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## The Sisterhood

by [Justin Higginbottom](#) | January 23, 2016

Off a road about 3 km north of Phnom Penh International Airport, past clothing and food stalls, where the cracked pavement turns to dirt flanked by grazing cows and duck ponds, the temple stands modestly, absent the ornate stupas that adorn most of the country's pagodas.

The temple grounds, which lie past an entry gate engraved with Chinese characters, are not hidden—a local moto-taxi driver knows it as “the Chinese pagoda”—but they are well out of sight of most residents and travelers.



Bhikkhuni Kammatthana, left, head of Maha Panna Vihara, sits with other bhikkhunis at the temple in Phnom Penh in October. (Jens Welding Ollgaard/The Cambodia Daily)

During a visit to the temple in October, a woman with a shaved head and wearing ocher robes greeted reporters with a smile.

“How did you find us?” she asked.

The temple has the occasional visitor, said another resident of the temple, who gave her name as Dhammaratana. People are surprised to see women in monk’s robes, she said.

“They tell us we are the only ones.”

Since 2001, the Maha Panna Vihara temple, home to a community of 10 Taiwanese bhikkhunis—fully ordained “female monks”—has quietly existed in a country where the predominant form of Buddhism allows women to ascend no higher than the role of nun.

Although the bhikkhunis practice Mahayana Buddhism, a form unfamiliar to the majority of Cambodians—it is estimated that more than 90 percent of the population practices Theravada Buddhism—the women monks hope the sect will bring opportunities for Cambodian women within Buddhism, and society as a whole.

As it stands, the thousands of white-clad nuns who live within Cambodia’s pagodas have a subservient role to male monks, spending their day performing domestic tasks like cooking and cleaning, with little emphasis placed on educating themselves on the teachings of the Buddha.

But the bhikkhunis at Maha Pana Vihara live a fully monastic life: meditating, studying Buddhism, following hundreds of precepts—leaving the cooking and cleaning for laypeople.

And the bhikkhunis are building.

Kneeling beside a laptop in a long hall used for the rare guests, who are asked to kneel on thin floor cushions in a brief show of respect for a squat Buddha statue in the front of the room, a bhikkhuni scrolled through photographs of nearby land owned by the temple. On the screen were images of a construction site, with a perimeter made of a large concrete wall and dozens of rows of newly planted trees. A blueprint was unrolled on the floor.

“A school,” the woman explained.



The courtyard at Maha Panna Vihara (Jens Welding Ollgaard/The Cambodia Daily)

The tradition of ordaining nuns to become bhikkhunis stretches back to the Buddha, who lived more than 2,500 years ago. But until a couple of decades ago, the last bhikkhuni ordained in the Theravada tradition was around the 11th century, according to the Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo, a bhikkhuni and professor of Buddhist studies at the University of San Diego.

A major reason for the lapse in ordination of women was a rule—“most likely the work of monks who lived long after Buddha,” Venerable Tsomo said—that requires a group of male monks as well as bhikkhunis for the ordination of a woman.

Once the communities of bhikkhunis died out, most likely due to famine, according to Venerable Tsomo, there was no way toward ordination for women in Theravada countries, according to the tradition now being upheld by the male Buddhist authorities.

While there still existed bhikkhuni communities in places like China, Korea and Vietnam, those communities were practicing Buddhism in the Mahayana tradition rather than the Theravada tradition dominant in places like Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

In 1996, however, a group of Sri Lankan nuns traveled to India and were ordained by a group of Theravada monks and Korean bhikkhunis. Now, half of the estimated 2,000 nuns in Sri Lanka are fully ordained, according to Venerable Tsomo. Nuns from Thailand have also become ordained, although the Thai Buddhist authority has explicitly refused to recognize their status.

Hou Chhivneath, chief of discipline within Phnom Penh's Theravada Buddhist order, said that Cambodia's clergy were also unwilling to accept that women might become monks.

"Now, nuns cannot become female monks because that became extinct after Buddha's death," he said, explaining that because there were no women monks to ordain new women, the process was impossible.

"How can nuns become legally female monks, because we lost first step?"



