

A path less travelled

Atiya Achakulwisut

Bangkok Post, 17 April 2001

The ordination of prominent Buddhist scholar Dr Chatsumarn Kabilsingh early this year promises a resurgence of religious women in Buddhism, if Thai society will come forward and support it

For Dhammananda, bhikkhuni ordination is a best way for women to carry on the Buddha's spiritual heritage. Her ordination also epitomises an increasing demand for full participation of women in Buddhism -- a worldwide movement which she insists Thailand can't simply reject.

The earth didn't shake. But when former Thammasat lecturer and leading Buddhist scholar Dr Chatsumarn Kabilsingh took the lifetime vow during her ordination to become a bhikkhuni (female monk) in Sri Lanka early this year, it was momentous in the development of Buddhism in Thailand.

Dr Chatsumarn, who received the ordained name of Dhammananda, now assumes the status of a Theravada samaneri (novice). Within two years, if she maintains the novice's six rules (the five Buddhist precepts plus the prohibition on eating after noon), Dhammananda can apply to be ordained as a bhikkhuni.

By committing herself to the sacred status of female Buddhists, which unfortunately has yet to be recognised by Thai law, Dhammananda is paving the way for women interested in realising the Buddha within themselves.

Until now, the only road open to women who wish to develop their spirituality is to become a mae chi (nun). Although the precept-holder standing allows a monastic lifestyle, generally it is not considered a serious platform for Dhamma study.

On a more personal basis, Dr Chatsumarn's entrance into the monkhood attests to a spiritual continuation from one generation to the next. Her mother, Mrs Voramai, is the first Thai bhikkhuni with full ordination. Voramai, known among her many followers as Luang Ya (Grandmother monk) is now 93. She has been sick recently and spends most of the time in bed

"After (my) ordination, I went in to see her. I asked her what she thought of it. She simply stroked my face, playing with my head as if to confirm that it really was shaved. After a while, she let me go as she always did. Since I have worn the holy robes, however, she wais to me," Dhammananda said.

Luang Ya sponsored the construction of Wat Songdharmakalayani in Nakhon Pathom province, where Dhammananda now resides. A leading Buddhist scholar, Dhammananda has had a

distinguished career. With a Ph.D in Buddhism from Magadh University in India, she taught Buddhist philosophy at Thammasat University and Maha Chula Sangha University.

She has published many books about Buddhism, both in Thai and English and is a regular speaker at international conferences. She was also a founder and former director of Thammasat University's Indian Studies Centre.

Academically, Dhammananda is more than accomplished in Buddhist study. But the real reason she decided to enter the monkhood was her boredom with secular existence. The world, she said, just turned her off.

"I grew up in religious surroundings and in fact, I was quite confident I would be ordained one day. But the real calling came about two years ago. What I used to care and work for, the personal glory or success, does not mean anything to me anymore. I have been quite successful in my profession. I have been to many places. I have seen the world. I thought it was time to devote my life to the service of Buddhism."

Dhammananda, who is 57 now, thought she would be too old if she waited until her retirement to embark upon the religious path. She sought early retirement and started preparing herself for the transition.

One of the first things she did was file for a divorce.

"My husband had known before we were married that I would follow the Buddha's way one day. Now that my children have grown up and settled down well, my job is done. I have no concern left." For Dhammananda, what was more difficult was to choose where to be ordained.

The bhikkhuni ordination requires dual ordinations by both the bhikkhuni and bhikkhu sangha (monks council). Since Thailand has never established a bhikkhuni sangha, the ordination is impossible here.

There are a few other Asian countries with an active bhikkhuni sangha, however. Taiwan, Dhammananda noted, has always been the strongest advocate for women. The bhikkhuni order there is very well-established and actively engaged in both academic and social welfare activities.

Even the Taiwanese supreme patriarch remarked that: "Buddhist education in this country is in the hands of bhikkhunis." Dhammananda's own mother was ordained there in the Dharmagupta lineage in 1971.

Some people reject the bhikkhuni ordination from the Taiwanese lineage on the grounds that the lineage belongs to the Mahayana Tradition. Dhammananda explained that this belief is unfounded because the Dharmagupta lineage is in fact a sub-branch of Theravada Buddhism.

Historically speaking, the bhikkhunis who revived the ordination of women in China came from the Theravada Tradition in Sri Lanka. A devout follower of His Holiness the Dalai Lama,

Dhammananda herself was more interested in the Tibetan lineage. But Tibetan ordination is available only at the novice level.

