other papers herein on this and related subjects.

### **Coming Together: The Bridge**

After novice ordination, at my Korean bhikkhuni teacher's direction, I traveled to the Lotus Lantern International Buddhist Center in Seoul, then led by the late Won Myeong Sunim



(Bhikkhu Asanga) and Bhiksuni Mujin Sunim. There my sense of appreciation for various traditions of Buddhism was reawakened and reaffirmed. An appreciation developed for the monastics of the Sri Lankan and Thai forest traditions. I was to encounter the monastics of this latter tradition upon my subsequent return to America, where the Abhayagiri Forest Monastery of northern California was just being founded. With a moral idealism common to Americans, I was greatly heartened to find Monastic Sangha practicing the Vinaya as well as the Dhamma fully. This tradition seemed to be very supportive and affirming of such integrity.

These were the beginnings of the bridging of a gap, which I was warmly welcomed to cross, in the spirit of Sangha and harmonious openness and exchange. Such attitudes and behaviors were also encouraged by the multi-traditional Western Buddhist Monastic Conferences,<sup>19</sup> then held yearly in California. I was further encouraged by my late Bhikkhu Upajjhaya, Bhante Havanpola Ratanasara Sangha Nayaka Thero, who, for the two weeks preceding our full ordination, enjoined us regularly from his sickbed “to look upon one another as one global Sangha, live in harmony, and always return to the heart of the Buddha’s teaching, for the welfare of gods and humans.” In this spirit, meeting “the Ajahns” through our local area’s multi-denominational Buddhist Council of Northern California, I also developed a close relationship with our neighboring ethnic Thai Buddhist monastic community. After finishing a three-year retreat, this led to my accepting their friendly invitation to travel to Thailand to visit the famed meditation monasteries and participate in a *tudong*<sup>20</sup> walk through the northeast, a longtime dream and life-changing experience.

## **Thai Sangha and Maechees**

In my contact with the Thai Bhikkhu Sangha, I found many commonalities with the Koreans, in both the meditation and educational traditions. Thai Buddhism has many strong and beautiful aspects, which I greatly appreciate and have benefited tremendously from. The situation for women in monastic life, however, was radically (and for me shockingly) different than in Korea. As this is well-known and will be presented in detail in other papers, I will summarize my observations and considerations and focus on key points.

Although history would indicate that there have been both bhikkhunis and samaneris in Thailand in the past, from the time of the Ashokan missions of Arahantas Sona and Uttara to Suvannabhumi, up until the Ayutthaya Period, and even into the twentieth century in the north, there is little or no public knowledge nor a sense of connectedness to this distant and more recent past.<sup>21</sup> For the sake of harmony, I have been told that even the Chinese Mahayana traditions in Thailand voluntarily gave up fully ordaining women after a law was passed making it illegal for the Theravadans to do so in 1928 (2472 BE).<sup>22</sup> Despite the inter-Sangha connections with Sri Lanka between the Lanka-vamsa and Siam-Nikaya, there is no popular Thai history of the great and long-lasting Sri Lankan Bhikkhuni Sangha taught to

school children in their classes on Buddhism.<sup>23</sup> Rather, students have been educated to believe that “the Bhikkhuni Sangha died out in India 500 years after its inception, just as the Lord Buddha predicted it would” without ever reaching beyond the bounds of India.<sup>24</sup> According to the *Manu-dharma Shastra*, tenants of the type of Brahmanism *that is still* deeply ingrained in Thai culture, birth as a woman may be seen as lowly, inferior, and defiled in many ways. Merit making for women is encouraged, so that a woman might be reborn as a man to be able then to leave home and practice the holy life in the Monastic Sangha. Sons are encouraged to ordain partly in order to gratuitously dedicate merit to their parents, particularly their mothers, as women may not ordain and be considered true fields of merit themselves.

Still, with great faith in Buddhism and a strong renunciate vein in the culture, many women undertake temporary monastic-style retreats, donning white and receiving the eight precepts, particularly on the Lunar Quarter Holy Days. Others leave home, cut off their hair, and don the long white robe of the *maechee*, or “mother recluse,” to live a simple and impoverished life of renunciation for some period of time, or even their entire lives. Because there is no women’s Sangha to train and support them, maechees generally must be self-supporting and often live making merit in service to and dependent upon the Bhikkhu Sangha. Still, less than half of bhikkhu temples have lodgings for such nuns, as nun’s co-lodging is somewhat mistrusted, and the number of independent *sammaks* or institutions for maechees is very few. The last records I have seen indicated more than 300,000 bhikkhus and samaneras and around 15,000 maechees.<sup>25</sup> The government offers no official recognition or support for maechees as monastics, as is offered for the Bhikkhu Sangha and male novices.<sup>26</sup> Although there are individual maechees who are honored and respected for their attainments in meditation, their teaching, and their saintly service, in general the social status of the maechee is ambiguous. It may even be considered lower than that of laypeople, since they give up the honor of their status in their lay roles in family, education, and work. The maechees have been publicly called the “white-shadow” by one popular Buddhist artist for their dark aspect in the culture. Again, since they are not ordained *Pbra* (Pali: “vara”) signifying “holiness” or “excellence,” they are not considered sanctified in the same way that bhikkhus are from the very moment of their ordination. With little or no training, education, or social and community support, either moral or material, their situation is far different than that of their northern bhikkhuni sisters.

## **Essence and Convention: Humility, Honor, and Tragedy**

Although modern Thai women are moving into all fields of a Westernized society with full education and career work, in Thai Buddhism nuns are taught to be humble and unassuming. They are not encouraged to raise, affirm, or assert themselves, but rather may even try to be invisible in order to not cause conflict and to have the precious opportunity of freedom to practice. When questioned, commonly recited Buddhist teachings such as the *Karaniya Metta Sutta* are cited to affirm that: “those who are skilled in goodness and wish to

break through to the path of peace should be humble and not conceited (obedient, gentle and humble), contented and easily satisfied, modest and with no greed for supporters.” Thus, for those women with deep sincerity in this practice of effacement, their spiritual path is righteous.

Although affirming the truth of the virtue of the teaching above, in the *Mangala Sutta* we find its balancing aspect: “*Puja ca pujaniyanam, etam mangalam uttamam,*” “honoring those worthy of honor” is taught by the Buddha as one of “the highest blessings.” This is practiced both within the Bhikkhu Sangha and within the Buddhist lay community. It is here that I feel grave concern. We are taught to have *hiri-ottapa*, “moral shame and dread,” for not respecting worthy ones, which in classical Buddhist teaching may be one of the causes of falling into hell or lower rebirths. This is the logic in Buddhist Thai society for taking sincere care in honoring the Bhikkhu Sangha. For those (we may not know whom) who have removed the triple hook of greed, hatred, and delusion and realized the Path and its fruits are considered to be most worthy of honor and “the Sangha, the most fertile ground for cultivation.” Some of the greatest of contemporary male Thai masters have both publicly and privately affirmed that there are women amongst their maechee and even *upasika* disciples and contemporaries who have realized saintly attainments on the Path and its fruits. Despite the fact that Thai society is more than ninety percent Buddhist, the law requires the king to be Buddhist, and Buddhist establishments are well-supported by both royalty and government, there is no social system for honoring and supporting such holy women.

*Sattam sabyanjanam kevala-paripunnam parisuddham brahma-cariyam pakasesi:*

The Buddha spoke of “essence and convention uniquely coming together in the completeness and purity of the holy life he expounded” as one of the hallmarks of his Sasana. However, in the example of the Thai maechees, these two factors of essence and convention may radically diverge. This divergence and imbalance is felt by many, both in Thailand and around the world, as stressful, concerning, problematic, and fraught with suffering (i.e., *dukkha*), for which many in the world feel sadness. It mars our sense of the nobleness of Buddhism. It does not seem to be for the happiness and welfare of many. Like bodhi trees that grow up through the cracks on busy city streets with buses whizzing overhead, in modern Thai society, such noble women remain at risk. They are the rare exceptions, largely unrecognized and unhonored. And the risk is not so much their own, as a loss of opportunity for the whole society. It is the loss of opportunity for those with social power who may be karmically involved with making decisions that perpetuate this situation. A field of merit is easily missed due to lack of attention if it is unmarked or mismarked, unseen, and denied viability and sustenance.<sup>27</sup> Due to the harshness of the conditions, these eminent women spoken of by the great Masters are rarely encouraged or able to grow fully, to noble stature, like the “great trees” praised by the Blessed Lord Buddha himself in his early Sangha,<sup>28</sup> and those in the contemporary Bhikkhuni Sangha in other parts of the world. It is a great loss for those who love merit-making. Again I am reminded of the Buddha’s words in the *Dhammapada*: “Whoever harms a harmless person, one pure and guiltless, upon that very fool the evil recoils like a fine dust thrown against the wind.” When such harmful

attitudes are socially institutionalized as “Buddhism,” it is my compassionate concern that this may not only be a great loss, but a great tragedy.

## **Bhikkhunis in Thailand**

There are a small number of brave women in Thailand ordained as bhikkhunis and samaneris. These monastics are both Thai and foreign-born, most ordained in the past five years either in Thailand or abroad (mostly in Sri Lanka). My experience with these bhikkhunis is of something that might be described as a “peace warrior.” They have strong faith in the Buddha’s teaching and the value of the ordained monastic life and strong determination to live it in the face of prevalent social winds to the contrary. Still, their *sila* may pervade, even against the wind. For this I must commend them. They are challenged regularly by both laity and monastic Sangha—mentally, verbally, and sometimes even physically. Many have stories of arrest, questioning, detention. They are determined to respond peaceably within their monastic vocation. I imagine their *paramis* becoming incredibly strong. Some of them have not been able to maintain their monastic life in bhikkhuni or samaneri form; but there are those, with the necessary mental skills and strength, who have.

In my own experience as a bhikkhuni in Thailand, I found that in the capital city of Bangkok there was far more media-produced controversy and more extremely polar views, both positive and negative, than anywhere else. As there regularly are in cities, there were politics. To my relief, in the countryside people seemed more simple and natural in their responses, displaying curiosity and respect for the monastic livelihood and the robe. Everywhere I went in the countryside, lay women and maechees expressed an interest in the possibility of going forth in the monastic life.<sup>29</sup> Although the male monks around me assured me that I could grant them at least novice ordination if I wished, and that robes, almsfood, and lodgings were available and offered, I performed no ordinations. At that time, it seemed irresponsible, both socially and practically, as well as according to Vinaya, to give ordination without being able to also commit to offering ongoing training and moral support. Now, having studied the Dhamma and Vinaya more deeply, with contemplation of several of the points written above,<sup>30</sup> my thoughts have changed and evolved.

