



# **DHAMMANANDĀ**

## **B H I K K H U N I**

**Commentaries and  
perspectives from  
around the world.**



**Interviews by Cindy Rasicot**

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## Editorial Note

These interviews are a compilation of a book project I started five years ago. I wanted to tell the story of one of the most inspiring women in Buddhism today, the Most Venerable Dhammananda Bhikkhuni. The following interviews from influential people in the Theravada Bhikkhuni Revival show public impressions of Venerable Dhammananda and her work.

I did not know anything about Venerable Dhammananda prior to moving to Bangkok with my family in 2005. The first time I heard her speak was at a women's conference in October that same year. I remember being captivated by her presence. Her face radiated a soft light as she said, "We cannot solve anything with anger. Anger doesn't lead us anywhere. It is much harder to practice loving-kindness and compassion. That is the goal of Buddhism." In that moment, I found the role model I needed: a compassionate and empowered woman.

I became close to Venerable Dhammananda while we lived in Thailand. In 2008, I asked if I could write a book about her life. Though Venerable Dhammananda graciously agreed, the project was interrupted when my family had to move back to the United States. After we returned home, I began to make annual visits to the temple. In December 2014, the year Venerable Dhammananda was appointed Pavattini, I received temporary ordination.

On one of my annual visits to the temple, I was feeling particularly discouraged and lonely in my marriage. I asked to meet with Venerable Dhammananda, but before I could get a word out, I started to cry. She suddenly remembered I wanted to write a book about her and said, "I would like you to do that." Later, she told me that she asked me to write the book in part because she had felt similar feelings. At that time, she was seriously depressed and began sketching with accompanying descriptions. The sketches were eventually published and became a top-ten best seller. More importantly, she said working on the book project helped her to recover. Venerable Dhammananda came up with the book idea because she thought it would be a good way to distract me from my problems and help me heal.

With Venerable Dhammananda's blessing, I began interviews in 2018. Everyone was willing to participate and expressed excitement about the project. Each interviewee conveyed their deep respect and admiration for Venerable Dhammananda. Many people commented on her determination, but Joan Halifax's quote stays with me to this day. She said, "Venerable Dhammananda has a strong back and a soft front," which reflects my personal impression that Venerable Dhammananda is both incredibly strong and compassionate.

I was impressed by these prominent leader's comments. They all spoke about the immense impact Venerable Dhammananda has had on the Theravada Bhikkhuni Revival in Southeast Asia. I am deeply grateful for the time and valuable input from each interviewee and, as always, grateful to Venerable Dhammananda for her wisdom.

Three deep bows,  
Cindy Rasicot

# **Feminism and Buddhism in Thailand: The Spiritually-Based Social Action of Chatsumarn Kabilsingh**

By Rebecca Warner and Holly Gayley

## **Introduction**

Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh is a Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Thammasat University in Bangkok. She has been an activist for social change within Buddhist institutions since 1984, beginning with her publication of NIBWA: Newsletter on International Buddhist Women's Activities, a quarterly newsletter focused on women's concerns in Buddhist countries. She has played a key role in inspiring an international bhikkhuni revival moment. As a scholar and organizer, she promotes the humanistic ideal of equal access for women to opportunities for spiritual training and practice. Her accomplishments include: a dissertation critiquing the scriptural basis for exclusion of women in Buddhist institutions, the founding of Sakyadhita—an international organization dedicated to improving the conditions and status for Buddhist nuns, for pioneering book—Thai Women in Buddhism—which details gender inequities in Thai society, and the founding of social projects in Thailand to uplift women.

Dr. Kabilsingh's work is invaluable to any student of Buddhism and/or feminism. In her life and work, she provides a role model for a nonviolent approach to feminist activism. She focuses on education and coalition building, foregoing divisive or confrontational tactics. As a scholar, Kabilsingh uses historical research to clarify original Buddhist doctrine in light of misogynist historical permutations. Through writing, publishing, and public speaking, she challenges the stagnation of monastic insularity and the reification of Buddhist institutions in Thailand and around the world. This type of persistent and sustainable activism allows Kabilsingh to make gradual and significant changes in social attitudes and institutions.

In this paper, we view Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh's work in two ways. First, we move chronologically through her life and work, showing how her interest in Buddhism and Feminism developed and manifested. In the early stages of her activism, her work focuses on the revival of the bhikkhuni sangha through publications and conferences. More recently, her "engaged Buddhism" has also taken shape in social projects to uplift women in Thailand. In the second half of this paper, we examine the spiritual dimensions of her approach to feminist activism. We ask the question: how does she express her social concerns in a way that reflects Buddhist values? This paper explores the work of Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh as spiritually-based social action.

## **Revival of the Bhikkhuni sangha**

### **Legacy of Defiance**

Chatsumarn Kabilsingh became interested in reviving the bhikkhuni sangha through her mother's radical spiritual pursuits. During Chatsumarn's childhood, her mother, the Venerable Voramai Kabilsingh, separated from her politician husband and became a renunciant, taking

eight Buddhist precepts and assuming the light yellow robes of a nun. In 1957, she established the first temple for Buddhist women, Watra Songdharma Kalyani, with an elementary school, orphanage, and printing press for her monthly Buddhist journal. The Thailand Government's Department of Religious Affairs challenged the legality of her temple as well as the color of her vestments. (In Thailand, fully ordained monks wear yellow robes, whereas female renunciants, called mae ji, typically wear white robes and cannot become nuns.) With the help of an influential member of the Council of Elder<sup>1</sup> and due to lack of any breach of law, her case was dismissed. In 1971, while the young Kabilsingh pursued a Master's in Religion and Philosophy, the Venerable Voramai Kabilsingh became Thailand's first fully ordained nun, or bhikkhuni. Because the bhikkhuni ordination is unavailable in Thailand, Voramai Kabilsingh had to travel to Taiwan for her ceremony. Since then, she is considered a fully ordained nun in the Chinese Mahayana tradition, but not in the Theravada tradition of her native land. Influenced by these events, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh decided to dedicate her master's dissertation to researching the historical roots of the bhikkhuni order and challenging the reasoning behind the absence of bhikkhuni in Thailand.

### Scholarship for Social Change

In her master's dissertation, Kabilsingh critiques contemporary sentiments against reviving the bhikkhuni order by scrutinizing original Sutra and Vinaya sources. Her scholarship provides a thorough and compelling challenge to the monastic opposition in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries. Persuasion through detailed scriptural research and analysis is a crucial tool for social change within Buddhism, especially the Theravada tradition which emphasizes the sanctity of the Buddha's words. Scholarship holds in the unique capacity to demonstrate the authenticity of contemporary bhikkhuni orders in Mahayana countries as well as to undermine unfounded biases. Persuasion must take precedence over divisive techniques, because creating a schism in the sangha is a grievous spiritual crime in Buddhism.

In her thesis, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh first of all confronts the propagation of isolated passages from the Sutras to create a bias toward the exclusion of women. She provides a context for often cited passages in which the Buddha seemingly devalues women. For example, she challenges the commonplace interpretation of the Buddha's reluctance to establish the bhikkhuni order. This famous story is often used as a justification for the hesitation among modern monks to reinstate the bhikkhuni order. To refute this interpretation, Kabilsingh first recalls the Buddha's reluctance to teach the dharma following his enlightenment. Of course, no one argues that bases on this reluctance, the dharma should not be taught. She then proceeds to draw a picture of the historic occasion in question. The Buddha was approached for ordination by none other than his aunt and step-mother, the recently widowed Queen Mahapajapati, along with her court of 500 royal women of the Buddha's own Sakya clan. Kabilsingh provides evidence for the Buddha's hesitation that reflects concern for the safety and comfort of these royal women in the hardships of a renunciant's life—rather than gender bias. Ananda, the Buddha's attendant, cousin and closest counsel, intervenes on behalf of Mahaprajapati by asking the Buddha whether or not women are capable of attaining enlightenment. Following his own affirmative answer, the Buddha decides to establish the bhikkhuni order.

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<sup>1</sup> Voramai Kabilsingh's defender, Phra Pronmuni, had acted as her preceptor when she took the eight Buddhist precepts.

After her review of Sutra sources on the Buddha's views on women, Kabilsingh tackles the prevalent assumption that the Mahayanists have relaxed the strict code of discipline found in the Theravada Vinaya. The main body of her thesis comprises an intricate comparison of Vinaya rules, demonstrating the consistency and non-sectarian nature of the surviving Vinayas. Historically, the lineage of bhikkhuni ordination traveled from India to Sri Lanka in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE and from there it spread to China in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. Kabilsingh argues that the extent Chinese bhikkhuni lineage is Theravadin, not Mahayanist. Through a line by line comparison of each patimoksha rule unique to bhikkhunis, she verifies that the Vinaya has remained virtually unchanged over the centuries despite migration.

Today, the direct and unaltered lineage of bhikkhuni ordination exists only in Mahayana Buddhist countries, like Taiwan and Korea. Between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, the bhikkhuni order died out in Theravadin countries. Most women renunciants in Southeast Asia, like the Thai mae ji, live with uncertain status as neither fully ordained nuns nor householders laity. In order for the bhikkhuni sangha to return to Theravada Asia, the bhikkhuni sangha must be convened of the authenticity of the extent lineages and of the value and capacity of women as spiritual leaders. Kabilsingh's research is an important step towards this goal.

### The Bhikkhuni Revival Movement

Now, as Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh stands at the forefront of the international movement to revive the bhikkhuni order. Her pioneering efforts to uplift the status of women within Buddhist culture and institutions include her influential book, *Thai Women in Buddhism*. This compact, compelling account draws from her early research and elaborates the circumstances of women in Thailand in the convergence of social and spiritual dimensions. Additionally, she edits and publishes NIBWA: The Newsletter on International Buddhist Women's Activities<sup>2</sup> and co-founded Sakyadhita, the International Association of Buddhist Women. These efforts focus on bhikkhuni revival and foster a budding international movement to reinstate bhikkhuni ordination to the Theravadin tradition, primarily in Sri Lanka and Thailand, as well as introducing it into Tibetan Buddhism. As we will see in the next section, Kabilsingh sows seeds of transformation through international publications and social work within Thailand.

## Engaged Buddhism

### Feminism and Buddhism in Action

Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh grew up as a "temple girl" practicing and studying Buddhism at an early age. As she recounts "When I was just 10 years old, my mother became a nun. Rather than following the traditional practice of leaving home, she made our home into a temple."<sup>3</sup> Integrating her academic research with her Buddhist upbringing, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh has become an international spokesperson for the spiritual uplift of women in Buddhist countries.

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<sup>2</sup> Recently, Dr. Kabilsingh renamed her newsletter *Yasodhara* to honor and highlight a prominent woman Buddhist's history. Yasodhara was the historical Buddha's wife, who later in life joined the nun's order and attained enlightenment.

<sup>3</sup> Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism*, p. ix.

Kabilsingh has initiated a wide range of activities to promote women's access to their full spiritual potential. She advocates the bhikkhuni revival through publications and conferences. Moreover, she provides an opportunity for women to practice and study the Buddhist teachings.

### Creating An International Network for Buddhist Women

Chatsumarn Kabilsingh has been widely influential in joining feminism and Buddhism at the international level. In 1987, she co-founded and later became the president of Sakyadhita, literally "Daughters of the Buddha." Her work with Sakyadhita, most clearly shows the international scope of her vision. Sakyadhita is an international organization that promotes the bhikkhuni issue worldwide and supports projects to improve the facilities and training for Buddhist nuns in Asia. It emerged from a conference in Bodh Gaya, organized by Kabilsingh along with Karma Lekshe Tsomo and Ayya Khema. Since [the writing of this paper], four more international conferences and a book have ensued.