Although the Dalai Lama suggested she could seek a higher ordination in the existing Chinese lineage in Taiwan or Hong Kong, as many women who joined the Tibetan lineage do, Dhammananda hesitated to do so.

Fortunately, Sri Lanka began to revive its bhikkhuni ordination. In 1996, the Korean bhikkhu sangha hosted an ordination of 10 Sri Lankan precept-holders. Two years later, the Sri Lankan sangha, led by Ven Sumangala from the Siam Sect, began to give ordinations to women. According to Dhammananda, the revival of bhikkhuni order in Sri Lanka is a turning point in Buddhist history.

It was the Sri Lankan bhikkhuni who travelled to India and established the bhikkhuni order in China. The lineage still continues until today but in the Mahayana tradition. When Sri Lanka wanted to revive the long-defunct Theravada bhikkhuni order, the Mahayana bhikkhunis returned to start the fire back where it began, making it possible for women in Theravada Buddhist countries to be ordained once again.

Sri Lanka is the only Theravada Buddhist country with a history of bhikkhuni ordination. "So when it is revived on that soil, it takes root," she said, adding there are more than 200 bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka at present.

In April last year, she flew to Taiwan to receive the lay bodhisattva precepts as a way to formulate her mind. She became a vegetarian soon after. The last secular job she did as Dr Chatsumarn Kabilsingh was to be an emcee for a Buddhist fellowship conference. "I still got dressed up and wore make-up at that time," she noted.

On the first full moon night of the first month of the year, she took the eight precepts. She stopped decorating herself and having dinner after that.

On February 6, one day before the Buddhist's holy Makhapuja Day, Dr Chatsumarn had her head shaved and received ordination as a Theravadan samaneri.

"For me, the most important preparation before the ordination was to understand the importance of bhikkhunis and to prepare my mind. Unlike the smooth path of male ordination, being a bhikkhuni is to walk against the tide. If my spiritual foundation is not solid enough, I might become distracted or unhappy when faced with resistance. And if I lose my calmness, it would defeat the whole purpose of my ordination.

"I do not choose to be ordained because I want people to recognise me. I did it because I want to carry on the heritage of the Lord Buddha. I am trying to revive the four pillars of Buddhism-bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, laymen and laywomen-that will sustain the religion into the future. I don't mind if some people reserve different opinions about bhikkhunis. The public will be the ones to judge our worth."

Dhammananda added that there were two ideals she strove towards but could never accomplish before the ordination. The first one was to stop eating meat. "As a Buddhist, I received the first precept of 'do not kill'. Still, I ate what other people killed and I could tell that meat was more delicious than vegetables," she said. The second was to lead a celibate life. "Celibacy is a blissful state. It improves meditation and spiritual development. I only achieved this after taking the bodhisattva precepts."

Now on the monastic path, there are immediate transformations. The first she noticed was physical, related to the new eating habits. "Before, I consumed for my own pleasure. But now, I eat whatever is offered to me. I eat merely to sustain my life. There is no more question whether I like it or not," Dhammananda explained.

"Also, I was an academic by nature. I considered talking to people a waste of time. I would rather shut myself in, reading and researching. But now that I am a monk, I listen to everything visitors have to discuss, be it their illnesses or their conflicts with relatives. I have discovered that most people don't need a tangible solution, they just need someone to listen.

"The changes are sudden and full. It is so clear to me that a monk must serve other people, not his or her self. Even the robes we wear," she touched her brick-coloured robes, "are strictly practical, not aesthetic." Dhammananda has two sets of long-sleeve shirt and robes and she thinks the austere uniform is a wonderful creation.

"With basically nothing to choose from, the mind is less concerned. The only thing I have to consider is if one set of robes is wet, the other must be dry. This frees my mind from distractions. I always think what an amazing thing these robes are," Dhammananda said, with a smile.

In terms of reaction from the people around her, Dhammananda said they can be split into two groups. The first group consists of admirers who are overjoyed at seeing a woman in religious robes. The other are those who simply don't know how to react or interact with her.

To a certain extent, these small-circle reactions reflect trends in the outside world. On the one side, bhikkhuni ordination is praised as a means to empower women in Buddhism-to return to them the previously denied access to enlightenment.

On the other side, it is viewed by some scholars as further adding to the already problematic power structure of the sangha. Dhammananda is aware of the criticism.