Everywhere we went, prevalent social misunderstandings that have arisen in Thai society related to having only a one-sided Sangha were overturned. Many times, women would hand something to their menfolk to hand to me, believing that a woman might not even indirectly touch a bhikkhuni just as she might not with a bhikkhu. This was not understood as due to being the opposite gender (which it is), but enculturated as being due to inferior or unclean womanliness. As ideas proliferate, people then also connect this custom with ideas that women may not earn merit themselves, but that it must be done for them through their male relatives. It was heartening to see this misunderstanding righted, since in Thai culture it is men that a bhikkhuni should not have contact with. For most of the men and women I met, this was a new experience.<sup>31</sup> Again and again, this very simple matter proved a great

opening, unbinding, and relief; a long-held false view righted by such a simple gesture and explanation. For the majority of the women, it was the first time that they had ever been able to make the direct, hand-to-hand offering so praised by the Buddha. A whole world of dogma is crushed in a moment, a whole world of possibility opened. This is but one example of many such beautiful and freeing occurrences.

## Communion

Let us turn to a similar type of occurrence as above but in a different context—across the Mekong River, the East China Sea and into the wilderness, to the foot of the Leaping Tiger Mountain in a peaceful valley surrounded by mountain forest.

For many of my bhikkhuni and samaneri friends from the Tibetan and Theravadan traditions who visited me during my time at Un Mun Sa, my bhikkhuni teacher's monastery in South Korea, there was a deep and profound impression made while being there; a sense of inheriting our lineage or birthright within the noble birth of the monastic Sangha. It is a great place, and offers a pure and beautiful vision of what we are capable of as women in the Buddha's Sasana when we are well-affirmed and nurtured with supportive conditions. Some female monastic friends said that they could feel that "this" also belonged to them as part of the greater Buddhist Community, and seeing it for themselves was tremendously heartening: an inspiration and great encouragement. I cannot overstate how important, supportive, and beneficial it is to have and make such opportunities available. As Buddhist women and human beings, this is our birthright. The gate to the Deathless is open and, as the Awakened One's daughters and sons "born of his mouth" we should all be welcomed to receive our full inheritance in the Dhamma and Vinaya the Buddha has left us.

This spirit is not dead within the Bhikkhu Sangha. Both in Thailand and South Korea, I met many monastics who had, following the wandering pilgrim ways of the monks of old, traveled abroad to foreign lands to further their study and practice of the Buddha's Dhamma. Within the Bhikkhu Sangha, I observed a broad welcoming of such foreign inquirers and way-seekers, their sense of brotherhood and community transcending ethnic and cultural divisions. Sri Lankan monks in Korea study and meditate together, sharing the warm *ondol* floors side by side with their Korean brethren. Korean monks in Burma, Thailand, and Sri Lanka walk *pindapat* for alms barefoot sharing the path, together seeking out the heart of the Buddhist teaching in Southern Theravadan form. I have been deeply gladdened to see this spirit of Sangha alive in the hearts and lives of my monk brothers and elders. It is true, as the Buddha taught, that when inspired gladness and faith arises in the Sangha, it may easily tend toward concentration and energy, and that concentration towards insight. Insight then tends towards knowledge, vision and liberation, the freedom that is the hallmark of the Buddhist monk in this world.

Certainly the wish has been for the women in Buddhist monastic life to be able to do this as well, as they used to, and modern lay society is now wide open with possibility. But bridges

(or a common platform) must be built and opened within the Sangha itself. Commonality in type of ordination for Buddhist women would be a tremendously useful *upaya*; a skillful means in this regard. Its lack, and the concordant lack of common affirmative ground, is one of the main hindrances to the arising of the faith, delight, and joy in “the Sangha practicing the right way” that can so easily facilitate concentration, insight, and liberation—or not.

As the Venerable Sujato Bhikkhu has written in his paper “Full Acceptance”:

[For] the bhikkhus, *Upasampada* (the Higher Ordination) is crucial to our sense of group identity, and we cannot help but see [nuns with other forms of ordination as a separate and] distinct group. Moreover, only the bhikkhuni form can claim authority from the Vinaya itself. The ten-precept novice or samaneri status was clearly intended as a stepping-stone to full ordination, not as an alternative career choice. Only bhikkhunis can perform *Sanghakamma* (Community Acts), and only bhikkhunis benefit from the complete and thorough training embodied in the Vinaya. The Buddha wanted female renunciates to live as bhikkhunis... Etymologically, *upasampada* suggests to ‘come close, join together, enter into’. It is commonly used in context of ‘entering’ into an attainment of jhana or samadhi, where it refers to a coalescence or communion. It carries the nuance of finality or completion... In the context of ordination, it suggests ‘full acceptance’. One is no longer on the fringes, in a twilight zone. There is a deep solemnity to this feeling of being totally embraced within such a sanctified community... We should keep our focus on the central meaning of *upasampada*, and should support to the utmost any human being, regardless of race, status, or gender, who aspires to enter into such a communion.

For this reason, for years one of my mentors, the senior-most monastic in our Buddhist Council of Northern California (who has been a *kalyanamitta* to all of us of various Buddhist traditions), repeatedly suggested and encouraged me in the founding of a Bhikkhuni monastery. Western women in the Theravada in America had been encountering the same gap, with many bhikkhu monasteries and temples appearing: Thai, Sri Lankan, Burmese ... Western bhikkhus of the Thai forest tradition have also founded or inherited monasteries: both Metta Forest Monastery in Southern California and Abhayagiri Monastery in Northern California. The teaching of these monks has spread widely in California and in America and inspired many women and men to monastic life. For the men, the present monasteries may be their refuge and there is the open opportunity to travel to Asia and be ordained and train in the heartland of the traditions. On the other hand, for the inspired Buddhist women here in America, there have been the traditional meritorious opportunities of supporting the Bhikkhu Sangha and temporary retreat in close proximity, or life abroad. Trips to Asia, with the disparity in the monks’ and nuns’ situations there, have generally been far from inspiring or supportive to the Western woman’s mind and sensibilities. Rather these good women have regularly been disappointed, challenged, or even harmed in their faith, their experience sometimes even cutting off their budding confidence in Buddhism and the Sangha as an

expression of and path to enlightenment. Many male friends, good men with developed hearts of compassion, have also expressed great sympathetic pain seeing this situation.

## **Bridging the Gap**

Can the gap be bridged? There have been many considerations. Foremost among them: that all is led by the mind, ruled by the mind, created by the mind.

Reflecting on the Buddha's injunction in his final teaching to be a lamp or an island unto ourselves, and to take the Dhamma and Vinaya as our refuge, we may realize that, fortunately, the Dhamma and Vinaya are still known and accessible; in fact, they are widely available to us these days, as native English speakers, in our first language. Many thanks to all those who have made it so! And the Sangha still exists. With the ordination from and the example of both the Asian and Western members of the Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni Sanghas, north and south, the materials for the bridge are all present, only to be set down and the way walked across.

So, many women aspiring to the full living of the holy life have gone for the full ordination in three waves: the first wave traveling to Asia and being ordained by the Chinese, Vietnamese or Korean Sanghas; the second wave, quite a number of international multi-ethnic mixed-Sangha ordinations in America, India at Sarnath and Bodhgaya, Australia, and Thailand; and the third wave (for the Theravadans at least), full ordination by Theravadan bhikkhus and bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka.

From what I've heard, the third wave has not yet happened within the Tibetan Buddhist Communities, although the potential is certainly there. Perhaps this potential is even more ripe now than it was for the Theravadans, as there are already a good number of bhikshunis living and practicing in Tibetan tradition who have been fully ordained for more than twelve years. Four or more of them gathered together would seem to be fully within their Vinaya rights to harmoniously recite their Pratimoksa Karman of choice, be it Mulasarvastivada, Dharmagupta or other, thus determining their Vinaya lineage. To my thought, these bhikshunis who are the repositories of the treasures of Tibetan Buddhism seem the most obvious and ideal choice for conveying full dual bhikshuni ordination upon aspiring candidates together with Tibetan bhikshus. Other options also seem reasonable according to Dhamma-Vinaya.<sup>32</sup>

For us, when the number of bhikkhunis in Theravadan robes in North America was rumored to have reached four, an important number for Sangha, with the advice of an elder kalyanamitta I proposed the foundation of what came to be known as the North American Bhikkhuni Association to my bhikkhuni friends and colleagues. Five of us: Ayya Sudarshana from Sri Lanka, Ayya Tathaaloka from the United States, Ayya Sucinta from Germany, Ayya Sudhamma from the United States, and Ayya Gunasari from Burma mutually affirmed our

agreement in mid-2005/first month-2549 BE. A number of eminent mahatheras from both Sri Lankan and Thai traditions have blessed us by being senior advisors to our Association.

With the impetus of the number of women interested in monastic life and the strong encouragement of teachers and friends, both monastic and lay, several months later on the full moon of August 2005, Ayya Sucinta and myself came together in founding Dhammadharini Vihara, the first Theravadan bhikkhuni establishment in the Western United States. There has been great interest and appreciation for our doing so. The vihara has been a gathering place and a refuge for women since its inception, blessed by the presence of a large number of the bhikkhunis in North America, Buddhist nuns of various kinds, many aspirants, and friends both male and female. Since the founding of the Vihara, the number of bhikkhunis in our Sangha in the USA has more than tripled<sup>33</sup> and this past year (2006), Ayya Sudarshana Bhikkhuni also opened the Samadhi Buddhist Meditation Center in Florida, becoming the first Sri Lankan bhikkhuni to found a vihara in the West.

### **Living with the Bhikkhuni Vinaya**

One of the main concerns amongst Westerners with bhikkhuni ordination in the Theravada has revolved around the differences between the bhikkhu and bhikkhuni discipline, particularly related to precepts for women that appear overly restrictive or gender-discriminatory. Thus other alternatives have been considered and developed, although none seems to have the same *arama* as the full bhikkhuni ordination, for reasons mentioned above. Despite the fact that the majority of Theravadan bhikkhus keep many precepts in an adapted manner, not dissimilar in some ways to their Mahayana brethren, the question has been raised of the worth in giving an ordination if all of the precepts may not be kept in their entirety. The majority of bhikkhunis that I know ordained either in Sri Lanka or North Asia keep the monastic discipline in very similar ways to their bhikkhu peers, that is, attempting to adapt appropriately to their time, culture, and circumstances.

For myself and around one quarter of the Western women who have been fully ordained, there has been inspiration both from the Dhamma and Vinaya texts and a wish to fully live the training recommended therein, as well as from the example of the livelihood of the South Asian, Southeast Asian, and Western forest Sanghas. The wish to fully develop honesty and personal integrity has also contributed. Reflecting upon the qualities of the Dhamma that we chant daily: *Sanditthiko akaliko ehipassiko, opanayiko paccattam veditabbo vinnuhi* —“To be seen here and now, timeless, inviting all to come and see, leading inward, to be seen by the wise for themselves”— we have undertaken the experiment the Buddha welcomes and invites us to, putting the living of the Doctrine *and Discipline* to the test. The way the Thus Come One encouraged, the only way to truly see and know the actuality of something is to experience it for ourselves.