The inspiration to create an international network for Buddhist women—that lead to Sakyadhita—had taken shape for Chatsumarn Kabilsingh several years earlier. In 1984, she established a quarterly newsletter as a forum for women's concerns in Buddhist countries, called NIBWA: Newsletter on International Buddhist Women's Activities. Over its fourteen years, NIBWA has grown from thirty subscribers to a circulation in over thirty countries.

Within its pages lie a diverse collection of articles portraying women in Buddhism. Biographies of pioneering nuns, activists, and yoginis appear, as well as accounts of outreach projects in Asia established by and for Buddhist women. Regional reports on the conditions of Buddhist nuns is an on-going theme for NIBWA. Issues discussed range widely—from bhikkhunis to AIDS and abortion.

The stories of unsung heresies that fill the pages of NIBWA create a mosaic of women pioneers in engaged Buddhism. In an article titled, "Her Heart as Fully Immune," we read the compelling account of Pimchai Inthamul, an unwitting Thai AIDS activist who contracted HIV from her husband and started visiting health service and bedside ministry. On the cover of another NIBWA smiles 82 year old Bhikkhuni Hiu Wan hosting a conference on Buddhist education in Taiwan at her pioneering college. Through NIBWA, we learn more about Kabilsingh herself, as well as detailed accounts of her own projects.

### Empowering Women

Since 1992, Kabilsingh has conducted three-day meditation retreats for women. They have the opportunity to practice meditation and study Buddhism together. Kabilsingh leads special training retreats for mae jis. In a project called "Buddha-Savika," (women followers of the Buddha), Kabilsingh seeks to undo ingrained negative self-images and prepare the mae jis for roles as leaders in society. In order to gain the education and structural support to benefit society, mae jis must improve the status of women in Thai Buddhism. Therefore, ordination is a crucial step for them. By providing a setting for mae jis to practice and study the Buddhist teachings, Kabilsingh hopes to prepare them for seeking ordination as bhikkhunis.

In *Thai Women in Buddhism*, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh devotes a chapter to depicting the destitution of Thailand's female renunciants, mae jis. She reports their lack of education (80% have less than seven years of schooling), low income backgrounds and lack of financial support. Kabilsingh relates, "Mae jis' lack of self-esteem, coupled with negative social attitudes, have resulted in their extremely low status."<sup>4</sup> Often, they are seen as failures in life, unable to marry or earn a living. When permitted to live in a temple, mae jis perform chores for the monks, like cooking and cleaning. They receive no formal training in meditation or scriptural study. Therefore, they cannot act as spiritual guides for women, nor do they have the resources or skills to provide social services. Kabilsingh sees the future of bhikkhunis in Thailand as engaged Buddhist—an active force providing social services, education and counseling for girls and women. She asserts:

Once a woman has that ordained status, she can engage herself in doing many good works for society, like teaching, preaching for women, and so on... There are certain kinds of works, like running an orphanage, taking care of young children, that monks cannot do—at least they haven't been doing them in my country. If we have fully ordained nuns, we could open up the horizon of different activities for women.<sup>5</sup>

Many social needs go unmet from lack of a female clergy. With greater respect accorded to women in Buddhism through the legitimization of the female renunciant as bhikkhunis, nuns would have the training and resources for their own spiritual practice and to provide badly needed services and spiritual education to Thai women.

### Sheltering Unwed Mothers

Fifty-two kilometers away from the hustle and bustle of Bangkok lies the cloister of the temple, Watra Songdharma Kalyani, founded by the Venerable Voramai Kabilsingh. Recently, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh has opened a shelter there for unwed mothers. Baan San Rak "Home of Peace and Love" is a small project in its early stages. It provides an alternative to abortion for unwed mothers.

What makes this shelter unique is its focus on Buddhist training. At Baan San Rak, young women practice and study the dharma while pregnant and nursing. They remain at the shelter for at least two months after delivery to breast feed their babies, but most new mothers remain longer. Kabilsingh believes that they gain spiritual strength to face life's challenges while at Baan San Rak. She conveys:

While mothers are with us, maybe for six months, we hope to plant seeds of peace and love in them, so that when they return to their own societies, they should have strongly rooted selves and be qualified members of society.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism*, p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> *NIBWA*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1995, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> *NIBWA*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 1996, p. 8.

The young mothers can leave their babies at the temple's orphanage while trying to establish a wholesome life. Only a small percentage of women never return to reclaim their babies. In her project at Watr Songdharma Kalyani, Kabilsingh nurtures the spiritual potential of women to become strong members of society.

## Women in Thai Society

Dr. Kabilsingh has not only advocated the ordination of the Thai bhikkhuni, but has also shed light on the condition of Thai women as a whole. In *Thai Women in Buddhism* she describes the limited role women are allowed to play in Thai society. Due to these limitations, an alarmingly high number turn to (or are conned into) prostitution. Thus the women are socially degraded. More tragically, the large prostitution community has become a cesspool of AIDS victims. NIBWA has also been a forum for prostitution and AIDS victims to tell their stories so others have an insider's view of their suffering.

Thailand's giant sisters, China and India, have greatly influenced Thai culture throughout history. Not only has Thailand absorbed religious and visual aesthetics but also their attitudes towards women. During King Rama II's reign, there was an influx of trade between Thailand and China. During this time many Chinese decided to immigrate to Thailand and marry Thai women, thus implanting Chinese cultural attitudes. These attitudes were soaked in negative perceptions of women, enforcing the idea of women's incompetence which is blatantly acted out in modern day Thailand. Five negative characteristics assigned to women adopted from the Chinese immigrants which were: "women are easily manipulated, always unsatisfied, jealous, insulting, and of lesser intelligence."<sup>7</sup> Even though they are receiving more educational and job opportunities, these negative views are so ingrained in the culture that it will take a long time before women are considered competent enough to participate fully. As of now, they are still highly encouraged to learn rudimentary skills of being a housewife and look pretty for their men. This view of women has placed them into inferior positions on economic, social, political, and education levels.

A lack of a bhikkhuni order is one aspect of women's position in Thai society. Closely linked, and on the other side of the spectrum lies the abundance of Thai prostitutes. This abundance is due to the limited amount of labor skills women are allowed to learn, and in turn the limited number of ways women can earn an income. The average Thai woman only receives five years of compulsory education. When she is old enough to enter the work force, she has little to offer. She becomes vulnerable and can only work out of what others have to offer. She is also pressured by her family (particularly the oldest daughters) to accumulate good merit by earning an income to help them survive (often poor rural families). Young men return to their home villages, from their jobs in Bangkok, to offer work to the women. The women are not only enticed by the first opportunity in their lives to live in luxury, but mostly pressured by their inability to gain income in other ways and help the family out. Some women are told that the job is something simple like washing dishes, and when they arrive in Bangkok discover otherwise. Others are informed beforehand and agree as they have few options.

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<sup>7</sup> Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism*, p. 19.

When they enter into prostitution they become statistical figures in Dr. Kabilsingh's book, *Thai Women in Buddhism*:

Statistics on the number of prostitutes has always been controversial between government organizations on the one hand, and non-government organizations on the other. Because prostitution is illegal, there is no official record of prostitutes. Morris G. Fox, a United Nations consultant on social welfare, did a study of prostitution in 1957, reported 20,000 prostitutes, half in Bangkok. Dr. Pasuk Pongpaichit, an economics professor at Chulalongkorn University, says that the current number of prostitutes is between 700,000 to one million. This figure is generally accepted by many organizations dealing with the problem of prostitution. This includes approximately 200,000 Thai prostitutes working abroad. Pasuk gives a regional breakdown: 43% from the north, 26% from the northeast, 20% from central Thailand, and 4% from the south.<sup>8</sup>

The average age of these prostitutes is between sixteen and nineteen and studies indicate that there is a correlation between these ages, and the number of voluntary (44%) and involuntary (64%) prostitutes. There are fewer who are older than this: twenty seven to twenty nine (24%): thirty to thirty two (26%). Many of these women still receive little income, and what is earned is sent to their families. The price range of services is from \$240 (6,000 baht) to as little as \$4 (100 baht). Only a few receive at the upper end, due to their age and beauty, but most receive less than \$20 (500 baht) for their services. Generally, their pimps keep about two-thirds of income.

AIDS in Thailand is flourishing like fire on a gasoline soaked cloth. Younger girls are not only valued for their beauty, but also for their freshness. Older women who have been in the business longer are more likely to have AIDS, and are therefore much less desirable.

[A] recent and frightening health problem was studied by Meechai Veeravaidhya, who quoted the following statistics of AIDS among prostitutes in Chiangrai (which has a high concentration of prostitutes). In 1987, there were no reported cases; in 1988, 98% of the prostitutes were diagnosed; in 1989, 36%; by August of 1990, 56% of the total population of prostitutes were diagnosed as HIV positive.

Victims of AIDS are not only prostitutes and customers of prostitutes, but also a flurry of newly weds, where the husband has previously contracted AIDS from a prostitute and in turn gave it to his new wife. NIBWA has been a form for such victims. One woman tells of her journey with the disease in an interview in the NIBWA. She also tells of how Buddhism has helped her in her tragedy.

Even if women don't get AIDS during their career as prostitutes, when they return to their villages to begin a normal life of marriage and family, this dream is not a possibility as the desirable Thai woman (at least the ideal for a wife) is the one who has remained pure and

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 73.

honorable. Fortunately, as so many women have become prostitutes to support their families, exceptions to this bias are gradually being made.

Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh lives in a society where women are degraded on every level. This degradation started with the seeds of Chinese and Hindu influences and has born the poison fruit of the mass exploitation of women and the possible annihilation of many lives through the rampant spreading of AIDS. Citizens of Thailand might see the prostitutes a few blocks away from home, and probably even know some prostitutes, but are still blind to the extent of suffering produced by the industry. Chatsumarn is providing the people of Thailand and of the world a glimpse of the larger picture of suffering. Hopefully this glimpse will be utilized before too many experience it first hand as the AIDS virus destroys their bodies.

## **Spiritual Dimensions**

While it is clear that Chatsumarn Kabilsingh seeks to reform Buddhism in Thailand to include women's spiritual aspirations, how might we say that her social activism is spiritual in approach? How has Buddhism inspired her to work for social change? What elements demonstrate a particularly Buddhist methodology to her work? First, we will briefly look at her basic approach and the spiritual motivation to engage in social action. Finally, we will examine in more detail several specific Buddhist dimensions of the work.

### **A Holistic Approach**

Whether her work appears on the local level as social work or internationally as political activism, it endeavors to transform the social structure of Buddhism to include the spiritual training of women. It is a holistic approach that addresses both the roots and the immediacy of women's conditions, the local and the global level, and the sacred and profane aspects of society.

Kabilsingh has promoted a unique brand of feminism. Rather than focus on equality as an unmitigated right, she takes inspiration from women's spiritual potential. Because enlightenment is possible for men and women alike, women deserve to realize that potential. She states:

It starts from my simple belief that women are equal to men in their spiritual potential to gain enlightenment. Therefore, I protest against anything that might obstruct the reality of this belief in practice.<sup>9</sup>

In Buddhism, enlightenment is considered a basic potential that nay human can realize in this very life. Kabilsingh bases her feminist activism on this basic Buddhist belief, rather than imported egalitarian ideals.