"Bhikkhuni ordination is an option that is simply not available for Buddhist women in Thailand. The door is closed. The lock is rusted. And the key is lost. Internationally, however, the demand for full participation of women is very strong. It is a worldwide movement and Thailand can't reject it," Dhammananda said

If the Thai sangha is far-sighted enough, it should take this matter into its own hands instead of allowing women to seek an ordination by themselves. Bhikkhunis are potential human resources that could strengthen many aspects of the sangha's mission.

As for her plan for the future, Dhammananda said that apart from running Wat Songdharmakalani and Baan Santi Rak for unwed mothers and discussing dhamma with visitors, she is learning every aspect of her ordained life and trying to understand it as completely as possible.

As a novice, she is required to study Dhamma with her preceptor for two years. Since the preceptor is in Sri Lanka, she does it via the Internet. Building a religious community for women is next on her agenda.

"I would be satisfied if I could serve as a refuge for women. I am not aiming at a big market. I don't think Thai women will rise up and get ordained en masse. A monastic path is not a comfortable lifestyle. I am thinking of a small religious community which helps women develop their own spirituality and contribute something to society.

"I know there is some resistance out there. It is not my intention to stick out and provoke anybody. I will try to honour everyone. I will try to be a supatipanno, to be a female monk with good conduct. Time will tell. If society believes this is a worthy role, then people will support it and consider it another alternative for women."

Getting there

What is the status of bhikkhuni in Thailand?

The attempt to introduce the bhikkhuni sangha to Thailand dates back to 1927. During that time, politician and progressive social critic Narin Bhasit, commonly known as Narin Klueng, was critical of the laxity of the sangha.

He, then, challenged the institution by having his two daughters, Sara and Chongdi, ordained as bhikkhunis. Narin also donated a piece of land and had Wat Nariwong built as a residence for bhikkhunis. The sangha and state authorities opposed his initiative. His daughters, along with seven or eight bhikkhunis at Wat Nariwong, were ordered to be disrobed. The two bhikkhunis resisted. They were put in jail and physically had the robes removed from them.

The incident prompted the Sangha Supreme Council to pass an order forbidding any monks to give bhikkhuni, samaneri or sikkhamana (a female novice during a two-year training before receiving a bhikkhuni ordination) ordination to women in 1928. The rule still exists.

Dhammananda, however, argues that the order contradicts Article 5 of the Constitution, which stipulates that Thai people, regardless of their origin, gender, or religion, are entitled to equal protection under the Constitution.

"I consulted some judges and they said there is no need to nullify the order because any law that is in conflict with the highest law of the land is automatically null and void. The reason this rule remains is because nobody has ever challenged it. That means the validity of this order has never been questioned or re-examined," the samaneri explained.

Is gender a factor in enlightenment according to the Buddha?

Some people have lingering doubts about the Buddha's acceptance of women because when Queen Maha Pajapati, the Buddha's aunt and stepmother, asked for his permission to be ordained, the Buddha refused. But Queen Maha Pajapati did not give up. She, along with 500 Sakya women, shaved their heads, donned the saffron robes and followed the Buddha on foot.

Ananda, the Buddha's personal attendant, found them waiting at the entrance, covered with dust, in torn robes and bleeding feet. He learned of their dilemma and approached the Buddha on their behalf. Again, the Buddha forbade Ananda, telling him: "Please, do not ask so."

Ananda persisted in an attempt to understand the Buddha's refusal. He asked whether it was because women were not capable of spiritual enlightenment that religious life is available only to men. To this, Buddha made it clear that both men and women have the same potential to reach Nirvana.

He, then, allowed the women to be ordained. The Buddha's statement broke new ground because during that time, according to Hindu beliefs, a woman could reach salvation only through bhakti (devotion) to her husband. A woman was not permitted to read nor recite the Vedas, the Hindu's sacred text, nor was she allowed to lead a religious life.

What are the requirements for bhikkhuni ordination?

Bhikkhuni ordination requires dual ordinations, one in the presence of a minimum of five bhikkhunis and the other in the presence of a minimum of five bhikkhus. A woman who requests a bhikkhuni ordination must be at least 20 years of age, having permission from her parents and have no illness that will pose an obstacle to leading an ordained life. She must have completed a two-year training as a sikkhamana and be able to obtain basic material requirements, such as a bowl and robes.

During the training period, the sikkhamana must observe six anudharmas without transgression. If she violates any of the precepts, she has to start all over again.

- Based on excerpts from Women in Buddhism: Questions and Answers, by Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University, 1998.

Source: The Bangkok Post