This has not been easy, but in actuality is not nearly as difficult as the mountain that can be built up in the inexperienced proliferating and projecting mind. There is relief and an unburdening in the relinquishing. Many new and wholesome aspects of the training have been revealed. So far, it seems to be a tremendously worthy and valuable endeavor. Time, with further practice, will be the proof.

## Looking Upon One Another With Kindly Eyes The Incredible Value of Sangha

*The Buddha:*

“I hope, Anuruddha, that you are all living in concord, with mutual appreciation...”

*Anuruddha:*

“It is a gain for me, it is a great gain for me that I am living with such companions in the holy life.’ I maintain bodily acts of loving-kindness towards these venerable ones both openly and privately; I maintain verbal acts of loving-kindness both openly and privately; I maintain mental acts of loving-kindness towards them both openly and privately... We are different in body, venerable sir, but one in mind.”

*(Upakkilesa Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya 128)*

## Relations with the Bhikkhu Sangha

Since the founding of our Dhammadharini Vihara, we have received great moral and symbolic support from our local Theravadan Bhikkhu Sangha. The name of our vihara, our bodhi tree, and the Buddha image in our meeting hall were all gifted to us by Phra Vitesdhammakavi (Ajahn Maha Prasert), who has mentored and ordained local monks both Western and Thai and been a pillar of support to not only the Thai Buddhist Community, but also the multi-ethnic and multi-traditional Buddhist Community in our area. The co-Abbots of the Abhayagiri Monastery, Ajahns Pasanno and Amaro, have also been a great inspiration and have provided moral support, gifting the Vihara with the Buddha image now sitting in our meditation hall, sharing in requisites and supplies, and blessing the first woman’s “going forth” into homelessness at our Vihara. Ajahn Thanissaro of Metta Forest Monastery has gifted us with invaluable advice in Dhamma and Vinaya. Many of the younger *dhammaduta* (foreign missionary) monks have expressed their hope in and appreciation for our ordination, remarking upon and commending our incredible good fortune.

Our local Sri Lankan Sangha led by Bhante Piyananda Sangha Nayaka Thera (my bhikkhu vice-upajjhaya) of Dhammavijaya in Los Angeles, Bhante Seelawimala of the American Buddhist Seminary, Bhante Amarabuddhi of Buddhi Vihara and Bhante Santa of the Dharmapala Institute have also been very warmly welcoming and supportive, offering invitations to lecture, participate in holidays such as Kathina and Vesaka, and come together cooperatively in mainstream Sangha events for the community.<sup>34</sup> Valuable advice and fellowship has been shared on so many occasions. We feel they are a refuge. Our local Burmese temple, Mettananda Vihara, has also been warmly and repeatedly welcoming. These virtuous Elder Brothers and Fathers of the Sangha have gladdened our hearts and continue to teach us by their example how wonderful it can be to have such good kalyanamittas.

### **Shared Sanghakammas**

During this time, both our Bhikkhu Sangha and our bhikkhunis have all had much to learn about shared Sanghakamma Acts, both those that are regular, such as the fortnightly Ovada Request, those that are yearly, such as the Pavarana, and those that may be more or less frequent such as bhikkhuni upasampada ordinations. Having passed through several years of research on these subjects, although it has sometimes seemed like restarting a vehicle that has not been driven for a while, we have been able to find all the information necessary to go ahead. When questions have arisen, we have been very fortunate to have the blessing of such excellent and well-educated monastics in our American Sangha such as Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi, Ajahn Thanissaro Bhikkhu, and others to consult with regarding the Pali texts of the Tipitaka. Their merits are truly abundant and a blessing to us.

The question of sikkhamana ordination has been a topic of investigation in the past year and, although initially it was thought to be outdated or unnecessary, Canonical research has seemed to show otherwise. In this process, our first generation of Theravadan Bhikkhuni Sangha in America is also gaining a good education through actively researching and studying the texts themselves as well as hearing and reading the commentary and explications of such knowledgeable elders. I can see the benefits that those bhikkhunis who have a strong mind for such study of the Dhamma and Vinaya bring to us and will bring to the next generation. It seems that this will be a great boon both for our Bhikkhuni Sangha here in the next decades and for our society.

### **Bhikkhunis, Becoming Sangha to One Another: In America and Internationally**

Being a fledgling Sangha and living within the mutually-appreciative melting pot mentality of America, although all but three of us bhikkhunis have been ordained in different places, by different teachers, and under different circumstances, we generally enjoy a sense of

commonality, sisterhood, and community. This reminds me of one aspect of what the early Sangha may have been like before being divided by time and space, culture and language, and political and sectarian movements. I feel glad and rejoice in this small measure of peace and harmony and hope that it may develop and last. It is best if we use our strengths to elevate and support one another, not waste them in contending over trifles, for our Original Teacher repeatedly advised us to develop those qualities “that create love and respect and conduce to helpfulness, to non-dispute, to concord and to unity.”

It has been a treasure to both visit and correspond with Bhikkhuni Sangha internationally as well, in Thailand and Germany for myself particularly; and to hear from Bhikkhuni Sisters of their ordinations and of their inspiring experiences with the much larger Bhikkhuni Sangha in Sri Lanka. All of us would like to offer our congratulations to the April 2007/2550 opening of the new Bhikkhuni Training Monastery in Germany, Anenja Vihara. I remember gladly reading Ayya Sobhana’s writing from Sri Lanka of the recitation of the Bhikkhuni Patimokkha in Dambulla with more than one hundred bhikkhuni participants, and of a great bhikkhuni meditation teacher dedicated to helping all her students realize *sotāpatti*, entry into the Noble Path. News of the inception of the Buddha Vision Bhikkhuni Training Center in India, and the beginnings of a hoped-for Bhikkhuni Sangha at Santi Forest Monastery and Sanghamittarama in Australia have also been a joy to read and hear of.

### **Response from the Buddhist Lay Community**

Not only have these developments been gladdening and inspiring to the members of our Bhikkhuni Sangha in North America, but to the Western Theravadan Buddhist lay community as well. In the Asian-American lay community too, particularly amongst the second-generation youth who sometimes see Buddhism as old-fashioned and irrelevant, the sight of women in the monastic robe (particularly a Western woman!) is seen as a welcome and much needed modernization. Their interest in Buddhism is often instantly and immediately renewed. Although initially a good number of adult and elder Asian Buddhist community members were supportive, others were suspicious or doubtful. Over even such a short time as a few years, with frequent contact and a perception of the many benefits that we bring to the community (particularly for the women, children, and non-Asian partners), the number of those who are supportive has continuously and tremendously increased.

For many Western friends, their first contact with Buddhism in the West has been in a lay context, through Dhamma books, meditation groups and classes, and images in the media, whether movies or television. Their Buddhism is idealistic, pragmatic, and egalitarian. The availability of practical means to realize ideals of peace and freedom reaffirms rather than disappoints these ideals. With concepts of gender equality and non-discrimination equated with enlightenment, it seems only natural that the Buddha would have had enlightened male and female disciples and that the Buddhist Sangha would be fair, just, and free of discriminations fraught with suffering. Contact with excellent Asian monastic teachers and with the Western nonastics of the Thai forest tradition has not lessened this idealism.

However, in contact with the monastic Sangha (and particularly in the Theravadan communities), the contemporary (non)ordination situation for women, with all of its human rights issues, has been seen by many as a stain on an otherwise bright picture. In fact, for Westerners and Westernized Asians, this picture seems to remarkably fit the situation that prompted the Buddha's formation of each and every precept. In the Vinaya's *Sutta Vibhanga*, the Buddha himself speaks out strongly and repeatedly against actions or practices of monastics or groups of monastics that are harmful to the development of the trust and confidence of the lay community in the Monastic Sangha, or to that trust within the monastic Community itself, saying:

“It is not, foolish man, for the benefit of unbelievers, nor for the increase in the number of believers, but, foolish man, it is to the detriment of both unbelievers and believers, and it causes wavering in some.”

American pragmatism, combined with Buddhist teaching, says: if there is a problem, we should find the cause and fix it. Considering the Four Noble Truths as a fundamental teaching, leading Buddhist monastics (seen as enlightened beings) are imagined to have excellent motivation and capability for such “suffering-solving.” This is in fact true, when the mind is freed from entanglements. We naturally want to end any suffering as soon as possible. For those whom ordination for women in Buddhism has been a concern, the appearance of bhikkhunis practicing and teaching in America has been very well received.

### **Response from the Non-Buddhist Community in America**

Our fully ordained female monastics have also been amazingly well met by the non-Buddhists in our community. Many people have expressed that seeing women fully ordained in Buddhism affirms their faith that the Buddha was truly and rightly enlightened (just the opposite of the detrimental effects caused by non-ordination in the quotation above). It has truly been a case of: “the arousing of faith in the faithless and the increase of the faithful” as well as good for “the establishment of the true Dhamma and the fostering of the Discipline.” We have been welcomed as a presence of peace. The media and local leaders have been very affirmative. This is the good reputation of the Buddha, his Teaching, and his Monastics. In interfaith dialogue and events, as well, our bhikkhunis' presence has particularly been sought after as a bright example of excellence and rightness in religious life. There is profound appreciation for the greatness of Buddhism and its history in this regard: from the outset having a fully ordained Women's Monastic Community, its great numbers of enlightened women disciples praised and affirmed by the founder himself, and the long-lasting tradition and integrity of its Sangha.

## Sangha Harmony and Preservation of the Dhamma-Vinaya

In my view, one of the reasons for the strength and long-lasting viability of the Sangha is similar to that of the Dhamma: the Dhamma has its key points, its heartwood which is timeless; but also practically infinite possible variations or permutations, which accord with time, place, and person. The Sangha as well, as *dhhammadhara*, has adapted continuously to various climates both physical and mental, while striving to remain true to its unchanging ground and essential means for liberation.

The Buddha himself is recorded in the suttas of the Fundamental Vehicle as saying that minor differences in Vinaya<sup>35</sup> are not of great concern, rather that commonality and trueness to the heart essence of the Dhamma is of utmost importance. He affirms his middle way position that there may be both adaptation in the minor aspects of monastic discipline and elements of monastic livelihood and that we should keep true to our ancestral grounds, our ancestral ways.

“A dispute about livelihood or about the Patimokkha would be trifling, Ananda. But should a dispute arise in the Sangha about the Path or Way, such a dispute would be for the harm and unhappiness of many, for the loss, harm and suffering of heavenly and human beings.” (*Samagama Sutta*)

Respected modern Dhamma teachers and Vinaya scholars and commentators of great repute such as the Venerable Thanissaro Bhikkhu, author of *The Buddhist Monastic Code I and II*, have noted the tendency towards the opposite, to “be very intolerant of different interpretations of the Vinaya and get into heated arguments over minor issues having very little to do with the training of the mind.” Throughout his BMC books, now widely referred to by English-speaking Buddhist monastics, he repeatedly makes the point “that any interpretation based on a sound reading of the Canon should be respected.” He recommends that:

A bhikkhu [or bhikkhuni] should also show respect for the differing interpretations of other Communities where they too do not conflict with the Canon, so as to avoid the pitfalls of pride and narrow-mindedness. This is especially true now that monasteries of different nationalities are taking root in close proximity to one another in the West. In the past, Thais, Burmese, and Sri Lankans could look down on one another's traditions without danger of causing friction, as they lived in separate countries and spoke different languages. Now, however, we have become neighbors and have begun to speak common languages, so it is best that we take to heart the writings of the Chinese pilgrims who visited India centuries ago. They reported that . . . bhikkhus belonging to different schools could be found living together in the same monastery, practicing and conducting communal business in peace and harmony. Theirs is a worthy example. We should not let our minor differences become stumbling blocks on our Way.