Rather than hail the spiritual potential of women, the monastic hierarchy in Thailand excludes them and portrays women as unclean, obstacles to monk's spiritual process, and born female from "bad karma".<sup>10</sup> In Thailand, women are forbidden to circumambulate stupas, because they

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<sup>9</sup> NIBWA, Vol. 12, No. 3, 1996, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> This discussion comes from chapter 3, "Buddhist Texts from a Feminist Perspective," in *Thai Women in Buddhism*.

are considered unclean (due to menstruation). Likewise, women are viewed as “an enemy to the monk’s purity” in his struggle to maintain celibacy. Kabilsingh suggests that negative cultural biases against women pose as Buddhist doctrine due to the lack of spiritual education among the laity and female voice in the religious hierarchy.

As a scholar, Kabilsingh expresses the cultural basis of biases against women through historical research detailed in her publications and presentations. In *Thai Women in Buddhism*, she demonstrates how cultural biases against women have seeped into Buddhist doctrine over time. Discussing the notion that a female birth results from “bad karma,” she notes that the “belief that women are of lower birth reflects Brahmanical ideas of caste rather than Buddhist teachings which was remarkable in its rejection of the rigid social structure and social prejudices of sixth century BCE India.”<sup>11</sup> However, this damaging view is naively accepted by both monks and laity as part of Buddhism. Kabilsingh continues:

Many women are convinced that they carry a heavy load of negative karma due to the simple fact of their gender, and are therefore eager to gain merit to offset it. Making offerings to the Sangha is the primary way most lay people hope to gain merit. Monks, being ‘fields of merit,’ thus benefit directly from this vicious belief.<sup>12</sup>

This ironic situation positions laywomen as the primary source of support for monks in Thailand. Because they believe in their own inferiority, women support monks rather than pursuing their own spiritual development.

This negative view of women’s spiritual potential in Thailand has implications in both the sacred and profane realms—for nuns and prostitutes. It underlies both the reluctance to establish a bhikkhuni order and the explosive growth of prostitution in Thailand. Kabilsingh sees these two extremes—the sacred and the profane—in a holistic way:

People don’t understand what the connection is between this ordination problem and the problem of prostitutes, for example. I try to bring this out in my presentations. When women cannot become ordained, because the image of women is so negative, that pushes women to the other end of the spectrum. That’s why the doors to brothels are open for women. But why are the doors closed for women to become nuns? I talk about the need to see social issues as holistic—you cannot separate them.<sup>13</sup>

In Thailand, women’s spiritual potential is belittled, while their physical potential is exploited. The root cause that thwarts the bhikkhuni revival and enables the prostitution explosion is negative social attitudes towards women.

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<sup>11</sup> Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism*, p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> *NIBWA*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1995, p. 4.

## Radical Innovation and Moderation

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines radical as "original, fundamental, reaching to the center or the ultimate source." In a spiritual context, a radical approach implies an analysis of the fundamental intent of a spiritual tradition. In *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, the authors call this type of radical approach "scripturalism."<sup>14</sup> This term implies contemporary reform movements from within one's own spiritual tradition, redefining its hermeneutic implications for one's society.

Within the canonical veneration of the Theravada tradition, Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh's radical approach scrutinizes Buddhist scripture to glean the Buddha's original statements, intentions, and actions. As we discussed regarding her thesis, Kabilsingh investigates Sutra and Vinaya sources to reveal the Buddha's view of women's spiritual potential and role in religious institutions. She demonstrates how Buddhist doctrine has been (1) misconstrued by selective interpretation from original source material and has (2) altered by the confluence of Buddhism with Thai culture. The Buddha's own confidence in the spiritual potential of women inspires Kabilsingh's own efforts to include women in Thai Buddhist tradition.

Chatsumarn Kabilsingh shares with contemporary "engaged Buddhists" the radical innovation that social activism is an integral component of spiritual life. The engaged Buddhist movement addresses suffering through activism as part of spiritual practice. This contrasts with the traditional emphasis of spiritual development within monastic isolation, traditional to Asian Buddhism. Interestingly, in the case of the Bhikkhuni Revival Movement, in order for women to have access to a life of renunciation and spiritual practice, cultural obstacles must be addressed and surmounted. Moreover, Kabilsingh regards social service as integral to spiritual development for both renunciants and laity.

Engaged Buddhism, in general, draws on the traditional Mahayana ideal of compassion for all being and advocates the skillful means of social changes as a method to ameliorate suffering. This can be seen as a radical return to the essence of Mahayana and a modern interpretation of its ideal. Thus, to alleviate suffering due to social conditions engages the Mahayana ideal of saving sentient being from suffering as a pragmatic call for action.

Kabilsingh's own call for action is Mahayana in flavor and includes her own concerns as a feminist. In a Theravadin country with patriarchal religious institutions, her assertions challenge the very conscience of Buddhism in Thailand. Kabilsingh clearly expressed her Mahayana inspiration as follows:

I want to be enlightened only because once I'm enlightened, I would have much more capacity to help all sentient being. This kind of conviction must be very strong in order to lead you to action.<sup>15</sup>

To truly express compassion for all beings, one must take seriously the needs, aspirations, and potentials of women. Kabilsingh particularly argued for Buddhism to address the concerns of

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<sup>14</sup> Christopher S. Queen in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movement in Asia*, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> *NIBWA*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1995, p. 5.

women. She envisions the uplift of Thai women as not only equal access for women to spiritual institution but also to social services and education which emerge from those institutions.

While her inspiration for social change within Buddhist institutions is radical and innovative, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh's methods and tone are moderate. Eschewing provocative tactics and short-term results, Kabilsingh works for long term uplift of Thai women through consensus building. She publicizes her concerns in ever-widening circles, conveying her themes in well-reasoned arguments. In this way, she builds consensus, beginning with the international community of Buddhist women, in order to penetrate monastic indifference and rigidity. International publicity slowly and resolutely places pressure on Thai institutions and society to take seriously her arguments and implement change.<sup>16</sup>

In her public image, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh conveys dignity and restraint, speaking in inclusive manner on issues. She seeks to persuade through reasoned arguments, refraining from divisive litanies. Despite this, she has been discounted, along with other Buddhist feminists, as driven by klesas, or defile emotions. However, the strength in her work comes from combining a radical and innovative approach with a moderate tone, which in the long run may convince her opponents of the validity and value of the bhikkhuni sangha.

The limited biographical material we find in NIBWA issues clearly evokes the Buddhist inspiration for Kabilsingh's social action. Within her Mahayana concern for other's welfare, she feels a responsibility and calling to action that springs directly from her canonical knowledge and mediation practice. She expressed a sense of "responsibility as an academic and committed Buddhist to make known to the general public the truth as I have found in Dharma Vinaya."<sup>17</sup> This responsibility springs from her concern with the state of contemporary Thai society and Buddhism's role within it:

The essence of Buddhism itself seems to be getting clouded. Thai society attaches and pays much attention to form at the expense of neglecting the essence. Then on top of it we are being flooded by a strong use of materialism and consumerism.<sup>18</sup>

To correct the aberrations of Buddhism within Thai society, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh experiences a calling as a reformer and advocate. She discussed her belief in the inseparability of spiritual faith and activism in this way: "The faith becomes commitment when I leap into action. If I have faith and don't express that faith, it's no good. Faith must come with action."<sup>19</sup> This echoes the Mahayana sentiment that full realization requires both a concern for all beings and activity for their benefit.

In this section, we will discuss particular spiritual dimensions of Chatsumarn Kabilsingh's work. Her holistic approach to women's issues discussed earlier in this paper incorporates the whole spectrum of women, from nuns to prostitutes. This holistic approach will be looked at more

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<sup>16</sup> Modern spiritual liberation movements, beginning with Gandhi, have successfully used the media to apply international opinion to bear on local or national issues.

<sup>17</sup> NIBWA, Vol. 12, 1996, p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> NIBWA, Vol. 12, No. 3, 1996, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> NIBWA, Vol. 11, 1995, p. 5.

specifically in several themes. These themes include, first of all, “transcending fixed views.” Expressed in her efforts to soften the rigidity of social structures within Buddhism. Additionally, we will explore the non-dual aspect of “submersion”. As a scholar, Buddhist, and woman, Kabilsingh has an insider status on the issues she advocates which allows her to speak from personal experience and insight. Finally, we will look at the incorporation of spiritual practice within her activism, particularly with Sakyadhita. Integrating personal spiritual practice with social activism on a broad scale is the defining component for any spiritually based change.

### Transcending Fixed Views

His Holiness the Dalai Lama preaches non-dogmatism as a form of spiritual activism to bring the world together. Dr. Kabilsingh’s work is aiming towards the same goal. The very condition which Chatsumarn is trying to improve has its problematic source at the idealistic clinging of dogmatism. She explains that most of the bhikshu’s rejection and degradation of women has nothing to do with the essential teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha. They are based on rigid beliefs conditioned in Vedic culture that have trickled back into Thai Buddhism. Nevertheless apparent “teachings of Buddha” are used to marginalize women, even though these teachings were originally intended to dissolve dogmatic concepts of self and other (including the concept of sex). For example, the Thai bhikshu sangha (particularly in the north) excludes women from entering sacred Buddhist places. This tradition is not in the Buddha’s teachings, as women were allowed to study and practice with the Buddha. Thai monks derive the belief that women pollute sacred space from the Brahmanical idea that menstrual blood is impure.<sup>20</sup>

Quotes from Buddhist texts are contiguously cited in response to why women shouldn’t be able to practice the Dharma as men do. These texts weren’t written until three hundred years after Shakyamuni passed away, by monks who weren’t enlightened, and with the absence of many of the bhikshu sangha of the time.<sup>21</sup> Men writing these passages came from a cultural society, the same society in which the Buddha transcended such distinctions:

The Buddha often explained that the quality of one’s actions defined a person’s worth, rather than birth into a particular social class or caste. Buddhist monks who hold what are, in essence, Brahmanical beliefs must be made aware that these were not the values of the Buddha, but are old prejudices based on ancient Indian cultural norms that were explicitly rejected by the Buddha.<sup>22</sup>

Interpretations of “Buddhahood” descriptions also provide “proof” that women are not capable of attaining enlightenment until they are reborn into a man’s body. Shakyamuni was born with thirty-two auspicious marks which predicated his enlightenment, one of those being “concealed” genitalia. This has been interpreted that he must be male. Another interpretation can be that an enlightened being transcends sexual craving.<sup>23</sup> These examples show how over the years Buddhist texts have become a source of justification for omitting Thai women from the path of

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<sup>20</sup> Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism*, p. 31.

<sup>21</sup> Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism*, p. 23.

<sup>22</sup> Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism*, p. 27.

<sup>23</sup> Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism*, p. 31.

liberation. According to Dr. Kabilsingh, however, such exclusionary ideas are not what the Buddha taught and have no root in the Buddhadharma.

### Submersion

Dr. Kabilsingh is activating the bhikkhuni movement from a personal point of view on many levels of her life. As a Buddhist, a professor in theology, and woman, she addressed the system that prohibits her fundamental spiritual growth, and that of women around her. That makes it impossible for Kabilsingh to separate herself from the suffering caused by the unfair prohibition of women from spiritually developing themselves on the Buddhist path.