A resident laywoman cooks food at Maha Panna Vihara. (Jens Welding Ollgaard/The Cambodia Daily)

In the decade since the Taiwanese bhikkhunis arrived in Cambodia, their religious aim has remained the same—finding peace in life.

"We leave home and become the Bhikkhuni to explore the secret of life. We practice Zen by meditation every day. It is the life education, by which we learn to know what life is from birth to death," Dhammaratana said in an email.

In the last seven years, however, there has been one unique effort, explained a bhikkhuni named Manodhamma.

"From 2008, we started to collect the Khmer Buddhist scriptures, especially for those ancient, lost, lack of original manuscript or blurred in print scriptures," she said in an email.

“We saved these Buddhist scriptures by retyping, reediting, and proofreading, then we published these scriptures for free. By doing so, we hope that the Buddhist culture in Cambodia can be preserved and last forever.”

So far, they have finished a new edition of Tripitaka—the 110-volume canon of texts in Pali, the traditional Buddhist language.

“All of them are retyped and corrected by the experts in Pali language. 70 volumes of them have been published and...40 volumes are on the line,” Manodhamma said.

Apart from the Pali canon, they have helped publish other books including one entitled “How to Be Ordained” and a Pali-Khmer dictionary. If Cambodian women would like to become ordained, Bhikkhuni Kammatthana, the head of the temple, said she is ready to provide the resources.

Yet even if Buddhist authorities in Cambodia warmed to the idea of women being ordained, obstacles would remain, Peou Vanna, the former director of the now-defunct Association of Nuns and Laywomen of Cambodia, explained.

“It is a fact that nuns as well as laywomen are so busy serving the monks and other people in their entourage that they do not have much time to think of themselves in the same way that monks and men do when they practice or learn the Dharma,” Ms. Vanna wrote in a 2005 article entitled “The Quiet Movement of Buddhist Women in Cambodia.”



Bhikkhunis browse through Buddhist texts at the temple. (Jens Welding Ollgaard/The Cambodia Daily)

Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, the first Thai women in modern times to receive ordination and the head of the only bhikkhuni temple in Thailand, is one of the more vocal proponents for the ordination of women. She said she has visited Cambodia to stir interest in ordination with nuns, but had been deterred.

“I offered training for the [nuns] to come to stay with me in Thailand twice [in 2002 and 2003], a group of 5 each time, and we had to pay for translator. They were not educated, this was the real drawback. [I] was hoping that I could bring them to be interested in ordination, but it was not successful,” she wrote through email.

She said she attended a training session with 40 Cambodian nuns in Battambang province in 2006. The nuns “hardly knew anything about Buddhism at all,” she said, and “only 4 of them could read and write.”

The bhikkhunis in Phnom Penh are working to solve the problem.

The Maha Panna Vihara’s planned school, International Panna Thom Institute, will have space for 800 students and housing for women, include a plantation on 22 hectares of land and cost \$20 million, according to Kammatthana.

She said funds for the school were mostly provided by donors outside of the country—the bhikkhunis at the temple do not go door to door collecting alms as is customary in Cambodia for monks—although the temple has received some donations from within Cambodia.

Set to open in 2019, classes will be taught in Khmer, Chinese and English. Teaching and practicing in their native Chinese Mahayana tradition is not part of the plan.

“It’s training how to be female monk in the Khmer Buddhism,” Kammatthana said.

“We don’t mention Cambodia or Chinese [traditions]. The main point is we pay attention to Buddhist teaching,” Dhammaratana explained. “We hope we can live here and know the culture and the people in Cambodia. We are very welcoming. We learn from local traditional culture.”

Venerable Tsomo hopes that the school and the bhikkhuni temple have a reverberating effect for women in Cambodian society.

“It could be a coincidence but generally speaking, those countries that have full ordination for nuns, in those conditions nuns thrive. They become well educated, they become teachers, they can do all kinds of things for society and they also get support from the lay community,” she said.

“So ordination, education and support, meaning not only financial and material support but also encouragement, go together.”

For Dhammaratana, she hopes to give nuns a chance to revolutionize the role of women by becoming monks.

“Not only do service work, they can improve their mind,” she said. “We can make a change for Cambodian female.”

(Additional reporting by Sek Odom and Khuon Narim)

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