In my readings from the *Essence of Refined Gold*, I have also discovered that His Holiness the Fourth Dalai Lama defined the *Lamrim* as “the essence of all the teachings of the Buddha, uniting both the method and wisdom aspects of the Path,” both essential and conventional dhammas. Although I am hardly in any position to comment on the *Lamrim*—in reading His Holiness’s *Refined Gold* text, in the *Four Excellent Qualities* section, several key points appear which would seem to offer directly applicable advice to our current situation: (1) seeing the non-contradictory nature of the Buddha’s various teachings, (2) seeing these teachings as personal advice to be related to our present situation in order to overcome the negative tendencies of the mind, (3) the intention to easily realize and manifest the intent of the Buddha rather than being overwhelmed by complexity, and (4) to be protected by spontaneously arresting the great negativity of “abandoning a lineage of the Dharma” which is likened to the “cliff of the greatest evil.”

According to the Buddha himself, as spoken in the *Bahuvedaniya Sutta* of the Pali texts:

“When the Dhamma has thus been shown by me in [different] presentations, it may be expected of those who will not concede, allow, and accept what is well stated and well spoken by others that they will take to quarreling, brawling, and disputing, stabbing each other with verbal daggers.

“However, it may be expected of those who concede, allow, and accept what is well stated and well spoken by others that they will live in concord, with mutual appreciation, without disputing, blending like milk and water, viewing each other with kindly eyes.”

Evam.

<sup>1</sup> According to eminent scholars such as Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi and Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, “A bhikkhuni is essential” is a mis-translation here which should read “the essential bhikkhuni” or “the bhikkhuni who has realized the heartwood or the essence”—that is the bhikkhuni Arahantas. Despite the mistranslation, this phrase, hand-copied and carried with me in my monastic bag for years, served as a great inspiration.

<sup>2</sup> The analogy or “simile of the heartwood” is one of the main teachings in the Theravadan texts in which the Buddha relates his advice to the Monastic Sangha on the rightful aims and rightful goal of the monastic life. We may see for ourselves where attachment to the lesser gains and the hindrances related here may have bound or hindered the issue of women’s ordination. In the first simile, monastics with sincere intentions are enjoined not to get caught up in the “(1) leaves and branches, (2) outer bark, (3) inner bark and (4) sapwood of the holy life” which are equated with “growing negligent and living in suffering because of lauding oneself and disparaging others on account of (1) one’s own gain, honor and renown in the monastic life; (2) one’s own attainment of virtue (precepts, *sila*); (3) one’s own attainment of concentration (*samadhi*, meditative attainments); or (4) knowledge and vision (*nyanadasana*). The heartwood by which one is freed from suffering is here spoken of as “perpetual” or “unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of the holy life, its heartwood, and its end” (MN.29). In the second analogy, attachment to the former gains are revealed as causing “hanging back” or “slackening” within the Sangha (MN.30). Other similes are related to blindly clinging to wrong identity views that are empty of self and of the goal as a palm tree is empty of heartwood (MN.35), and attachment to the five lower fetters of a mind obsessed and thus enslaved by: (1) doubt, (2) adherence to rules and observances, (3) sensual desire, (4) ill will, and (5) personality views which are related to the various above-mentioned tree parts other than the heartwood. Non-attachment to these hindrances; that is, “cutting through,” them leads to “confidence, steadiness and resolution” (MN 64). Again, I believe it would do well to look into where these hindrances may have acted as such in the issue of women’s full ordination, and then by clearly cutting through them, attain confidence and resolution. In the first and final “Similes of the Heartwood” in the *Majjhima Nikaya*, the Elder Maha Kaccana, praised by the Buddha himself as a master of doctrinal exposition, enjoins inquirers not to listen to and rely upon he himself, but rather to rely upon “he who is vision, he who is knowledge, he who is the Dhamma, he who is the Holy One, he who is the sayer, the proclaimer, the elucidator of the meaning, the giver of the Deathless, the lord of the Dhamma, the Tathāgata”; that is, the Buddha himself who is the Heartwood (MN 18 & MN 133). Thus there is an attempt here in the early sections of this paper to rely upon the consistent words and deeds of the Buddha himself to represent his expressed intention related to the Bhikkhuni Sangha he founded.

<sup>3</sup> In MN 140, the Dhatuvibhanga Sutta or “Exposition of the Elements,” “refining gold” is related to the pure, bright and malleable equanimity of mind that arises with the abandoning and cessation of clinging to what is coarse and lower, bringing about the ability to achieve one’s higher goal and purpose.

<sup>4</sup> Here, “mining for gold” or “seeking hidden treasure” is the phrase expressed by the teacher. In MN 52, this is associated with a person in a burning house seeking and (through eradicating the five lower fetters and destruction of the taints) coming upon a “door to the Deathless.”

<sup>5</sup> Women are currently regularly encouraged to aspire to rebirth as men in Southeast Asian Theravadan Buddhist countries. Although the Buddha makes no such statement in the Pali text Suttas that I have ever seen, Commentarial literature which illustrates women’s birth as karmically inferior, combined with strong belief in the merit of the full ordination together with the current non-ordination status of women, perpetuates this trend. See the end of footnote 15 for an example.

<sup>6</sup> Regarding the subject of rebirth, other Commentarial sources would tend towards the drawing of a highly different conclusion on this subject. For example, in the Commentary to MN 141 as paraphrased by Hellmuth Hecker in *Great Disciples of the Buddha* (p 19): “...Moggallana, when training pupils in the same way [as Sariputta] did not give up concern for them until they had attained arahantship. This was because he felt, as was said by the

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Master, ‘As even a little excrement is of evil smell, I do not praise even the shortest spell of existence, be it no longer than the snap of the fingers.’” And in the Questions of King Milenda (Pali-Miln 142), Ven. Nagasena says: “For it has been said, O King, by the Blessed One: ‘Just, O Bhikkhus, as a very small quantity of excrement is of evil smell, so do I find no beauty in the very smallest degree of future life, not even for the time of the snapping of the fingers.’”

<sup>7</sup> Here, Mahapajapati Gotami has asked the Buddha how the bhikkhunis should train themselves with regard to the precepts held in common with the Bhikkhu Sangha, to which this reply is given.

<sup>8</sup> There are other time-frame theories for the foundation of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, including one year after the first teaching and twenty years after. This is a subject worthy of further research and investigation, as there are so many discrepancies and inconsistencies in the “eight garudhammas” foundation story as to make it utterly untenable. Logical dating lies at the crux of this matter, particularly but not exclusively related to Vibangha histories of the formation and development of each of the garudhamma-like pacittiya precepts which lead to the conclusion that the story in its present form must be at least largely either a later construction or reconstruction. This leaves many open questions, but the certain knowledge that, at present if Mahapajapati Gotami was actually ordained with eight dhammas of respect, we do not currently know what they originally were. When and how the related bhikkhuni pacittiyas which developed over time came to be backdated to the foundation of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, we also do not know; we only know with certainty that this has happened. When it came to be required that the eight garudhammas should be the subject of the Bhikkhuni Ovada or fortnightly exhortation is also not clear, as the majority of Ovada examples that appear in the Canon do not mention them, but include other Dhamma subject matter.

<sup>9</sup> Looking at the Pali texts alone, we find reference to the *ehi bhikkhuni* ordination in both the Vinaya and the Therigatha. According to Ven. Analayo, the ehi bhikkhuni ordination is also recorded in four of the other schools’ Vinaya’s texts as well as linked to seven specific bhikkhunis in the *Avadanasataka* as recorded in Chinese. Skilling has also noted the Avadana references to ehi bhikkhuni ordination. Bhante Sujato claims to have found even further references to bhikkhunis ordained by this method. The use of both the ehi bhikkhuni ordination and the ordination by going for the three refuges would tend to place the foundations of the Bhikkhuni Sasana in the earlier period of the development of the Sangha.

<sup>10</sup> The *ehi* ordination may be significant in that here we find the Buddha himself proactively calling forth quickly enlightened women to lead the Holy Life in his Sangha, without their even asking. We know that early on in the Bhikkhuni Sasana he instructed his Bhikkhu Sangha to give ordination and training to the majority of the women seeking it, and then compassionately adjusted and readjusted the ordination methods, according to the bhikkhunis’ and candidates’ own wishes and sensibilities.

<sup>11</sup> Sitting the bhikkhus on his left hand and the bhikkhunis on his right, the Buddha recommended that all might rightly look to those foremost disciples of his Community composed of two halves, the *Ubhato Sangha*, and reflect upon their memorable qualities as objects of meditation.

<sup>12</sup> The daily recollection of the “Ten Great Disciples” appears to, at present, be a northern Buddhist practice, a still living remnant of the livelihood and teachings of the Theravadan (Sthaviravadan or Hinayana) Schools that flowed northwards into Korea, China, Japan and Vietnam, and in earlier periods throughout much of South and Southeast Asia. The Pali texts contain reference to the Thirteen Foremost Bhikkhuni Disciples—the *Etadagga Bhikkhuni Savakas*. In Thailand we find a number of monuments, temple artworks and images dedicated to these thirteen bhikkhuni arahanta theris as well as the ten great laywomen (*upasika*) disciples enshrined. Locations include the Queen’s Chedi at Doi Inthanon in Chiang Mai, the Foremost Bhikkhuni Disciples wall paintings within the Temple of the Reclining Buddha at Wat Po in Bangkok, and the statuary images of these thirteen foremost bhikkhunis at Wat Songdhammakalyani in Nakhon Pathom. According to Skilling, blessing verses chanted in praise of the thirteen foremost bhikkhuni disciples were composed and recited regularly in the Lanna Thai period. The Pali recollection verse from the *Anguttara Nikaya*’s *Ekaka Nipaata Paa.li, Etadagga Vagga, Pa~ncama Vagga* follows:

“*Etadagga.m, bhikkhave, mama saavikaana.m bhikkhuniina.m ratta~n~nuuna.m yadida.m mahaapajapatigotamii* (Bhikkhus, among my bhikkhuni disciples, Mahapajapati Gotami is foremost for her seniority). *Mahaapa~n~naana.m yadida.m khemaa* (Khemaa is [foremost] in great wisdom).