Kabilsingh experienced that women who wanted to fulfill their spiritual potential a fully ordained bhikkhuni would be immediately pressed down when her mother (Venerable Voramai Kabilsingh) shaved her head and wore the yellow robes of the monks when Chatsumarn was ten. Venerable Voramai Kabilsingh was immediately taken to the authority for wearing yellow robes and opening a spiritual center for women. Fortunately, the case was dismissed as there was no real evidence of illegal action on Voramai's behalf. A few years later, Voramai went to Taiwan to become a fully ordained bhikkhuni, returning only to find no support from the lay Buddhist population, or recognition from the bhikkhuni order. Watching this injustice happening with her very mother became a glaring lesson to Dr. Kabilsingh about the biases of her own society.

Not only seeing her mother's lack of equal support compared to Thai men, but Dr. Kabilsingh's own inclinations for practicing Buddhism are directly effected. Even in the Buddhist world, beliefs are fed to the Thai population that women cannot themselves attain enlightenment, and must first wait to be reborn as men before they can accomplish this feat. This belief instills in women the idea that they are less evolved than the men around them, and shouldn't even try.

Kabilsingh was more fortunate than the average Thai woman. She had a powerful female role model who was strong enough to swim against the current of these common misconceptions. She was also encouraged to utilize her educational opportunities to give her the strength to challenge theological discrimination against women. She has integrated herself into the very system (of scholarship) which has been used to rationalize the subordinated position of women. She used it as firm ground from which to express other points of view.

On many levels, Dr. Kabilsingh has both experienced, and made use of her direct understanding to transform the system that binds her. In this way, she is not an outsider fighting an idea about what is going on between two other parties. As a Buddhist, she seeks to provide changes for everybody in the system, therefore alleviating the suffering of everybody caught in this delusion.

### Incorporation of Spiritual Practice

Encouraging spiritual practice is vital to the Buddhist women's movement in Thailand. Giving them the opportunity to learn about themselves through studying and the practice of meditation is the root for social transformation. Meditation practice provides the space for women to shed the layers of social conditioning about themselves and eventually alter the interpersonal dynamic between men and women.

Women will have the opportunity to see through the incessant demands put onto them in order for them to maintain the stereotypes of the ideal woman. Not only have historical influences of Brahmanical and Chinese societies cast a negative shadow on the image of women, but Western commercialization has double impounded the ideals to which women should aspire. When women experience a gap from the incessant bombardment of imagery of high fashion, perhaps they will come to notice that there is more to them than looking pretty, and preparing themselves for men.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps they will notice that they are capable of spiritual growth and heightened awareness from spiritual practice as much as men. In this heightened awareness deriving from the meditation practice, women might be inspired to relate in the world not as impure beings who are compensating for previous bad karma until they become men. They might start relation in the world with the understanding that there's nothing wrong with them in the first place.

This might be threatening for men who are used to having women looking up to them, and are now experiencing an eye-level interaction. Perhaps it might arouse resentment, and aggression, but once they become used to this change, it might also give them an opportunity to begin respecting the women in their lives a little more. After this shift has occurred with the women in their lives, men might also begin to communicate with each other in a different matter:

It is common practice for Thai men to visit brothels to prove their virility. Men who do not do so are considered strange and suffer the possibility of becoming social outcasts. Many men say they cannot break the habit of going to prostitutes because they are so readily available and a cheap source of entertainment.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps when the women in their lives refuse to be objectified, and act on this new knowledge that they are not objects of men, the men will in turn begin to notice that women are not their objects. Men will no longer pressure each other to perpetuate this common myth about women.

Women's relationship with other women will also shift. Many women will have the opportunity that Dr. Kabilsingh had of spiritual guidance. Women who were finally able to achieve spiritual strength can encourage and guide younger women towards many forms of liberation including the superficial constructs of women's roles. Not only will women work together in the household, or in whorehouses, but also in spiritual communities.

Relationships between women in a spiritual practice are already being actualized in the annual Sakyadhita conferences being held in various Asian countries. Dr. Kabilsingh and Bhikkhuni Ayya Khema are the co-founders and coordinators of the conference which brings Buddhist women from many traditions all over the world to discuss women's issues in Buddhism. Conference daily schedules exemplify how women are encouraged to study and practice which is the first step towards social change:

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<sup>24</sup> Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism*, p. 20.

<sup>25</sup> Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism*, p. 79.

7 a.m. Meditation  
8 a.m. Breakfast  
9 a.m. Talks and Discussion  
11:30 a.m. Lunch  
Noon Rest and Informal Chats  
2 p.m. Workshops  
4 p.m. Tea and Dialogue  
5 p.m. Chanting and Meditation  
6 p.m. Cultural Presentations

We can see that the movement itself does not separate itself from its aspirations. Sakyadhita is about connecting Buddhist women, but most of all it's the connection of these women on a spiritual level.

Buddhist ideals are prominent in the list of Sakyadhita's formal objectives.<sup>26</sup> The first on the list, "To promote world peace through the practice of the Buddha's teachings" implied awareness of each individual in the movement." Second, "To promote harmony and understanding among various Buddhist traditions,"; the third objective implies a dialogue between two seemingly opposing views. Opposing views must drop a part of their agenda in order to see it from the other's perspective. Both parties come from a perceived truth to arrive at a common ground. This is reminiscent of Gandhi's relationship to his opponents. It is also related to the spiritual practice of dissolving self and other, and letting go of an attachment to fixed views.

## Conclusion

Dr. Kabilsingh displays an exemplar model of how the spiritual realm meets with social engagement. She reaches the public ear through a traditional campaign of networking and more radical efforts at empowering women through spiritual retreats. Her work balances periodical (NIBWA and Sakyadhita newsletters) and in-depth (her dissertation and *Thai Women in Buddhism*) publications informing the world of the international bhikkhuni situation. She complements her efforts on the international level—providing Buddhist women from around the world a forum to voice their concerns—with projects at local level, strengthening spiritual opportunities for Thai women.

Chatsumarn strikes a balance with her intimate involvement to all of the issues she raises and the breadth of her scope to involve women internationally. All she asks for involves life as a woman, a Buddhist, and a member of the human race. Ultimately, the impact of reviving the international bhikkhuni sangha will eventually alter the view of women in Thai society and beyond. Isn't shedding light on delusion what Buddhist spiritual practice is all about?

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<sup>26</sup> Julia Milton, *Sakyadhita Website Homepage*.

## Ajahn Brahm



Ajahn Brahm is an internationally recognized Theravada Buddhist forest monk, lecturer, and author. He currently serves as the Abbot of Bodhinyana Monastery in Serpentine, Western Australia. On October 22, 2009 he and Bhante Sujato ordained four women into the Theravada Buddhist tradition, a highly controversial act in Thai Buddhism.

In 2004, Ajahn Brahm received the honorary title of chao khun from his Majesty the King of Thailand for his outstanding service in Buddhism. In June 2019, the Queen of England presented him with an award for services to Buddhism, in particular gender equity. Ajahn Brahm gave this interview in June 2019 during the 11<sup>th</sup> Buddhist Global Conference at Berkeley.

CR: You're a strong proponent of the restoration of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. Is there one person who influenced you in that regard?

AB: Yes. It was the bhikkhunis, the nuns who first came to Australia. The one that really stood out was the nun called Ajahn Vayama. She was a disciple of Ayya Khema but then she became a ten-preceptor because there was no bhikkhuni ordination available. We had a nice piece of land for a monastery, which has now become Dhammasara. Land doesn't make a monastery; people do. She said she was going to take it on. She stayed as a ten preceptor for many years. Ajahn Vayama was such an impressive woman. She was so simple. She had a huge amount of endurance. She stayed in this hot little caravan with lots of flies. She would not complain. She was not asking for very much in her life. Then, when a few more women came they wanted to be bhikkhunis- really good women. They already trained as preceptors for more than two years and said they would like to become bhikkhunis.

So, it wasn't like I went out of my way to try to find someone, saying "Hey Cindy, would you like to become a bhikkhuni?" This was the beginning of 2009. We thought through it. I know the Vinaya very well and there's no reason why they cannot be ordained. So it was a case of what's the problem? Why not?

Shortly after, there was a global conference in New Zealand. I wanted to find out what other monasteries around the world thought about bhikkhuni ordination. I talked to a lay person who was head of the English Sangha Trust. They said there was no way the Sangha in England was going to support bhikkhuni ordination. Though some of the Trustees were trying to encourage it, the senior monks said, "No! No discussion." So, I realized any sort of discussion or debate was not welcome in the UK. Instead, we thought 'There's nothing wrong with it according to the Vinaya. Let's do it.'

Ordination is not an easy thing to do. You have to find a bhikkhuni who's been ordained for twelve rains in addition to other bhikkhunis to make up the quorum. I'd also have to get a quorum of male sangha supporters and several lay supporters that included a large number of Thais. The Thai lay support really impressed me. I asked them what they thought about bhikkhuni ordination and warned them the process might not go down so well in Thailand. Since they'd seen the nuns, they loved the idea. They said, "Yes, please do it." That surprised me. So, we had everything lined up. We said let's try it.

We had to go many hoops. We had to ask the Buddhist society of lay people what they thought. They told us we may get in trouble but formally voted to do it. About a week later, I was in England visiting my family. I popped in to see Ajahn Sumedho and I informed him we plan to ordain bhikkhunis in Australia. I told him I wasn't asking for permission because the vinaya says that each monastery has their own authority to do things. But out of respect I informed him.

Then "shit hit the fan", as they say. They got quite upset but there was nothing they could do. We had a sangha decision and a lay decision— all the people on the ground who count. So, we did it.

I was also impressed by an elite conference on the gold coast, which hosted influential decision makers in Australia. Climate change was a major theme for the conference. They discussed the

melted chunk of an Icelandic glacier that created a Tsunami that damaged the New York harbor a year ago. They felt they had no choice but to bring carbon emissions to zero. So, they speculated, let's say we've achieved that. The climate problem has been solved. Now how do we get there from where we are today? Instead of this is where we are now how do we get to that goal, because they're too many obstacles that way. How cool was that?

Why can't we do that with Bhikkhunis? We start at the end goal, saying bhikkhunis are here and flourishing; they're given equal respect, equal sharing of the burdens of teaching. Imagine there are as many bhikkhunis as there are monks in the U.S. and other Western countries, even Thailand. That's our reality now. How did we get there? Working backwards is another way of problem solving. That's how I looked at it.

CR: Did you know Venerable Dhammananda at that time?

AB: Yeah. She was partially responsible since she mentioned these stories from global conferences. Once during a 2004 conference, I was notified that I received a chao khun award and they insisted that I come right away. It was right in the middle of the conference that I had organized. I was the main person in charge. I told them I couldn't come. They got a bit upset and said you have to come to receive this accolade.

I was talking to Venerable Dhammananda at that conference, and she said "What we really need to get bhikkhuni ordination going in Thailand is a senior Thai monk, someone who has received an honorary title because they have some say. If one of them did it," she said looking at me, "They would pay attention. Why don't you do it?" It's wonderful that people will put you on the spot.

