

Women in Buddhism: Planting the Seed of Peace

Aree Chaisatien,

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Bangkok -- Nine years have passed since an American doctor of philosophy took the vows of a bhikkhuni. But a recent stay in the Kingdom by this US ordained female monk has served to highlight once again the male-dominated thinking that still prevails in this country.

Her hair is shorn, her blue eyes crystal clear and her smile friendly and wide. Yet the most striking thing about her, at least to Thai eyes, is the yellow robe she wears. Even today, Thais are unable to associate a monk's robes with a woman.

Greeting the Venerable Bhikkuni Dr Leaura Naomi, aka Bhikkuni Lee, I cannot find the words of protocol to address a female monk. But her friendliness makes me feel comfortable and so I dispense with the protocol.

Even though our meeting took place two months ago, the day before she was due to leave Thailand after more than a year here as a guest of the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women, her gentle presence and peaceful attitude remain with me today.

She begins the interview with a very simple question, yet one that is difficult to answer : "What makes you happy?" asks the 41-year-old Bhikkuni Lee.

To her, happiness is love, interpersonal understanding and living harmoniously. Born in New York to a family with a Christian background, Dr Lee was exposed to several different cultures and religions from an early age.

"My cousins and relatives include Jews and Buddhist Chinese. They consider love as a high priority, they have tolerance and learn from each others," she says quietly. "We all knew love before religion."

Why and how did she become so deeply involved in Buddhism?

"Perhaps there is a good reason why we are here. Since I was very young I have known that I would become a nun. I didn't know when or where. I just felt it deep in my heart.

"The first time I came into contact with the Buddhist world was in New York. I was seven at the time. My family and I went to Chinatown. As we walked in front of a gift shop, I remember being mesmerised by a religious image in the window display. My family didn't even realise they had left me behind," she recalls.

"The elderly shopkeeper started talking to me. I asked her about the image that was on display. And she told me that he is the Lord Buddha and that he loves all children. I have never forgotten this incident. The memory is embedded in my mind. It was like a natural seed had been planted in my heart."

The young Leaura was also exposed to different cultures during her school years.

"One day, while looking down from the fifth floor of my university building, I saw a woman with a shaved head wearing a grey robe. Her gait was so serene. I was so excited, I ran down the stairs immediately, jumped on my bicycle, trying to catch her but the nun had gone to the bus stop," she says with alacrity.

Her heart dropped when she saw the bus coming. She had missed a chance to meet a Buddhist nun.

"I didn't know if I would ever have a chance to see one again. Then, one day I was sitting in the park watching the sunset and meditating with some friends. I asked the others if they had ever seen a Buddhist nun in the city. And that was how I was finally introduced to the Chinese Buddhist nun I had seen walking through the university grounds."

After this meeting, there was no turning back for the young student. She became even more determined to pursue Buddha's path.

Dr Lee was ordained as a bhikkhuni nine years ago at an international Buddhist centre in Colorado.

Asked what Buddhist sect she belongs to, she replies: "I don't see any separation between Hinayan (or Theravada) and Mahayana sects. The search for spiritual fulfilment is universal."

Although the State of Colorado boasts somewhere between three and six Buddhist nuns Bhikkuni Lee was the only one in her adopted home town. Following the advice of the serene nun dressed in grey, she began her search for Buddhist teachings in English in seven countries, including Thailand, where she stayed for more than a year. Why was Thailand so special?

"I saw Khun Ya (literally grandmother) in an English-language TV documentary called The Best of Us, The programme featured the seven most kind-hearted lay people in the world. One of them was former US president Jimmy Carter. He was not ashamed to don jeans and join his fellow men in doing menial work."

The Khun Ya in the documentary was Mae Chee Khunying Kanitha Wichienchareon.

Bhikkuni Lee was impressed by Khun Ya's sacrifices for women and children in distress, as well as her lack of attachment to her social position.

"She works from the heart. I felt there was a very deep connection. It was like a spiritual awakening. There are different levels of spiritual awakenings that come at different times in our lives."

But the documentary was over before Bhikkuni Lee managed to catch the full name of the Khun Ya she had so admired. She intensified her search and, in the meantime, tried to learn as much as she could about the Thai people.

She wrote to the TV station but to no avail. Then she made her way to a Thai temple where she began teaching English to Thai monks.

Eventually one of the monks, who was aware of her search for Khun Ya, found a magazine in the library and pointed to a woman in one of the photos. "Is that the woman you saw on TV?", he asked.

"I said 'yes! That's her'," she recalls with a fond smile.

Not long after, Bhikkhuni Lee finally met Mae Chee Kanitha and it is thanks to sponsorship of the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women, founded by the kindly Khun Ya, that she was able to stay on in Thailand and become involved in the pilot project for Southeast Asia's first College for Buddhist Nuns and Laywomen.

"I trust intuition. The Buddhist teachings and traditions speak to my heart more than any others. It's spiritual intuition, not Western logic or rational thinking," says the Venerable Dr Lee, who holds a doctorate degree in geographical peace studies. "Sometimes spiritual intuitions protect us from something or lead us to something."

She says her primary concerns are women and children, in particular the HIV/Aids-afflicted in Thailand and, since joining the Association early last year, has worked both in Bangkok and upcountry and spoken at several conferences and seminars.

Most recently she inspired a Thai nun to fulfill her dreams by being ordained as a bhikkhuni in Sri Lanka.

Seven years ago this island country saw a revival of the Bhikkhuni issue, the subject of controversy for four decades. There are now more than 200 Bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka.

As a Bhikkhuni, Dr Lee's daily activities are similar to those of a monk.

"It is a beautiful and intimate experience," she says of the offerings of alms every morning, "I have life because of their love for me. If I don't have the food, I don't have life. Their loving kindness goes into my soul and into my bones. It's because of their kindness that I am alive. And that's about life. It doesn't matter what skin colour you have, the language you speak or the country to which you belong. It's the nature of human beings. It's a blessing to live life and feel that everyday."

She is particularly pleased to have become so much part of the local community. "When someone died in the family, or when they had conflicts in the community, they talked to me. When their child was sitting a major exam at school, or their daughters were studying very hard, they let me know."

Most people were delighted to see her, a female monk in a yellow robe. "Women are the backbone of Buddhism in Thailand. The majority of alm-givers in Thailand are women," observes Venerable Lee. "But the sight of a female monk has made some people furious."

Her yellow robe made her feel a little secure while in the Kingdom. One afternoon, while she was having lunch, she was picked up by the police and taken to the station. "On no grounds," she says softly.

As no female is regarded by the Thai Sangha as a monk, the police could obviously not charge her for violating the vinaya (the discipline that demands that monks must not eat meals after midday).

We are eating as she recounts the story and instinctively I glance at my watch. My gesture does not go unnoticed. "I don't think the Lord Buddha had a watch," she says, adding that she sees the interpretation of vinaya as a convenient arrangement to fit in with the routine of lay people.

The vinaya of the Theravada school that dominates Buddhism in Thailand states that a woman who wishes to become a monk must be ordained by both the bhikkhu (male monk) Sangha and the bhikkhuni Sangha . Since the latter body has never existed in Thailand, it is not possible for women to be ordained as monks.

"I am not fighting. I place emphasis on the positive. Just do what you believe is true," she says with a gentle smile.

Since our conversation, the female monk has moved to Sri Lanka, where she hopes she can contribute something to society. "I want to plant seeds of the positive kind and let them grow naturally."

Source: Nation Multimedia, Buddhist News Network