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*Iddhimantiina.m yadida.m uppalava.n.naa* (Uppalavanna is [foremost] in attainment of extra-ordinary psychic powers).  
*Vinayadhraana.m yadida.m pa.taacaaraa* (Patacara is [foremost] of Masters of Vinaya).  
*Dhammakathikaana.m yadida.m dhammadinnaa* (Dhammadinna is [foremost] in explaining the Dhamma).  
*Jhaaniina.m yadida.m nandaa* (Nanda is [foremost] in meditative absorption). *Aaraddhaviiriyaana.m yadida.m so.naa* (Sona is [foremost] in ardent effort). *Dibbacakkhukaana.m yadida.m so.naa* (Sona is [foremost] in the Divine Eye). *Khippaabhi~n~naana.m yadida.m bhaddaa ku.n.dalakesaa* (Bhadda is [foremost] in quick penetrative attainment). *Pubbenivaasa.m anussarantiina.m yadida.m bhaddaa kaapilaanii* (Bhadda Kapilani is [foremost] in fully recollecting past lives). *Mahaabhi~n~nappattaana.m yadida.m bhaddakaccaanaa* (Bhadda Kaccana is [foremost] in the bases of great supernormal power & higher knowledge). *Luukhaciivaradharaana.m yadida.m kisaagotamii* (Kisagotami is [foremost] in wearing coarse rag robes). *Saddhaadhimmuttaana.m yadida.m sigaalamaataa ti.* (Sigalamata is [foremost] in release through trust).”

<sup>13</sup> I see no evidence that the Buddha was suspicious about having bhikkhunis, that he tried to limit their numbers, or that he treated women’s ordination as unimportant. Rather, throughout the Vinaya, we find the Buddha working to protect the Bhikkhuni Sangha from abuse by either deviant monks or laypeople, acting to ensure the bhikkhunis would receive both the material and the Dhamma requisites of the teaching and training that would facilitate their enlightenment.

<sup>14</sup> In the absence of access to bhikkhus when there are obstacles, the bhikkhunis are also directed to ordain women alone, with only a message to and from the Bhikkhu Sangha.

<sup>15</sup> In addition to the leading masters who have spoken of there being really no wish or need for the bhikkhuni ordination for women, a number of scholars have also brought forth similar reports related to the Thai nuns and the Thai laywomen who have been the subjects of their research. I would like to state here clearly that this has not been my experience. Perhaps this difference in experience comes from the difference in meeting with a fully-ordained female monastic compared to meeting with a lay researcher who might be expected to report what they say, bringing on fear. I will report on the response that arises in meeting the forth *devadhuta*—the vision of a bhikkhuni, a female *samana*. Both in the United States and in Thailand, everywhere I have been I have met Thai women who have confessed to me their aspiration to ordain. They speak of approaching family members or elder monks, voicing the wish in their hearts. I have witnessed this personally, both with Western and Asian women, dear friends inspired by the Buddha’s teaching and Sangha. They are regularly answered that as women, they may not. Often the possibility is suggested that, if they make merit well and dedicate their hearts to it, they may be reborn in another life as a man, or be reborn in the Sasana of the future Buddha Maitreya, and then be able to ordain, fulfill the Buddha’s teaching and the Path and thus find liberation. Many women live with this wish, giving up their aspiration in this lifetime. It is a very common story.

<sup>16</sup> The following is the critical comparison between women’s monastic traditions that I was asked to make in the year 2003 when in meeting with monastic and lay administrators at Rajavidyalaya Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya Royal Sangha University in Bangkok. At that time, to the disappointment of the table, I was not able to give a balanced, well-informed critical response. This was due to my hesitancy to speak critically (particularly without full information) as well as my newness in Thailand and my then lack of complete comparative knowledge of the Thai nuns’ situation related to that of the Korean bhikkhunis. This section hopes to remedy that, informed by the first-hand knowledge and understanding that developed in the time following.

<sup>17</sup> See Appendix herein. I have been told by Thai researchers and Buddhist academics that the statement “Thailand has never had a Bhikkhuni Sangha” or “Thailand has never had bhikkhunis” to current knowledge may be accurately and correctly stated as: “Since the foundation of the current dynasty of Kings, that is *since the beginning of the Ayutthaya Period* in the 14<sup>th</sup> century CE, Thailand has never had a *Royally sanctioned and supported Bhikkhuni Sangha with dual ordination.*”

<sup>18</sup> It is a common, shared history. Most of the living Buddhist traditions around the world, at one time or another, have been decimated, or nearly so, and have re-arisen. I know of no tradition that has been exempt. The Southern Theravadan Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni Sanghas have both been eradicated due to political upheavals, and the

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Bhikkhu Sanghas of Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma have been revived with foreign assistance on numerous occasions.

<sup>19</sup> Being in the presence of great Buddhist women and men who are ordained, who have faith and confidence, who have developed knowledge and vision, and who have skill in teaching is beneficial no matter what their tradition or lineage. These beneficent qualities transcend race, ethnicity, national boundaries and sectarianism—this transcendence being a hallmark of the Buddhadhamma Sangha.

<sup>20</sup> Thai: *tudong*, Pali: *dhutanga*—the austerities or ascetic practices allowed by the Buddha, popularized by the Venerable Maha Kassapa. In Thailand, monastics may undertake a period of time when they take upon themselves one or any number of the thirteen dhutanga practices. In modern-day Thailand, tudong often refers to a monastic undertaking a radically simple and unfettered way of life, walking from place to place, sleeping in the forest, living only off of whatever is received during early morning almsround in whatever locale they happen to be passing through.

<sup>21</sup> See Appendix herein.

<sup>22</sup> Currently, there are several temples established by foreign Mahayana traditions with resident bhikkhunis in Thailand, including a branch temple from Fo Guang Shan in Taiwan and a Korean bhikkhuni temple. Neither these temples nor their monastics are afforded legal “temple” or “monastic” status by the Thai government.

<sup>23</sup> Looking at the walls of Wat Po in Bangkok in the Vihara of the Reclining Buddha at the great painting depicting Ashoka's daughter Sanghamitta Theri's arrival with the Bodhi tree sapling in Sri Lanka, Queen Anula's request for ordination, and her going forth; one might be inclined to believe that in the early Bangkok era in Thailand the Sri Lankan Bhikkhuni Sangha history might have been more well known than it is today.

<sup>24</sup> I have heard this affirmed repeatedly by ostensibly well-educated Thai friends. The quote here is from a Thai layman friend reading and translating directly from a Thai children's primer on Buddhist history, while avidly denying that there had ever been bhikkhunis anywhere outside of India.

<sup>25</sup> According to the Thai National Bureau of Religious Affairs statistics for 2550 BE/2007 CE. However, without a formal monastic community or system of ordination, training and support providing documentation, it is very difficult to accurately ascertain the actual number of maechees in the country. So far, only a small percentage of nuns have registered with the Thai Nun's Association.

<sup>26</sup> The “Nun's Bill” attempted to introduce legislation that would give official status and support to the maechees in 2004, but failed to pass and was followed by an official letter sent to every temple in the country notifying both the monks and nuns that the nuns had the official status of “upasika” – that is, laywomen. Still, like bhikkhus, nuns are not allowed by law to vote. Again in 2007, a second attempt is being made contemporary to this writing to include provision for official status and support for the maechees in the new Thai constitution.

<sup>27</sup> Here I am referring to the wearing of the *kasaya*-colored *civara*, the saffron patchwork monastic robe, also known as “the Banner of the Arahants” to Southern Buddhist traditions and the “Field of Merit” to the Northern traditions.

<sup>28</sup> Such potential becoming ripe and that fruit coming forth largely depends upon conditions. Where the conditions are good there may be great fruit. Where the conditions are not good there may be only a very few people with truly exceptional paramis who are able to grow and develop. Under harsh conditions, like a tree growing out of a crack in a rock, it may be beautiful like a *bonsai* but stunted, the fruits few and the benefits limited, not widespread. The Blessed One himself eulogized Mahapajapati Gotami as one such “Great Tree.” Some say that the ancient bhikkhunis had such paramis and the blessings of the Buddha's presence, but doubt that women today can possibly have such quality of merit. I have seen this quality manifest in the contemporary Bhikkhuni Sanghas of Korea and China, where there are certainly still saintly women, excellent examples and teachers, bringing great benefit to our human society and world.

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<sup>29</sup> Men also inquired on behalf of female relatives.

<sup>30</sup> Here, I am particularly referring to firstly the Vinaya imperative or affirmative responsibility that the Sangha has to give ordination to qualified applicants; secondly, to the time imperative that appears in the Vinaya; and thirdly, to the vision of the field, knowing that if no seeds are planted there will be no harvest, however if seeds are planted even in very untilled and minimally moist soil (minimal training or support) still a few of the very strong may grow and in doing so break the earth and attract and hold moisture.

<sup>31</sup> Most everywhere I traveled, both in the cities and countryside towns and villages in the north and northeast of Bangkok, for the majority of the male monks, maechees and laypeople, it was the first time they had ever met a woman wearing the *civara*, the monastic robe. They were greatly respectful of the robe and the monastic livelihood which is normal for Thai people, when not confused by issues and politics.

<sup>32</sup> Among other options proposed – single ordination from the Tibetan Bhiksu Sangha alone would affirm the cultural solidarity of the lineage while dual ordination together with the Chinese Bhiksuni Sangha (or their Vinaya descendants) would be a tremendous gesture of harmony, peace and forgiveness, affirming our common heritage and Dhamma-Vinaya ancestry as Sakyan sons and daughters.

<sup>33</sup> As of this endnoting, August 2007, our known numbers have quadrupled, reaching twenty (Mahasangha) with this Vassa. There are eight bhikkhuni wayplaces in the United States: four on the East Coast, three in the West. Plans are underway for the first national Bhikkhuni Sangha gathering for Patimokkha recitation and Vinaya Seminar in November 2007.

<sup>34</sup> In fact, there is such an exponential growth of interest in Buddhism in America that we really need more monastics, both male and female, particularly those skilled and practiced in the Dhamma and capable of teaching, to fill the need.

<sup>35</sup> *Vinaya* literally means “to abandon” or “remove” hindrances, not to create them. When understood and used rightly, it is meant to support the best opportunity for enlightenment in monastic life, not to prevent or prohibit it. The Vinaya does not recognize sects, nor consider nationalities or robe colors as an obstacle to ordination.

## APPENDIX

### *Glimmers of a Thai Bhikkhuni Sangha History*

“Although history would indicate that in the past there have been both bhikkhunis and samaneris in [the lands now known as] Thailand, from the time of the Ashokan missions of Arahantas Sona and Uttara to Suvannabhumi, up until the Ayutthaya Period, and even into the twentieth century [in the northern regions], there is little or no public knowledge nor a sense of connectedness to this distant and more recent past.”