There was another great nun who was a member of the Fo Ghan Shan group-- Sister Yi Fa. I really respected her because she had a lot of attitude and she would not shut up. I liked her perseverance and outspokenness. At one of these conferences in Singapore 2003, we were discussing the issue of bhikkhuni ordination and I said, "Well yeah, but it's very difficult." Then she got on the microphone and said, "That's patronizing women, Ajahn Brahm; that's not good enough." And I thought, wow, she really has a point. I loved that bhikkhuni because she wasn't afraid of men or monks or anyone. She knew her stuff. I don't know what happened to her but she was probably put into some quiet monastery somewhere for being a trouble maker. She also said you can't say it's someone else's problem. Many people like that make all of the monks think twice. It's become such an obvious thing to do.

CR: Now you are trying to raise funds to build a monastery in England?

AB: Yes, everyone is always trying to raise money for something. Good monasteries attract good people. The reason for doing something in England... sometimes someone says something that penetrates me really deeply and I have to do something about it. After the Australian bhikkhuni ordination, many of the ten precept nuns disrobed and left England. They felt very uncomfortable after their spiritual leaders said something these nuns couldn't respect. Imagine you give your life to an organization or monastery and the leadership is something you're embarrassed about-- so they left. Some came to Australia, and some went to the US. Two or three nuns went to the

monastery over in the Sierras. They've taken bhikkhuni ordination now, outside of England. Once when I was visiting England, they said Theravada Buddhism is very dark for British Women. I remember those words because I was partially responsible, but in a good way. So, you have to do something about it.

There is one bhikkhuni in Oxford, England with a rented house. It is necessary to try to find another bhikkhuni to stay with her. For someone to stay with her, she needs a much bigger thing than just a small, rented house. I have some wealthy disciples and we have been raising money for that project. At the moment we have one million pounds sterling. In the UK, that doesn't get you very far. It takes a bit more to get a decent place in the countryside with land to make it like a serene forest monastery. So that's why the people are organizing this conference. I don't think Diana would mind me telling you this. She's been working for the last year and a half to raise money for the bhikkhuni monastery. That's one of the things that's been driving her.

CR: Has Venerable Dhammananda ever been to Australia?

AB: Oh, yes. Several times. You feel a lot of compassion for her, because you've known her for such a long time. She's a very wonderful teacher. If you looked at her and you looked at a monastic, a male of similar age, which one would you respect more? It's obvious: Bhikkhuni Dhammananda. Sometimes, because of adversity, there's a spiritual strength there. People who have it easy don't seem to generate this kind of strength.

There's the old story of the truckload of dung, the more shit you have in your garden the better plants that come up. That's a good example of her.

CR: How important do you think she is to the bhikkhuni movement in Thailand?

AB: Very important because she was an academic and she knew the Thai culture. She never abused Thai culture and knew how to do it without pushing people's noses out of joint. At the same time, she had the authority of being a well-known academic.

You know, when Prime Minister Thaksin was running the country, one of the senators in Parliament put a proposition up to discuss bhikkhuni ordination. But because of the instability of Thai politics at the time, it was put on the back burner. Then there was a change of government and so it never went that far. Now I don't know what would happen.

CR: Do you think things are changing and the Sangha is more accepting?

AB: I think the sangha is changing since they've lost some respect from the general populous. Every now and then, there's some scandal about very senior monks embezzling money. Still the people are Buddhist, they love Buddhism and their culture. They want to put food in the alms bowl of people they respect. So, you have someone like Bhikkhuni Dhammananda and the bhikkhuni movement and they're great bhikkhunis. Sometimes people say, "Why are we suppressing this?" Having more bhikkhunis could increase Buddhist faith in Thailand. It might even be a good example to our monks so that they too would have to 'lift their game,' as they say.

The new head monk of Thailand spent a while in Australian monastery. He was a forest monk before and he was also such a beautiful simple monk. Even though he's the head of Thailand, he doesn't wear shoes. He must be in his nineties now. He's just a friendly monk and walks everywhere. He doesn't have any infirmities and when he was having his investiture as the head monk he had to go and visit the main royal monasteries in Bangkok. (At that time) The head monk of one of those monasteries called me up because I was visiting Thailand close to Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's monastery. He asked, "Can you drop what you are doing and come into Bangkok? I want to present you to the new Sangha Raja (head monk of Thailand)." I didn't know what was really going on. Then this monk who was a good friend of mine presented me to the new Sangha Raja. All the TV cameras were there, and he spent a long time talking to me, even though all these other senior monks were there. To me, that was a signal that the very senior monks are ready for this. These are highly intelligent monks who know about politics, who know I am associated with Bhikkhunis. So, I think he did it on purpose. But I cannot be sure, and I cannot say that in Thailand.

CR: Was 2016 the last time you saw Venerable Dhammananda Bhikkhuni at the Asian Buddhist Conference in Nakhon Pathom?

AB: I cannot say for sure. Every now and again we are at some conference or event.

CR: Is there anything special you could say to describe your relationship with Venerable Dhammananda?

AB: I think it's a mutual respect. She had a Western based education but is very well versed in both Western academia and Thai culture. She formed a great bridge. She can relate to Westerners and gain their deep respect as well as gain the respect of Thai people.

CR: How well known do you think she is in the US?

AB: Among Buddhist circles she is very well known. Every now and again people show these BBC documentaries about what is happening in Thailand with Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, so she does get exposure. Whenever I see her, I talk about the bhikkhuni lineage and how strong it can be.

CR: Anything else that you want to add?

AB: Well you mentioned my talk about "We're on the Right Side of History." That was from a speech after I was given an award for services to Buddhism and in particular gender equity for ordaining bhikkhuni. I was given that award for ordaining Bhikkhunis and for making that open to women in the world. In Thailand, people respect royalty enormously. Receiving that award from the Queen of England, who is highly respected by Thai royalty, is almost like receiving the award from the eldest royal. So, to get an award with her imprimatur on it for ordaining bhikkhunis—that has a powerful message to the elite in Thailand. That should have an effect on the people in Thailand.

CR: Did you ever meet the King of Thailand?

AB: Unfortunately not. I had the opportunity to meet him when I was given the chao khun award, but I was busy attending that other conference and couldn't attend.

CR: You are so generous with your time and support.

AB: Why not? Maybe it's because I'm a Westerner, Western educated, and have a social conscience. The story behind why I have a social conscience is probably from my time as a student in Cambridge. A couple of my Christian friends told me they were going to visit a mental institution as a way of doing "good acts" for Jesus. I thought, 'Well, if they are doing that as Christians, I better do something as a Buddhist.' Total conceit and ego in trying to keep up with my friends, but nevertheless, I went with them to an institution. In those days, people with down syndrome were confined. They opened me up enormously. When they talk about emotional intelligence, I was stunned by how these friends with down syndrome could understand me so easily. I had just broken up with a girlfriend the night before, so I went there to do this occupational therapy. As soon as one of them saw me, he came running up from a distance and gave me this big hug.

First of all, I am English and we don't do hugs. And I am straight, not gay. To be hugged by a man as an Englishman was very uncomfortable. But he did it with such love and said, "What's wrong?" I thought, 'How the hell did you know that?' He realized that I was really disappointed and he went straight away. How could he do that? He hadn't learned intellectual intelligence, but emotional intelligence, they were really attuned. At the same time, you're sometimes having dinner with Nobel laureates in the faculty club and you have something to compare to. Those Nobel laureates, they were emotionally stunted. They hadn't developed that part of themselves at all. The other part, the intellect was huge. But these down syndrome friends were amazing.

You know, just being a male you're afraid to explore that area. They're powerful parts of your life which, because of its power and strength you don't know how to control it. Physically, you're more in control of your limbs and muscles. But the emotions, that was just a bit too much. But it was wonderful to spend time as a monk because at that time you weren't competing anymore and had the opportunity and space to understand your emotions and explore them. Why was it that I really enjoyed being with people with Downs Syndrome when other people would just walk away? I thought these were amazing people and I was grateful to spend time with them. I just thanked them. I really missed them when I had to leave. I wasn't being 'goody goody' at all. They were great teachers, unexpected teachers. Life sometimes throws out unexpected teachings.

CR: Thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to add about Venerable Dhammananda?

AB: Hopefully she will live a long life and lives to see bhikkhunis fully accepted legally and legitimately in Thailand by the Sangha Council. Things do change, politics change. And it's one of those things which you call a no-brainer. Whether it's the Royal Family or the government in power now, it's something they can do very easily and that doesn't cost any money. There's been a change of government and leadership, so they don't need to lose face. All the senior monks could vote on this and actually do something that is accepted worldwide to show that Thailand is progressing in many areas— other areas it's not. It may be a bit difficult for them because they

may lose face, they may lose money, but it's such an easy one. Just accept the bhikkhunis, do something about it, all those senior monks become heroes including the Royal family and the Prime Minister. Why not? It's everything to gain and nothing to lose. Hopefully we see that.

CR: Thank you so much.

## Bhante Sujato



Bhante Sujato is an Australian Theravada Buddhist monk who received ordination in the Thai forest lineage of Ajahn Chan. As a strong supporter of bhikkhuni ordination, he established the Santi Monastery for Buddhist nuns in 2003 in New South Wales, Australia.

CR: Why are you living in Taiwan?

BS: I'm staying on a little island off the west coast of Taiwan. I've been here for two and a half years. I came here to translate the four Nikayas from Pali into English. I did that because there aren't any complete translations that are freely available. So I decided I'd better do it myself. I have some very good friends and supporters in Penang, Malaysia. The ancestral family home of one of my supporters is based here. They came here about 100 years ago from China, perhaps during the Boxer Rebellion. Once they settled, they kind of thrived at this fishing village. They had a little store out in front and of course the kids grew up and left before returning to the mainland for work. They have a few bits of land and a few years ago they did a renovation. It's actually where they grew up as kids. They use it only two weeks a year. When I wanted to do this project, I contacted the family and asked if I could come there. The husband just laughed, saying "We always thought you would come and stay there eventually."

I'll return to Australia in about ten days to attend some conferences and see my dad.

CR: You are a strong proponent of the restoration of the bhikkhuni lineage. In 2008, I seem to remember you talking about your sister. Was there one person or personal experience that motivated you in this regard? If so, what were the circumstances?

BS: When I was in Perth from 1997-1998 staying in Ajahn Brahm's monastery, my sister came to visit and we were talking. She said—and she spoke very quietly without any negativity, but in a matter of fact kind of way—that she found it difficult to commit herself to any religious life because none of them treated women as equals. That was a very small statement, it's kind of obvious, not news for anybody. But when I heard it from my own sister the reality of it really kind of struck me. I realized the world I inhabited as a man and the possibilities that had been open for me were different from her world. That conversation planted a seed for me to start looking more closely at what these inequalities were, why they were there, and what we could do about them.

CR: And was it 2003 that you started Santi Forest Monastery. So sometime between the late 90's and 2003 your interest became clear. Do you remember what changed?

BS: There were a few things that happened. One major thing was when I lived in Malaysia for a couple of years. That shifted my perspective in a number of ways. One way was because Penang (Malaysia) has a very diverse Buddhist scene. Have you spent time in Malaysia?

CR: Just Singapore.

BS: Malaysian Buddhism is kind of like what American Buddhism would be like in terms of its diversity, except it's much more rooted in monastic traditions. It has a full diversity of Chinese, Thai, Sinhalese, Burmese, and Tibetan traditions. All the different groups are there and they all get along just fine. They have their differences: Burmese have their Vipassana centers, Sri Lankans have community monasteries, things like that. It really showed me how the different Buddhist traditions, especially the Mahayana traditions, were really part of those same traditions. That's something you don't see in Thailand because they're not there. To meet different

Mahayana nuns and monks from different traditions and backgrounds and realize under all the surface-level differences, they're really practicing the same path. As far as monastic training, yes, there are differences in how the rules are interpreted and practiced. But the basic framework for the Vinaya is the same in every case. That's something I kind of knew before but I'd never really seen in practice.

Of course, that connection between Mahayana and Theravada is one of the foundational principles for the restoration of the Bhikkhuni order. So that was one thing. And the second thing was that I saw so many good women practitioners. Most of the good meditators are women. When I was there, I was teaching for a year. The women were doing the translation for my talks.

See the thing about Asian women... I don't know if it's just Asian women, but there's this reputation that women in Asia are second-class citizens-- kind of meek and humble. When you get to know them, they're actually incredibly competent and strong women. I don't know what the reason is, but you see all these dedicated practitioners who are very capable, very intelligent women with a huge amount to contribute and who want to contribute. Many of them were interested in receiving ordination.

CR: Do you remember the first time you met Venerable Dhammananda? Can you describe that first meeting?

BS: I've met her a number of times over the years. The first time may have been at a conference in Singapore or Malaysia. I couldn't say which was the first time. I definitely saw her at the Perth Conference in 2008. I think I met her earlier. I think she was at the first conference in Kuala Lumpur. It was before I started SFM so it must have been about 2003.

CR: What was your first impression?

BS: I can't remember my first impression, but overall I can tell you that she's always good humored, intelligent, quick witted, and very warm with a vital kind of presence. I always enjoy seeing her and talking with her. She always has really interesting things to say.

CR: What quality do you respect or most admire about her?

BS: Her determination, the fact that she's had a path and pursued it. I have some idea of the obstacles that she's faced, but I'm sure it's only a tiny fragment of the reality. She's pursued that all with such grace and good humor. It's really hard to avoid being bitter and disillusioned; she seems to have worked out how to do that.

There is one thing I find telling if not a bit shocking. She's not just the main international representative with an international voice. She's not just the main representative of the Thai Bhikkhunis, she's the main representative of the Thai Sangha. There's no one among the Thai monks who engages with the international arena the way that she does. I can't think of any monk. If you look at international conferences, yes, Thai monks will sometimes do presentations and things but they're not really engaging with things and pushing the narrative in the same way

as Venerable Dhammananda. In terms of having a meaningful voice in the international arena, she's the only one really.

CR: Meaningful in the sense of the Bhikkhuni issue?

BS: Any issue really. There are Thai monks who are good meditation teachers and such. You can understand why most Thai monks are focused on their local issues. But it's strange that there's no one in the international arena; it's not as if there aren't intelligent and educated monks. Of course, there are. But for some reason, I think it's a cultural thing. Perhaps there's a cultural inhibition or wanting to avoid criticism. Whereas Venerable Dhammananda knows she's going to be criticized wherever she goes.

CR: Is there any conference that is really memorable to you?

SB: The Sakyadhita Indonesian conference in 2015. I actually booked a ticket to the wrong city.

CR: What was amazing about this conference?

BS: The setting was fantastic. It was a women's conference, so it was very interesting. There were lots of fascinating things done there, it was very progressive, very diverse, and included people from different backgrounds. When we were at the conference, same sex marriage was legalized in the US. I happened to be the first speaker on the panel after the news came through, so I announced that. There were panels on LGBT issues. I mentioned this and there was universal applause from the audience. I've heard stereotypes that Indonesia is kind of repressive and won't support these kinds of issues. That's not my experience.

On the first day of the conference, Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo and all the other organizers were invited to the local Governor's palace, where they were given a formal state reception and parade through the streets. I've lived in Malaysia; of course, there are a lot of problems and issues. But I know that the main religious goal is to promote harmony. Indonesian bhikkhunis quietly get government funding every year. They put money in their bank accounts and they don't even apply for it.

CR: I assume Venerable Dhammananda was at the conference. Have you ever consulted with Venerable Dhammananda about her scholarly research defending the revival of the Bhikkhuni lineage?

SB: Yes. We've had numerous conversations and email exchanges.

CR: Do you consider yourself a feminist?

BS: Oh yes. Absolutely.

CR: Ven. Dhammananda said she is a Buddhist first and a feminist second. Do you subscribe to that idea?

BS: I don't think there's a need to rank 'isms.' I don't think we have to be defensive about being a feminist. It's just commonsense. I'm guessing that this will be part of your story's background; to look at the different kinds of Asian feminisms and the way that's been interpreted and filtered through the Asian cultures.

CR: I asked Venerable Dhammananda what the Thai feminist reactions were when she received ordination. She basically said that those people were opposed to Buddhism because of the Thai patriarchy.

BS: You can see this is part of the division. American Feminist Psychologist Carol Gilligan talks about this in her book 'The Birth of Pleasure'. She said patriarchy divides men against women and divides women against each other. That's how patriarchy survives.

CR: Who are the most influential feminists to you?

BS: I liked Carol Gilligan's work. If you want, I can put you in touch with a Sri Lankan scholar who is one of founders of the Asian third wave of feminism-- Kumara Jayawardena. She's basically tried to present feminism within a Sri Lankan Buddhist context. She argues against the idea that feminism is an alien imposition on Asian culture. She pointed to her own cultural roots that support ideas of feminism. She did this sort of historical research throughout Asia and different developing countries. I'll give her your contact.

CR: Do you think there's been progress in the revival of the Thai Theravada bhikkhuni lineage in your lifetime? Could you describe that and how Venerable Dhammananda's ordination contributed to that effort?

BS: Of course, Venerable Dhammananda is obviously the foundation of the whole revival, her scholarly work, her advocacy, and her practical work setting up the order. She has paved the way for everyone else. I'm not up on the numbers, but I think there are upwards of 200 Bhikkhunis in Thailand now. Venerable Dhammananda would have better figures than me. Obviously, there are legal problems and everything else. But one of the big issues is having after nun offer mentorship and leadership as a spiritual role model for another nun. This is something that I'm acutely aware of as a monk. In my experience, when you're a teacher, people tend to project and identify with the teacher.

If I'm trying to lead and support nuns, it's very difficult to get into an environment where they're going to see themselves in a leadership role. There's still an overwhelming need to project onto the teacher. If the teacher is always a man, then it's really hard. I think Venerable Dhammananda has been able to step into this kind of leadership role and provide a serious and authoritative presence to be reckoned with which provides a role model and example for other women to follow. She's been able to do this because of the seriousness of both her scholarly work and her spiritual vocation.

CR: Do you have any sense of what she is up against in terms of the male prejudice in Thailand?

SB: I have some idea- It's complicated. Generally speaking, I think most of the monks don't really have a problem with her. There's a kind of hardening that happens at an institutional level pushed by a relatively small minority of monks who push this kind of sexist agenda. But the majority of monks either don't really care or, in my experience, are very supportive of nuns and bhikkhunis. But when it comes to standing up in public and being counted and doing something, suddenly they (the monks) are not there anymore.

There are so many factors at play. One of the main ones, unfortunately, is the overall struggles of the Sangha. Thai monastic centers as a whole are struggling to cope with modernity, the fact that the monasteries are rapidly emptying out, that kids don't want to do temporary ordinations anymore, that people don't want to go to monasteries for education anymore, that people have alternative career choices and they're not going to temples anymore. Another factor is the sclerotic and arthritic leadership that hasn't made a decision in a generation. The only major movement that's actually dynamic and innovative is a criminal cult (Dhammakaya Temple, known for money laundering and corruption), which is a threat to the existence of Thai Theravada Buddhism. Yet another factor is coping with the death of the king and the destabilization of the Thai society.

Where are they going now? The Sangha is there like a pillar that holds Thai society in (what is perceived as) highest values of the past, the things in Thai society that they most value and want to carry forward. When we see monastics from a Western background, we tend to see it as a vocation to pursue in order to reach enlightenment or spiritual advancement. But in Thai society, the Sangha functions as a way to provide cultural continuity. So, any kind of change is really threatening to that. People have explicitly expressed to me, "It's not that good, but we can't lose it."

As always, the poor women are left on the outside and they don't have an institutional say. They kind of say "sorry ladies, we can't do anything for you." The tragedy is, the bhikkhuni order can and probably is an incredibly positive forum to actually change things in a positive manner. But the Sangha would rather have a thousand monasteries empty and falling apart than to fill them with nuns.

CR: Is there anything unique in Venerable Dhammananda's approach to Buddhism that distinguishes her from other Bhikkhuni with which you collaborate?

BS: I'm not entirely sure; everyone has their own unique qualities. I think in many respects what she is doing is providing a kind of template for building community. She has a very balanced approach to the monastic life: socially, scholarly, community building, training, meditation, etc. So, she is really setting a template for building a monastic tradition in a healthy way, which sets a good example for the kind of thing we can be doing. There are so many different kinds of monasteries and ways that people live; every place will be different. I try to encourage bhikkhunis not to imagine that there's one template that's going to fit everybody; everyone has to find their own personality and what works for them.

CR: Do you think Venerable Dhammananda is recognized on an international or global level, and, if so, by whom?

SB: If you mention her name, monastics, the academic community, and the global Buddhist community recognizes her. Obviously, she doesn't have a huge international profile like the Dalai Lama. But because she appears at these national events and conferences and publishes books in English, she has quite a wide presence.

CR: If you could describe Venerable Dhammananda with one word, what would it be?

BS: Indomitable.

CR: Are you coming to SF?

BS: I have a standing invitation from Ayya Thathaloka. I haven't given her dates yet, but I will be seeing her in Sydney in a couple of weeks, so I'll discuss it with her then. My main concern at the moment is seeing my family and my community in Australia. They're the ones who have supported me for the past twenty years and looked after me. I go back and see how they are, if there is something to do, and if there is some way I can serve the community there. I might even start to think about visiting the states. But to be honest, I'm not enthusiastic about visiting the states. When going through immigration at the borders, one of my friends said you get treated like a suspect. He said when you enter the country, you can get pulled aside for three hours and be interrogated.

I could see something like this being framed to be quite interesting to a mainstream audience.

CR: Thank you for your thoughtful interview.

## Venerable Paisal Visalo



CR: Do you remember when you first met Venerable Dhammananda? What were you doing at that time and what was your first impression?

PV: I do not remember when I met her the first time. I heard her name when I was doing my B.A. at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University. She was teaching in the same faculty, but that was more than 40 years ago.

CR: What is your relationship to Venerable Dhammananda? Do you seek her out for her academic knowledge about Buddhist teachings?

PV: At that time, I was a student. I knew her from a distance and did not take any courses from her. I got to know her after my ordination.

CR: What groups or organizations have you been involved in where you have worked in collaboration with Ven. Dhammananda?

PV: I recall there was an issue on Dhammakaya in 1999. I was the President of the Buddhika and campaigning for the Buddhist reform. I contacted her to join the network.

CR: Did you have contact with Ven. Dhammananda after she was ordained in 2001? What impact do you think that her ordination had on the Thai Sangha?

PV: After her ordination, we had contact off and on. I think her ordination made lots of Buddhists think about the role and status of women in Buddhism. I also think the Thai Sangha should allow women to have their space.

CR: Do you believe in the reestablishment of the bhikkhuni in Thailand? In Theravada? In Vajrayana?

PV: I believe there is a good chance for bhikkhunis to establish themselves. But to be accepted by the Thai Theravada Sangha, it is difficult to say.