This sentence within “Mining for Gold” has elicited significant surprise, interest and curiosity amongst both friends and eminent fellow monastic Sangha members who have read it, particularly those who have lived in Thailand for many years, but “never had a clue.” The information that I’ve come upon in the past years has largely been brought forth by the simple merit of the interest stimulated by the rare appearance of a female form clothed in the patchwork saffron robe, both during my time in Thailand and elsewhere amongst the Thai people, scholars and Sangha members. For those mentioned above who have requested sharing knowledge of the details, they are laid forth here for reflection and consideration. As the information is substantial and deviates from the main theme and flow of “Mining for Gold” it is set forth separately in this appendix. Recognizing that the work shown here with this important subject is barely a beginning and highly inadequate, it is my hope that, as a beginning, it might at least encourage an opening of ideas and views, as well as further research and publication.

#### *A Weaving of Threads*

Like weaving threads together, the lines of a sketch or beginning to lay out pieces of a puzzle, I will lay out what I have come across for consideration. The clues span a vast period of time, from roughly the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE through to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a period of perhaps 2,300 years, nearly as long as Buddhist history itself. I will divide it roughly into three sections as mentioned in the “Mining for Gold” text: (1) the Ancient period or time of the Ashokan missions of Sona and Uttara to Suvannabhumi, (2) the middle period of various “Thai” kingdoms up until the founding of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya, and (3) the period of more recent history reaching into the twentieth century and modern times.

#### *Ancient Period*

The first references to bhikkhunis in the lands now known as Thailand come from the records of the Ashokan missions of the Arahanta Theras Sona and Uttara to Suvannabhumi, the ancient and famed “Land of Gold.” Although the exact boundaries of the ancient Land of Gold are unknown, the Thai people have strong emotional ties to the history of this land

that may be seen in many facets of their culture, in the ancient name of one of their provinces, Suphanburi, and the modern, new Suvarnabhumi International Airport. Historians say the Land of Gold roughly covered the territories now known as Burma, Thailand and Laos, as well as parts of Southern China, Cambodia and Northern Malaysia.

The journey of Sona and Uttara Thera to Suvannabhumi is recorded in the important Pali text the *Samantapasadika*, in the ancient Sri Lankan chronicles the *Dipavamsa* and *Mahavamsa* as well as in the Vinaya commentary *Sudassanavinayavibhassa*.<sup>a</sup> According to the *Samantapasadika*, the Theras “ordained 3,500 men and 1,500 women, establishing the Buddhadhamma.” In Thai Buddhist historical texts, this record appears in the Thai *Ruan Song Pra Thera Bye Prakat Pra Sasana Ni Thang Prathet—About Theras Going to Teach Buddhism Abroad* where we find that:

“Youths in the group of royal males of the number of 3,500 ordained. The royal female youths in the number of 1,500 ordained. Thus, the Theras firmly established Buddhism in the area of Suvannabhumi. Thereafter, the young people of the royal heritage received the Dhamma lineage of Sona and Uttara.”<sup>b</sup>

The exact location of the ordinations is disputed. I have no intent to propose which site might have actually been the real and true location of the Suvannabhumi bhikkhus’ and bhikkhunis’ ordination or whether the Ashokan Missions really happened as recorded, but rather to show that *the Thai people themselves* lay both historical and emotional claim to the site that their own Buddhist textual records indicate was the place where 1,500 women were ordained *as bhikkhunis* from the very beginning of the recorded establishment of Buddhism *in their land*.

The Thai people regularly speak of the location of this great happening, the foundation of the Buddhism in their land, as having occurred at the “First Chedi” Nakhon Pathom, thousands of people coming to pay their reverence to the site daily for this reason. The Burmese people locate the site in Burma at Thaton where there is also a shrine devoted to this most famous and venerable of occurrences. However, according to research done by Ven. Ratanavali Bhikkhuni, contemporary Thai Buddhist historians locate the site of the first ordinations at the ancient Thai city of Nakonsi Thammarat (*Nagara Sri Dharmarajasima*). According to interviews conducted with local Nakonsi Thammarat historians, it is well known that Buddhism first entered Suvannabhumi in what is now known as Nakonsi Thammarat, not Nakhon Pathom. The Thai Tipitaka reference above is anthropologically linked to the Nakonsi Thammarat Yak Chedi (*Yaksa Chaitya*) through the accompanying Tipitaka story of the Theras displaying their power over the supernatural forces the people had feared and worshipped by subduing the Yaksas (ogres, cannibals, flesh-eating giants) before teaching the Dhamma and giving ordination. The main Nakonsi Thammarat Chedi, built in Sri Lankan style, is also linked by local history directly to the Tipitaka history and the arrival of the Theras Sona and Uttara. It is recorded to have been built in conjunct with the Sri Lankans to commemorate the site where Indian Prince Kumar and Indian Princess Hemachala (whose statuary images remain there) came with a tooth relic of the Buddha, now

enshrined there in memory of it being the site of the establishment of the Buddha Sasana. This is confirmed by Phra Raj Suwan Maytee in *Pan Din Ton: Nakon Pathom dan gert Prabuddhasasana*.

Neither the *Samantapasadika* Pali nor the Thai account say what the noblemen and women were “ordained” (Thai: *buat*) as. However, by the famed statement that “Buddhism has only been established in a land when both sons and daughters of that land have been ordained [as bhikkhus and bhikkhunis,]”<sup>c</sup> it may be inferred that it was upon such ordination that the pronouncement “the Buddhadhamma has been established” was made in the end of the *Samantapasadika* account. This is confirmed by the less well-known *Sudassanavinayavibhava* which does specify that the men and women were in fact ordained as bhikkhus and bhikkhunis.

Another point of interest is that according to the Thai Vinaya Pitaka version of the *Samantapasadika*, as related by former Thai Senator Rabiaprat Pongpanit in her 2002 report to the Thai Senate, both men and women appear to have been ordained by the Bhikkhu Sangha alone, as there is no mention of bhikkhunis among the “five bhikkhus, samaneras, upasakas, brahmans, high ranking government officials and members of royalty totaling thirty-eight persons”<sup>d</sup> who comprised the Ashokan mission. In fact, all of the Ashokan mission records in which both men and women are recorded as ordained in various countries surrounding India by the Arahanta missionaries following their teaching, other than the Sri Lankan record, follow this same pattern. This does not mean that the calling upon of bhikkhunis to perform the dual ordination did not happen, as this part of the historical records could certainly have been lost in many cases. However, the history in its current form could also be seen as giving precedent, in the behavior of numerous Arahanta Dhamma teachers of great renown, to the ordination of both women and men as bhikkhus and bhikkhunis by the Bhikkhu Sangha in the absence of a Bhikkhuni Sangha.

### *The Middle Period: the Kingdoms of Pattani, Sukhothai, Lanna-thai and Ayutthaya*

According to the general Buddhist history of this area in the middle period, there were bhikkhus and bhikkhunis of various Buddhist schools and traditions—Theravada (Sthaviravada or Hinayana), Mahayana and Vajrayana—throughout the lands of South and Southeast Asia. Middle period references specifically to bhikkhunis in the area that is now named Thailand come from the Pattani, Lanna-thai and Sukhothai periods as well as the Ayutthaya period.

#### *Pattani (3<sup>rd</sup>—17<sup>th</sup> Century CE)*

Moving through time, we come to the Kingdom of Pan Pan, not far removed from modern Nakonsi Thammarat. Pan Pan was later know by the Thais as Pattani and is considered by them to be one of their ancient historic kingdoms. Earlier historical records of Pan Pan

span the 3<sup>rd</sup> through the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries of the Common Era; later records of Pattani extend through the 17<sup>th</sup> century, up until the absorption of the kingdom in the modern Bangkok period.

In his work *Nuns of Southeast Asia* (3.6), Peter Skilling relates this finding:

“[In] Ma Tuan-lin’s description of the Kingdom of P’an P’an in his *Wen-hsien Tung-ke’ao*: ‘There are ten monasteries where Buddhist monks and nuns study their canon. They eat all types of meat, but restrain from wine.’ Wheatley and others have concluded that P’an-p’an was located in the vicinity of the Bay of Bandon in peninsular Siam.”

The record is estimated to be related to the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. The word “nun” in the record is the Chinese character *ni* commonly used as an abbreviation of the three Chinese characters *bi-ku-ni*. Although the record is Chinese, the description of the food consumed by the monks and nuns does not bear the marks of the discipline of the Chinese Mahayana schools, thus it seems that these female Buddhist monastics would have belonged to one of the Sthaviravadan or Theravadan schools.

#### *Sukhothai (13<sup>th</sup>—15<sup>th</sup> Century CE)*

According to Thai records as related by the Research Department of Rajavidyalaya Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya Royal Thai University (hereafter abbreviated as “Mahachula”) there are Sukhothai records of bhikkhunis ordained by the Bhikkhu Sangha alone. The question has been raised by scholars whether the (perhaps) original practice of ordaining bhikkhunis by the Bhikkhu Sangha alone may have continued in Thailand from the Ashokan period, rather than being replaced shortly after the original ordinations by the dual-ordination practice. Since these bhikkhunis did not have dual ordination, modern monastic and lay Thai Buddhist scholars have affirmed they may not be considered to have constituted a legitimate historical Bhikkhuni Sangha, having not met the full criteria for ordination as bhikkhunis. However, it may be noted that according to Vinaya, in the time of the Buddha, neither early bhikkhunis ordained by the Bhikkhu Sangha alone nor even those ordained by the “bhikkhu rite,” rather than the “bhikkhuni rite,” were to be considered *not* ordained.

#### *Lanna-thai (13<sup>th</sup>—16<sup>th</sup> Century CE)*

In *Nuns of Southeast Asia* at 3.6, Skilling further relates that:

“in Lanna Thai literature (Catalogue of Palm Leaf Texts on Microfilm at the Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai) there are two texts entitled *Tamnan Bhikkhuni Dona* and *Tamnan Sindu Bhikkhuni*, which from their titles are the biographies of bhikkhunis. These bhikkhunis do not seem to be listed in the Tipitaka—at least they

are not listed in Malasekara's DPPN, thus there is the speculation that they might be later bhikkhunis' histories."<sup>c</sup>

As these bhikkhunis' names appear to not be among those dating from the earliest days of the Indian Sangha, there is the expectation that rare and precious records of later bhikkhunis, whether from Thailand or from other locales may have been discovered. It was also in the Lanna-thai period that Sanghanusati chants including the recollection of the virtues of the Thirteen Foremost Bhikkhuni Disciples were composed and their recitation called for by the royalty for the blessings of the populace and nation. Considering the formal veneration payed to the Arahant bhikkhunis by even the great kings of the Buddha's time, it might be seen as ironic that in 2007 CE, bhikkhuni Arahanta statuary images from the Lanna-thai period were removed to Wat Songdhammakalyani (a bhikkhuni temple) from the Lanna-thai monastery where they were long enshrined, as modern local monks felt it inappropriate for men to show veneration to their female forms.