CR: What are the main obstacles to the full ordination of women in the Sangha?

PV: There are 2 major problems. First, the patriarchal mentality does not allow women to have the same status as men. Second, the predominant interpretation of the Vinaya doesn't allow ordination for women.

CR: Have you seen progress in the revival of the Thai Theravada Bhikkhuni lineage in your lifetime? If so, how important was Venerable Dhammananda's ordination to that effort?

PV: I see lots of progress in the Thai Theravada bhikkhuni lineage with increasing number; this is all because of Venerable Dhammananda's initiation.

CR: Would the ordination of women help boost the Sangha's social image?

PV: It helps to improve the image of Buddhism and creates an opportunity for women to receive ordination. But the negative reaction from the monks about female ordination is causing many to look at the Sangha negatively.

CR: What is your view of the centralization of the Sangha and its current position on women in Buddhism?

PV: The centralization of the Sangha forces sanghas in the whole country to be part of the government. The monks have to wait for orders from the central government; There is no initiation from themselves. So, they cannot handle various problems on their own. As a result, the local Sangha is weak and inefficient; it also allows for corruption in the system. We witness many monks who made mistakes but remain with titles and are protected by the power structure.

The majority of monks are accustomed to the patriarchy; thus, they cannot see the importance of women.

CR: How would you see the bhikkhuni's role if they were to be integrated in the structure of the Sangha? Would a new institutional structure need to be created?

PV: I am not sure if the Bhikkhuni Sangha becoming part of the sangha would be a good thing or not, as they are centralized. Again, bhikkhunis would be under the government structure and thus lose the flexibility and ability to respond to the needs of women in society. They would lose their own initiative.

CR: How should bhikkhuni advocate for their cause within the current political environment?

PV: The Bhikkhunis should raise faith among the public by earnestly following the Dhamma and Vinaya. At the same time, they should also play the role of preacher and address the suffering of women while extend loving kindness and compassion. In order to be able to do so, the bhikkhunis themselves need to have sufficient knowledge of both the dhamma and general education.

CR: How would you describe the current gap between monks, bhikkhuni and mae chis?

PV: The monks have a strong stand in the mind of the people, whereas the bhikkhunis are still unstable since they aren't accepted by the main sangha. But the mae chis still have an unclear status as to whether they are ordained or not. People will support bhikkhunis more than mae chis.

CR: What do you think of new movements led by Buddhist lay women such as the Techo Vipassana led by a self-proclaimed enlightened woman (Acharavadee Wongsakon)?

PV: The movements of Buddhist laywomen will be easily accepted by the public if they have knowledge of the dhamma. But the movement by Techo Vipassana is still doubtful since the teaching is far from what Thai people are accustomed to. Also, they are not dependent on Thai Bhikkhus and boasting the leader's enlightenment allows more criticism.

CR: Can Thai monks abroad play a role in the promotion or reestablishment of the Thai Bhikkhuni order?

PV: Thai monks living abroad still emphasize the ritualistic and traditional way of practice because they still have to depend on the Thai people who live in that country. It will be difficult for them to support the Bhikkhuni.

CR: What role can the political sphere play or should it play a role in the revival of the Bhikkhuni lineage?

PV: It is possible to draft a new sangha act to decentralize the power of the Sangha and allow the new ones to take care of themselves. This will allow a new space for the bhikkhunis.

CR: Can the monarchy play a role in all this? King? Princesses?

PV: As long as the bhikkhunis are controversial, the only role of the King is to give his signature on the new Act.

CR: Do you think that Thai monk's attitudes towards women's ordination has shifted since Ven. Dhammananda's ordination?

PV: No. I do not think they have changed much.

CR: Do you think it is possible that Thailand's Sangha would ever consider abolishing the infamous order of 1928 saying that Bhikkhus are forbidden from giving ordination to women?

PV: It's difficult. To be truthful, that order is not really effective. The Council of Elders are not serious about putting it in o practice and the general public has already lost faith in the Council, so they do not support the Council to pursue it effectively.

CR: What changes do you think are happening, if any in the Thai Sangha's attitude towards women's ordination?

PV: They see that women can be good monastics and that the public doesn't protest against the bhikkhunis.

CR: Is there anything unique in Venerable Dhammananda's approach to Buddhism that distinguishes her from other Bhikkhuni you collaborate with?

PV: The main difference I see is her bravery to advocate for this issue publicly and internationally, both in her speech and writing.

CR: What do you think Venerable Dhammananda's single most important contribution has been as a Buddhist scholar and feminist?

PV: To be ordained as a Theravada bhikkhuni is to confirm that the Vinaya allows her to do so.

CR: If you could use one word to describe Venerable Dhammananda what would that be?

PV: Brave and committed to what she believes. I admire this quality of hers.

## Reverend Joan Halifax



The Theris, or senior Buddhist Bhikkhunis, have been a mystery to most Buddhists. They stand like a distant mountain range covered in mist, not visible yet firmly there. We are only now learning more about the women who joined the Buddha's Sangha 2500 years ago. Their presence in early Buddhism created a quiet revolution in social values that only now is beginning to come to fruition in our modern cultures, thanks to the vision, courage, and determination of women like Venerable Dhammananda, the subject of this book's interviews.

As Buddhism meets the modern world, more and more women are practicing and receiving ordination as novices and monks. Women are taking great responsibility as the heads of monasteries, dhamma teachers, and scholars. This is a book about one of those extraordinary women, and I have the great joy of being her friend.

In 2003, I was fortunate to meet the great bhikkhuni Venerable Dhammananda, who was the first Thai woman to receive Theravada Bhikkhuni ordination on February 28, 2003 from Sri Lanka.

We encountered each other at the Aryavinaya meeting inspired by the Thai social activist Sulak Sivaraksa. As a Buddhist feminist and social activist, I wanted to meet this remarkable woman to spend time with her and learn from her. Before traveling to Thailand, I asked one of the conference coordinators to request forward my request to stay at Venerable Dhammananda's monastery after the meeting.

I was very moved by Venerable Dhammananda's presence at the Aryavinaya meeting. She spoke with profound conviction about the importance of allowing women to become fully ordained. I was aware of the controversy surrounding her ordination and ordaining women more generally in Theravada Buddhism.

Thailand has some 300,000 male monks. Men have monopolized monkhood for centuries. Women are essentially barred from ordination. There is a fairly recent and unfortunate history of gender nonparity in the modern Thai monasticism.

In 1928, Prince Bhujong Jombunud Sirivadddhano, the Supreme Patriarch of Thailand, and the Sangha Supreme Council forbade male monks from ordaining women after Narin Klueng, a Buddhist activist and politician, had his two daughters ordained. Both daughters were forcibly disrobed. For almost eighty years, that directive has blocked women from joining the monk body. To make matter worse, in 1984 and 1987 the Sangha Supreme Council issued two rulings making the ordination of women illegal. So, Venerable Dhammananda's extraordinary act in seeking full ordination despite Thai restrictions was of great interest to me. Her ordination also stirred up controversy in Thailand.

After the Ariyavinaya meeting, I made my way to her monastery, Wat Songdhammakalyani, directly west of Bangkok in the city of Nakhon Pathom. I was shocked by the public hostility she faced as a result of her ordination. The anger directed at her for receiving monastic vows was both bewildering and frightening to me.

While at Wat Songdhammakalyani, Venerable Dhammananda and I discovered we had much in common. We took refuge in each other, as I was weary from many problems in my country and community, and she was weary from the aggressive resistance to her ordination. We realized our feelings of isolation and not many of our peers were accessible. In our days together, we gave each other great support as we explored ways to renew ourselves and continue our work in and for the world.

I learned from my new friend that women do not normally go on alms rounds in Thailand. In this practice, a monastic walks silently with an alms bowl in their hands and receives food from lay people out of respect. Despite the uncomfortable social context at the time, she invited me to join her on her daily alms round. We made our way through the neighborhood adjacent to the monastery, her in russet robes with bare feet and me in my black Zen robes. As we slowly walked in the heat of an early Thai morning, some households closed their doors tightly as we neared them. Other men and women opened their doors to bring food to us. Though I cast my eyes down, I was aware of some women who wept as they stood before us. I saw men's hands shaking as they put rice into our begging bowls.

At the time, I had no idea how radical this act was. I only knew that my head was bare to the sun, my feet were bare to the road, and my heart was bare to the people from whom I received food. Later, I realized that we had not only broken the social norm, but we had, in some small way, broken open the door that separates women practitioners from being who they really are in that country. There are no photographs of these hot morning walks on the stinging pavement of Nakhon Pathom. But the sense that women's right to practice was being established in some humble way as we made our way through this busy neighborhood.

As I learned more about the Buddhist women's rights in Thailand and broader Southeast Asia, Venerable Dhammananda and I began to think about the Buddhist icons who reflect values related to gender parity. I realized that there were few images of women, especially in Southeast Asia. At that time, I knew of no statues of Mahapajapati, the Buddha's stepmother who bravely became the first bhikkhuni.

I learned from my new friend that there actually was a small temple in the middle of Bangkok with a collection of statues of the first bhikkhuni. She had never visited the temple, so we both decided this was the time to go. Before we went, we stopped by a sculpture studio to explore the cost of commissioning a Mahapajapati statue, if it seemed appropriate.

We made our way to Wat Rajnaddarama and found a guard who opened the sanctuary for us. King Rama III built this little temple for his daughter on his birthday. Upon entering the temple, we stood in front of the most wondrous sight of 53 uniquely carved Theris. At the head of this retinue of diverse beauty was a larger statue of Mahapajapati. This sight was overwhelming and beautiful for both of us and moved us to tears.

We traveled back to the sculpture studio with excitement. So much of our work in the world had been about supporting and inspiring women. We realized creating the statue might benefit women who practice deeply. We also hoped the image of courageous female monastics from the Buddha's time would inspire others.

We told the artist that we wanted Mahapajapati's face to be mature. After all, she became a bhikkhuni when she was nearly 60 and had endured much suffering. We also wanted her hand gestures to reflect the interconnected aspects of courage, generosity, and profound contemplation. So, her right hand is held in the mudra of giving no fear, and her left hand is held in the mudra of meditation. Her robes needed to be alive, soft, and realistic. The contours of her body needed to reflect her motherly qualities. We felt the Gandharan period radiated compassion, beauty, and reality, so the statue reflected this style.

Today, these wonderful statues of Mahapajapati are in Buddhist centers and nunneries in Southeast Asia and America. I am so grateful for all Venerable Dhammananda has done to make this possible.

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I have practiced Buddhism since the mid-sixties. From my point of view, Buddhism is more of a philosophy and a method to train the mind and heart. At its base, the basic tenets of Buddhism have no gender bias. We find gender parity, however, in the eight precepts that favor brother monks and imply sister monks are less worthy. These precepts are called "the eight heavy rules" and were reputedly crafted by the Buddha, who originally resisted the ordination of his stepmother until he was persuaded otherwise by his cousin Ananda.

These rules were created some two thousand five hundred years ago. Although female monastics have faithfully observed the rules for centuries, we are now examining them in light of equal rights and equal capacity for enlightenment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Though it has not been typical for women to have authoritative positions within traditional Buddhism, we are currently seeing a dramatic and positive change for women in all Buddhist orders. Buddhist women like Venerable Dhammananda are setting policies in place that guarantee practitioners ethical treatment, honor families, ensure democratic processes in their organizations, and are dedicated to environmental justice and social engagement.