#### *Ayutthaya Period (14<sup>th</sup>—18<sup>th</sup> Century CE)*

Further bhikkhuni records were spoken of at Mahachula, recovered incidentally while conducting research related to the exchange of the upasampada ordination between Thailand and Sri Lanka, in particular the ordinations which facilitated the (re)establishment of the Thai Sangha upon the founding of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya. These records indicate the existence of pre-Lankavamsa Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni Sanghas in Thailand, up to the entry into the Ayutthaya period, at which time these Sanghas were ended and a new Bhikkhu-only Sangha established with royal patronage and support from the Bhikkhu Sangha lineage of Sri Lanka.

By way of explanation, it is recorded that the Kingdom of Ayutthaya was named after the Indian Kingdom of Ayodhya, famed birthplace of the Hindu God Rama and the "first man" Manu. In its ruling secular and religious leadership structure, the Kingdom of Ayutthaya showed a great harmonizing of the religious teachings and practices of its time: Brahmanistic or Hindu, and both Mahayana and Theravadan Buddhist. The king was thus availed of both the divine right to rule via the Brahman priests as well as the Buddhist messianic right as a "wheel turning monarch" and an incarnation of the Bodhisattva Phra Ariya Maitreya—the future Buddha. These hardly seem to have been unique ideas; in the centuries both preceding and following, history records many Asian rulers, both Thai and non-Thai, adopting similar means in various combinations of these same prevailing teachings.

The records relate the causal reasoning behind the ending of the Bhikkhuni Sangha as "inappropriate relationship" with men and the Bhikkhu Sangha. This is interpreted by some scholars to mean that there were allegations of sexual misconduct. Indeed, this seems to have been a topic of literally mortal concern during the Ayutthaya period, as Skilling has found records of Buddhist monks being regularly punished to death by public roasting over fire for allegations made of sexual misconduct. For this reason, foreign documenters observed and noted that only women past their childbearing years were allowed to



respectably don even white robes in the Kingdom of Ayutthaya.<sup>f</sup> Other scholars understand this statement regarding “inappropriateness of the bhikkhunis” to mean that it was considered inappropriate for women to have the status of *Brahman* priests<sup>g</sup> within the social/religious/ideological framework of the Ayodhyan Brahmanical tenants of the *Manudharmashastra*, a system of philosophy and social order which had spread at that time from India to Thailand. This system by law subordinates women first to their fathers, then husbands and finally sons, and does not allow for the possibility of women’s salvation other than through the “sacrifices” or the merit offered by their sons. Finally, there has been the further speculation that the cessation of the previous Sangha was simply, if nothing else, an oft-repeated political move to ensure the loyalty of the clergy to the sovereign, and thus the solidarity of the kingdom.

As apparent in the *Kingdom of Siam* exhibit shown in 2004 CE in the United States at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, the writings and meticulous drawings of at least one foreign Jesuit missionary in Ayutthaya nonetheless still record the presence of undoubtedly feminine,<sup>h</sup> saffron-robed, shaven-headed monastics sitting on raised-platform seats in distinctly Thai-temple environs during that period.<sup>i</sup> Skilling finds records of robed Buddhist renunciate women in those times still addressed as *bhagini*—“sisters,” the Pali/Sanskrit form of respectful address used by both the Buddha and Theras, as well as called *nang-chee*—“lady renunciates,” a melding of Thai and Brahmanical terms and the precursor of the modern, white-robed *mae-chee*.

According to scholars, it may be reasonably assumed that some numbers of both bhikkhus and bhikkhunis of lineages and traditions from the pre-Ayutthaya period would have continued to survive in areas of what is now known as Thailand outside of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya. This may be confirmed by later records of Bhikkhuni Sangha in the regions that are now known as the surrounding countries of Burma, China and Cambodia.

### *Pre-modern and Modern Period*

Looking for evidence of the continuation of *kasaya*-robed Buddhist monastic women beyond the Kingdom of Ayutthaya, such evidence may be found in nearly all directions.

In the northwest of what is now Thailand, Mon records include bhikkhunis into the 14<sup>th</sup> century CE. In the northeast, records from Lao territories show yellow-robed female monastics into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the north, Thai-Yuan records of the Yuan Special Autonomous District in Southern China show bhikkhunis contemporarily. The Thai peoples of at least one locale in India also preserve the last remnants of a yellow-robed women’s monastic tradition.

To the west in neighboring Myanmar, the *Burmese Chronicles of the King’s Proclamations*, as translated by Dr. Tan Tun in *Ideas and Views*, shows royal permission granted as late as 1788 CE to women over age nineteen to ordain as bhikkhunis. Additional laws prevented the

king's slaves from becoming bhikkhunis and, as late as 1810 CE, required both the bhikkhus' and bhikkhunis' discipline to be royally monitored. It may be noted here that, rather than the "thousand year gap" regularly spoken of, these records leave a gap of *less than 200 years*<sup>j</sup> in the tradition of full ordination for women in Southeast Asia.

To the east there are more recent Thai-Lao records as well. Most well-known is the travel diary of Hermann Norden, as published by Kamala Tiyavanich in the chapter "Sisterhood of the Yellow Robe" in her book *Buddha in the Jungle*. Norden writes in his 1920s travel diary for the Royal Geographical Society of Great Britain of his visit to the isolated Muang You people:

"At the *bonzerie* (monastery or nunnery), I was astonished to see young women in yellow robes and with shaven heads; a Buddhist Sisterhood. They were busily sweeping an already tidy yard; an older woman superintending the work."

To the north, the records are not only recent, but contemporary. Dr. Hua Che Min, a Chinese scholar of Sinhalese language affiliated with the language department at the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, has authored a book in Sinhalese about the Thai-lue people's religious lives and practices in the Sip Song Panna Special Autonomous Region in Yunnan Province, Southern China. This book, *Theravada Buddhism in China* (in Sinhalese), records, as of the year 1991 CE, the number of temples and bhikkhus and bhikkhunis of both Mahayana and Theravada traditions, reporting that they have been largely untouched by the Chinese government. Phra Vutthichai Bhikkhu, in his 2006 visit to the area to support the renovation of the Thai people's Theravadan temples, confirmed the reports of the book and reported that the temples look remarkably Thai.

Not only in China and in the regions surrounding modern Thailand, but in the homeland of Buddhism as well, the ethnic Thai peoples seem to have been among the last to devotedly preserve the remnants of their yellow-robed monastic traditions for women. In *Yasodhara Magazine*, Venerable Dhammananda Bhikkhuni reports her recent discovery of the presence of a tradition of saffron-robed female monastics in at least one ethnic Thai people's community in India.<sup>k</sup>

Once again returning to within the heart of the Thai Kingdom, images of saffron-robed women in Buddhist monastic life do not entirely disappear in the Ratanakosin Era, but may be found in the arts and histories related to the Royal Family.

Many Thais might be surprised to learn that the heritage of the early Arahanta bhikkhunis and the later bhikkhunis' missions were both affirmed and royally honored in Thailand. In 1836 CE, King Nang Klao—Rama III, established Wat Thepthidarom (Pali: *Devadhita-arama*) in Bangkok, the Monastery of the Heavenly Daughter, named for his beloved eldest daughter who served efficiently as his personal secretary, Crown Princess Apsonsudathep. The monastery's bhikkhuni Vihara houses statuary images of the Founding Mother of the Bhikkhuni Sangha Mahapajapati Gotami and fifty-two bhikkhuni Arahantas, the images

dedicated to his daughter (whose health was ailing) and his fifty-two children. The princess also contributed from her personal fortune to the construction. King Rama III also undertook the 16 year 7 month restoration of the Ayutthayan period monastery Wat Bodharam (commonly known as Wat Pho), initially begun by King Rama I when he established it as a first grade royal monastery in 1788 CE. King Rama III's son Prince Laddawan led in the restoration of the Western Vihara, the famed Temple of the Reclining Buddha, on whose walls may still be found the *Mahavamsa* mural paintings of the arrival of Ashokan daughter Sanghamitta with the Bodhi tree to Sri Lanka, her meeting with King Devanampiyatissa and her ordination of Queen Anula with her company of 500 women, establishing the Buddhasasana. Other walls in the sanctuary of the Reclining Buddha are covered by extensive and elaborate mural paintings of the thirteen foremost bhikkhuni disciples of the Buddha and their stories, as well as paintings of the ten foremost laymen and laywomen disciples. This great restoration was undertaken by the king to maintain Wat Pho as “a center of both arts and knowledge for the Thai people, where descendants could look indefinitely.”

In the years that followed however, few have even known to look. The doors of the Bhikkhuni Vihara in the Monastery of the Heavenly Daughter generally remain locked. As robed, shaven-headed images of bhikkhus and bhikkhunis may look similar without close examination, even well-educated monks living for years at Wat Pho may never know of the content and meaning of its full-wall mural paintings, not to mention the throngs of tourists that pass through its halls each day. The majority of modern records that are often seen related to ordained women in the saffron robes and the Thai royalty might be considered tragic.

Perhaps the most famous is the diary of Anna Leonowens and the Western movies *The King and I* and *Anna and the King* based upon it. Anna Owens was the British governess to the Royal court of Siam from 1862-1865 CE, during the reign of King Mongkut—Rama IV, who was a highly-disciplined Buddhist monk himself for many years and founder of the Dhammayuta Nikaya (a reformed monastic order) before ascending to the throne. In her book *Romance of the Harem*, she relates the pitiful story of the favorite consort-wife of the king, Lady Tuptim, who was engaged to be married when she was chosen for the royal harem. Her fiancé, Pilat, ordained as a Buddhist monk after her leaving, and when Lady Tuptim felt trapped by the confines of her palace life she escaped and secretly ordained as a novice at Phra Pilat's temple. Upon her discovery there, although affirming purity, the two were tried and sentenced to death by fire. We can only guess the impact that such an event may have had upon the thoughts and views of the royal princes and their heirs, amongst them, Prince Chulalongkorn, the son of King Mongkut who was later to become Rama V, the king to follow, and Prince Wachirayan, the son who was to become Sangharaja.

Under the reign of the beloved and revered King Chulalongkorn—Rama V (the son of King Mongkut tutored by Anna Leonowens while a prince)—Siam lost border territories to colonial powers, to France for Laos and Cambodia, to Britain for Burma. However the King was able to maintain independence, declaring Siam an independent kingdom in 1886.

A son of King Chulalongkorn's, Rama VI—King Vajiravudh—reigned from 1910 to 1925, during which time he increased the westernization begun by his father and grandfather, including mandatory primary school education and a system of standardized basic education for the Buddhist monastic Sangha. Prince Wachirayan (Vajirananavarovasa) was appointed and empowered by King Vajiravudh as *Sangharaja*—“Sangha King” or “Supreme Patriarch” of Siam.

Texts authored by Prince Patriarch Vajirananavarorasa for the progress and knowledge of Buddhism and education of the Sangha in the monastic discipline of the Vinaya included the *Vinaya Mukha* and its English-language translation *Entrance to the Vinaya*. As these texts are often studied in place of the Vinaya itself, they have led (and still continue to lead) the vast majority of Thai-educated Buddhist monks to hold beliefs expressed therein, such as: a “person who wishes for *upasampada* (full bhikkhu or bhikkhuni ordination) must be male” and “if one has committed serious offences or one is a woman, then such persons cannot receive the upasampada and their ordination would be known as *vattu-vipatti*, literally, defect[ive].”<sup>1</sup> Later, in Volume III of the *Vinaya Mukha* we find two personal speculative theories propounded by its author: the first, that the Bhikkhuni Sangha “existed temporarily, for no great length of time... [and] probably disappeared in Lord Buddha's own days;”<sup>m</sup> and the second, that from the time of Sanghamitta Theri, daughter of Emperor Ashoka, “it is agreed that the bhikkhunis disappeared.”<sup>n</sup> In this case, the “agreement” would seem to have become the self-fulfilling prophecy for a nation. With a concerted effort made to spread and establish a statewide system of secular and monastic education, lay children, samaneras, and bhikkhus, from the early 1900s until the present, all came to be educated that the Bhikkhuni Sasana had died out in India not long after the Buddha's time, the last bhikkhuni being Sanghamitta Theri.

Additionally, according to both Buddhist monastic scholars and Buddhist historians such as Tiyavanich, in the twentieth century, diverse, local, ethnic traditions of Buddhism in Thailand were legally replaced by State Buddhism for the sake of a Unified Thai Nation and Sangha. Empowered by the Sangha Acts of 1903 and 1928, both secular and religious laws were made forbidding the ordination of women due to a perceived political threat.<sup>o</sup> For the sake of a centralized Thai State and uniformity of Sangha standards, although a divergence from the Vinaya, from that time it became illegal for local Elder Buddhist monks to give ordination within their local Sangha traditions and lineages *to even men*, unless they were approved, trained and certified as Upajjhayas (preceptors) by State Authority.

As a final note, scholar Peter Koret is currently working on the histories of several Thai women ordained as bhikkhunis and disrobed by law during the early 1900s in the Sangha Acts period above. These include the two daughters of outspoken political critic Narin Klung (one of the political threats mentioned above) who were ordained as bhikkhuni and samaneri along with a number of other women. Due to their father's political conflicts, the daughters, Sara and Jongdi, were arrested and most of their Sangha disrobed, while the two sisters were taken to prison where the elder sister was disrobed by force. When released from prison the daughters maintained their monastic life but changed the color of their

robes. Their Sangha ended one day when the elder sister, Phra Bhikkhuni Sara, was kidnapped by a rider on horseback while she was walking on almsround. Due to the negative reaction to that event within the Sangha, the then Sangharaja of Thailand passed a law forbidding any and all Thai bhikkhus from acting as preceptors in ordaining women as either samaneris, sikkhamanas, or bhikkhunis.

Nonetheless, twenty-eight years later, in 1956 CE, Thai lady Voramai Kabilsingh received ordination as a samaneri from Phra Prommuni of Wat Bawanniwet, the King's own ordination master. Although she wore light yellow robes of a different color than Thai bhikkhus, in the 1960s she was charged with the illegal act of impersonating a bhikkhu. After learning of the continuation of Sanghamitta Theri's line in the Chinese Dharmagupta bhikkhuni lineage of Taiwan, in 1971 she traveled for the full bhikkhuni ordination there, receiving the ordained name of Shih Ta-Tao Fa-Shr—Venerable Mahabodhi Dhammacarya. In the year 2001, thirty years after her full ordination, Venerable Mother Mahabodhi's daughter Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, herself a respected Buddhist scholar and teacher, traveled to Sri Lanka to receive samaneri ordination and two years later the bhikkhuni ordination upon the revival of the tradition of the bhikkhuni upasampada there. Given the ordained name Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, her ordination together with the beneficent works of others, has paved the way for a gradually but steadily increasing number of Thai women, both Theravadan and Mahayana, to be ordained as samaneris and bhikkhunis both in Sri Lanka, in Taiwan, and once again in Thailand. As their stories are many, they will not be told here.<sup>p</sup> Fortunately, it is the very spirit of further research into the Buddhist texts coupled with dedication to the higher purpose of the Buddhasasana and the welfare of the Monastic Sangha, so championed by Kings Mongkut and his sons King Chulalongkorn and Prince Patriarch Vajirananavarorasa, which has brought this about. In the year 2003 CE, after extensive research and review by the Thai Senate, the secular law banning women's ordination in Thailand was found unconstitutional and revoked as contrary to freedom of religion.

### *In Conclusion: A Different Definition*

Thus, as I have been told by knowledgeable Thai researchers and Buddhist academics, the common statement “*Thailand has never had a Bhikkhuni Sangha*” or “*Thailand has never had bhikkhunis,*” to current knowledge, might be more accurately and correctly stated as:

Within the domains of the current Chakri dynasty of Rama kings, since its foundation; that is, in the Ratanakosin Era from the Ayutthaya Period through the Bangkok period (1782 CE -present), Thailand has not yet had a *royally- or State-sanctioned and supported Bhikkhuni Sangha with dual ordination.*

This is not to say that there have never been bhikkhunis amongst the ethnic Thai peoples, nor that the lands, now known as Thailand, have never been host to the Bhikkhuni Sangha.

In fact, the pattern that appears within the historical threads, when woven together, does seem to tell quite a different story.

## Endnotes to Appendix

<sup>a</sup> A text of Sri Lankan origin taken to China and translated by Sanghabhadra about the time of Buddhagosa. The Chinese translation of the title of this Sinhalese Vinaya commentary has been retranslated into Pali as the *Sudassanavinayavibhasa*.

<sup>b</sup> *Ruan Song Pra Thera Bye Prakat Pra Sasana Ni Thang Prathet*—p 119: “*Puak dek ni tragoon praman 3,500 buat laew. Khuntida praman 1,500 nang gan buat laew. Pra thera nan dye pradit tan prasasana hye damrong man yu ni kwan suvanabum nan laew doy prakan cha ni. Jam derm ther nan ma chon [p 120] chow suvanabum gau dye thang cheu pauk dek ti gert ni ratchathragoon wa Sonuttara serp ma.*”

<sup>c</sup> Although this statement has been attributed to Ashokan son Mahinda Thera in his words to Sri Lankan King Devanampiyatissa regarding his reason for calling for his bhikkhuni sister Sanghamitta Theri and her peers to establish the Bhikkhuni Sangha, it is based upon various quotations from the Tipitaka. As amalgamated and paraphrased briefly from Analayo’s *Women’s Renunciation in Early Buddhism*:

Numerous early canonical passages concur with the clear statement given in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* that the Bhikkhuni Sangha is an integral part of Buddhist community, particularly the *Lakkhana Sutta* and the *Pasadika Sutta* of the *Digha Nikaya*. Even those outside the Buddhist order apparently perceived the existence of proficient female Buddhist monastics [bhikkhunis] as indispensable for the completeness of the Buddha’s Sasana, as in the *Mahavaccagotta Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikaya*, where we find the wanderer Vaccagotta, soon to enter the Buddhist Sangha and become an Arahanta, proclaiming that: “If, in this teaching, only the Reverend Gotama and the bhikkhus were accomplished, but there would not be accomplished bhikkhunis, then this Holy Life, would be deficient in that respect”—(*sace ... imam dhammam bhavañc’ eva Gotamo aradhako abhaviṣṣa bhikkhu ca ... no ca kho bhikkhuniyo aradhika abhaviṃsu, evam idam brahmacariyam aparipuram abhaviṣṣa ten’ angena.*) The degree to which the existence of the bhikkhunis is integral to the welfare of the Buddha Sasana is highlighted in *Samyutta Nikaya 16.13*: “*bhikkhu bhikkhuniyo upasaka upasikayo satthari ... dhamme ... sanghe ... sikkhaya ...samadhismim sagarava viharanti sappatissa. Ime kho ... pañca dhamma saddhammassa hitiya asamosaya anantaradhanaya samvattanti.*” The conditions that lead to the duration of the Dhamma after the Buddha has passed away are treated in the *Anguttara Nikaya* which states these requisite conditions to be that “the four assemblies be respectful towards the Teacher, the Teaching, the Community, the training and towards each other”—(*bhikkhu bhikkhuniyo upasaka upasikayo satthari ... dhamme ... sanghe ... sikkhaya... aññamaññam sagarava viharanti sappa issa. Ayam kho ... paccayo yena Tathagata parinibbute saddhammo cira hitiko hoti.*) According to the *Dakkhinaṅgaha Sutta*, from the perspective of merit, a gift given to the Ubhato Sangha comprised of both bhikkhus and bhikkhunis is superior to that given to the Bhikkhu Sangha alone, thus the absence of the Bhikkhuni Sangha would result in a deficiency of the Order as a recipient of gifts. Finally, in *Samyutta Nikaya 42.7* we find that, in addition to being treated as superior recipients of offerings, the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis are reckoned together when it comes to receiving teachings, as they constitute the superior field for the Buddha’s instructions—(*seyyathapi ... khetam aggam evam eva mayham bhikkhu-bhikkhuniyo.*)

<sup>d</sup> *Samantapasadika* 62-63.

<sup>e</sup> The translation of these texts into Thai was commissioned by Ven. Dhammananda Bhikkhuni in July 2007.

<sup>f</sup> Skilling—*Nuns of Southeast Asia*

<sup>g</sup> In the Buddha’s teaching, a person rightly becomes a Brahman (holy) neither by birth-caste nor by gender, but rather by their own virtuous and noble deeds.

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<sup>h</sup> Due to the distinctive double circle breast motif

<sup>i</sup> The author here wonders whether this may have been a drawing of the fabled royal Ayutthayan princess who secretly fled the palace life to be ordained as a bhikkhuni and live the monastic life against the wishes of her father the King.

<sup>j</sup> The eminent teacher of Burmese Master Mahasi Sayadaw, Mingun Jetavan Sayadaw's 1949 CE reasoned proposal for the reestablishment of the Bhikkhuni Sasana in Burma (although not accepted at that time) thus seems to have followed upon no more than 139 years lapse of the Southeast Asian Bhikkhuni Sangha.

<sup>k</sup> See [www.thaibhikkhunis.org](http://www.thaibhikkhunis.org) – Yasodhara Magazine, “back issues.”

<sup>l</sup> *Entrance to the Vinaya I*, pgs 4-5 on fulfilling conditions (sampatti) for ordination. Thai version published in 1903.

<sup>m</sup> *Entrance to the Vinaya III*, pg 268. Thai version published in 1921, English in 1983.

<sup>n</sup> *Entrance to the Vinaya III*, pg 269. “”

<sup>o</sup> According to Mahachula, until that time Chinese Mahayana traditions in Thailand still had both Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni Sanghas in Thailand, but with the establishment of these laws, they voluntarily gave up their practice of ordaining women.

<sup>p</sup> Many of these women have been awarded as “Outstanding Women in Buddhism” in observance of the United Nation’s International Women’s Day at the United Nations in Bangkok. Their information may be available through Outstanding Women in Buddhism Awards Secretary General Dr. Tavivat Puntarigivat or Founder Venerable Rattanaivali Bhikkhuni.