This means that Buddhism is not only good for women, but good for the world. Much of this has risen from the empowering women, like Venerable Dhammananda, becoming bhikkhunis and teachers to empowering more women to do the same. Women receiving transmission and being ordained as monastics in our era is an extraordinary shift away from a patriarchal religion. We are heading toward a religion that honors gender parity and practices what it preaches about inclusivity. This bodes well for Buddhism and all religions, as women like Venerable Dhammananda have so much to contribute to the psychosocial body of various religions, in addition to the philosophy, ethics, and practices that ground religious institutions.

I believe that we are experiencing a powerful phase shift in the world religions today, led by women like Venerable Dhammananda, where gender parity is being deeply acknowledged and valued. The empowerment of women, the protection of children, the cultivation of ethics-based organizations, and the rights of all species is a vision whose time has come. Women are carrying this vision into a future that is deeply imperiled. I look to Venerable Dhammananda and her great community of novices and bhikkhuni as a revolutionary force for the future of Buddhism. Her story, her life, and her courage are examples to us all for what it means to speak truth to power, stand in integrity, and manifest unconditional wisdom and compassion.

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CR: When was the last time you saw Venerable Dhammananda?

JH: You know, we're in contact but I haven't been to Thailand in years. So, I don't remember when the last time was. I feel like we're more or less the same age. I'm a little bit older. We both have had a lot of problems dealing with gender bias in our different traditions. Gender bias not just from men, but from women, as well.

CR: Do you remember the first time you met Ven. Dhammananda Bhikkhuni? Can you describe that meeting?

JH: I think I first met her in 2002 when she had just received ordination as a samaneri. She was subjected to a lot of criticism and death threats. When I was at her temple, I had my own set of issues and subjection to biases. But I have to say, only a few of us were at the temple then. Venerable Dhammananda, myself, and her mother who was dying and in very fragile condition. A few mae chis were also living at the temple. I was really moved by her courage, determination, and commitment. Her ability to resist intimidation from Thailand and international monastics was moving, too. But it wasn't just male monks who attacking her; there were also disapproving females. I knew about this kind of behavior from my 1970s work as a feminist. It is called horizontal hostility or bullying among peers—how women are engaged in their own internalized oppression and then attack their own peers or those who are outstanding. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda is an outstanding person.

CR: What were the biases and discrimination you were experiencing in your own tradition at that time?

JH: I think any Buddhist woman with authority or responsibility is subjected to gender bias.

CR: Were you one of the first women in your tradition to be ordained?

JH: Yes. I was not the first, but one of the first women to be made a Roshi. Interesting enough, I'm going to Eihei-ji which is the monastery of Eihei Dogan who founded our lineage in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. I'm probably the first woman to ever teach there. I'll be doing that in April. But that's my story, not Venerable Dhammananda's story.

I think Venerable Dhammananda and I have a lot in common. We're both very determined, mission-inspired women who have the guts to stand up in a good way- not in an adverse way. We have the patience to keep standing up to resistance and to gender parity.

CR: How did you find out about her in the first place?

JH: I'm an old friend of Sulak Sivaraksa and the whole world of socially engaged Buddhism. I had heard about her for quite a while and then people said, 'Oh, you should meet her.' I went to a meeting of Engaged Buddhists at Sulak's place in Thailand. Like you, I had the chance to hear her speak and write her through Sulak that I wanted to visit her temple. We met at that conference and she said that was fine. We went on Bindabat (alms rounds) together and then went to her temple. During my stay, we spent a lot of time discussing the issues she was facing. At that time, she was facing a wave of vitriolic criticism in the press as a newly ordained sameneri.

CR: Where were the threats coming from?

JH: She was getting them in the mail. Then on another visit she took me to the place where all these incredible statues of the Bhikkhunis were. Oh my God! Have you ever been there? Look at the article. Every Bhikkhuni is there as a separate statue. It's really amazing. One is chewing betel nut, another is looking at her purse: very individualistic and beautiful. Then there's a big statue of Mahapajapati. So, we had this idea to produce the Mahapajapati statue. Venerable Dhammananda oversaw that production and sent that statue to Upaya. I think she has reproduced that statue and it's gone to various nunneries in various countries. [Joan Halifax wrote an article about this experience, which is inserted after the interview]

CR: Did the shared experience of creating the statue of Mahapajapati strengthen your resolve towards one another?

JH: I think it's because we're so close in age and we have a similar kind of personality. I entered her life at a critical time. She entered my life when I felt very vulnerable because I was getting a lot of pushbacks for the work that I was doing as a Buddhist contemplative and social activist. I totally supported her initiative to reestablish Theravada Bhikkhuni ordination within the Asian context and deeply within the Thai context. She was just totally courageous. I thought, 'Wow, this is my Dharma sister, and our karma is together. Whatever I can do to support her, woman to woman, I would do for her.'

CR: Did you ever provide spiritual guidance to her?

JH: I think we do that for each other. I don't feel like I'm above her or below her; we're peers. She's actually one of my most treasured peers. I feel I provided support for her at a really critical time. She knows that I'm here for her. I'm a big advocate of her and her vision.

CR: Have you participated in any conferences with her?

JH: Yes, we've been in various conferences together in Malaysia and Thailand. We're also very close to Ouyporn—the woman in Chaing Mai who has the Women in Social Justice Center. As I said, I haven't been to Thailand for a while, but we are virtually connected around gender politics with other Buddhist women advocating for women's ordination. There's a small pod of women our age who have pushed for bhikkhuni ordination for a long time. The list includes some of the Theravadin nuns, Western nuns who have had some pretty steep mountains to climb. We really pushed for gender parity in the International Buddhist Confederation.

CR: When I spoke to Tenzin Palmo, she said she didn't have near the same kind of fight that Venerable Dhammananda has on her hands. I'm wondering how you can compare it are the prejudices and discrimination that you face on a par with what she deals with in Thailand?

JH: It's really different. I'm a Zen Priest, and I haven't taken the full Vinaya.

CR: How has Ven. Dhammananda's leadership and advocacy for women's spiritual potential been internationally effective?

JH: My basic sense is that she is probably the most renowned leader around issues related to full ordination of women and standing up against gender parity. In terms of effectiveness, her determination, patience, and ability to uphold herself in the face of serious criticism, including death threats, is not to be underestimated. She did her PhD thesis on the Bhikkhuni Patimokkha, so she has tremendous knowledge for the perceptual foundation for Bhikkhunis. She can speak with deep authority about the Patimokkha in a way that few people can. So, she's standing on a great academic foundation and has a persistent and patient character.

CR: How well is she known outside the Buddhist world?

JH: I think she's pretty well known, partly because she was subjected to such serious pushback. She got into the press, even though she didn't necessarily want to get into the press [laughs]. She became very well known in the early 2000's because of that criticism. She handled that criticism with a lot of dignity.

CR: In the Western press as well?

JH: When we say press, I would have to google her. I just assume that the Western press was also covering the pushback she was subjected to. I can't say for sure, because I'm not that involved with the Western press. Of course, she's in the Buddhist press, Tricycle- Lion's Roar, etc.

CR: What quality do you most respect or admire about Venerable Dhammananda?

JH: Well, it's not one quality for me, it's many qualities. She has a strong back and a soft front. She's iron willed and pliable. She has immense determination and high integrity with deep compassion. She has these many qualities that make it possible for her to have actually created a safe place for women to take vows and deepen their commitment to realization.

CR: How important do you think her mother is? What kind of impact do you think her mother's relationship had on her?

JH: Well, I think it was significant. Her mother was a highly individuated woman, a writer, and educated. She took very radical steps to stand up to the heads of the Thai Bhikkhu. She went to Bodhgaya and had this transmission experience with the Buddha and then took ordination upon herself. I was there when she was dying. She was basically dying, in a semi-comatose state being taken care of by the mae chis. I never saw her in action. I sat with her when she was in this state. Needless to say, I heard many stories about her from Venerable Dhammananda, but I've forgotten a lot of it. You know bicycling across Asia, going to Bodhgaya, stuff like that.

CR: Do you have a memorable experience at any of the conferences being with Venerable Dhammananda?

JH: Watching her speak. Also, seeing monastics push back and seeing Venerable Dhammananda beaming through their resistance with academic rationalizations for the importance of women's ordination.

CR: Is this in a conference with her, or when you were in Thailand?

JH: In Thailand, Malaysia, and India. I don't remember exactly where. She's a total trip!

CR: Have you ever spoken at Sakyadhita?

JH: No. That's one of those things that's always happening when I'm committed to teaching. It looks like I will be going to the Australian conference. I think I'm going because I've not been to one.

CR: How important would you say Venerable Dhammananda's ordination is the movement to revive the bhikkhuni sangha in Thailand.

JH: Well, I think it wouldn't have happened without her.

CR: Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences that stands out in your mind about Venerable Dhammananda?

JH: You know I think she has changed the history of Buddhism. Her ordination was a phase shift, even with the powerful women in Taiwan and the wonderful women in Sri Lanka. The thing that Bhikkhuni Dhammananda did was make this a psychosocial and political revolution within Buddhism based on acknowledging the equality of women and men in the Buddhist world. Her ordination became a powerful political statement about gender parity in Buddhism.

CR: Venerable Dhammananda has said she's a Buddhist first and a feminist second. Does that mean anything to you?

JH: Well, I can understand that. I feel the same: I'm a Buddhist first and feminist second. My practice includes feminism, but it's not specifically feminist in the sense that I didn't become a Buddhist to be a feminist, I became a Buddhist to wake up. If you're a woman or a certain kind of male and you wake up, then a certain kind of feminism follows.

CR: In that sense, you are both agents of change for Buddhist women.

JH: Yes, among others. There's a lot of great women on the landscape, lay and ordained-more. Wester women are becoming heads of practice centers, monasteries and nunneries, because there's a certain quality that we bring to our practice; gender parity, more community based, less sexual violence, and so forth.

CR: If there was one thing you would want to say to describe Venerable Dhammananda's life story, what would that be?

JH: I think her courage. I feel like she is an extraordinarily courageous women and it's based on wisdom and compassion.

CR: Anything else you would like to add?

JH: I feel gratitude for what she's done. I'm very grateful for this interview because I feel her story is so powerful. I hope the interview includes not just the glory, but the rough spots she has had to work with.

## THE GREAT THERIS

<https://www.upaya.org/2015/03/great-theris-roshi-joan-halifax/>

The Theris, or First Nuns, have long been a mystery to Buddhist women. They stand like a lovely mountain range covered in mist, not visible but their presence is felt. As Buddhism has met the modern world, more and more women are practicing. So also are women taking great responsibility as the heads of monasteries, as dharma teachers, and as scholars. And many of us wish to know and express our gratitude to our women ancestors.

It is in our generation that more is being learned about the women who joined the Buddha's Sangha 2500 years ago. Their presence in early Buddhism created a revolution in social values that only now is beginning to come to fruition in our modern cultures.

I am a Western woman, a Dharma teacher, and the Abbot of a monastery in the United States. I came to Thailand in February 2002, to attend the Aryavinaya meeting inspired by the Thai social activist SulakShivaraksa. Prior to my journey to Thailand, I had learned about a brave woman and scholar who had been recently ordained as a Samaneri (novice nun) by Bhikkshunis in Sri Lanka. Her name was Samaneri Dhammananda. This was the first such ordination of a woman in Thailand in 1000 years as the nun's line had died out a millenium ago. I asked one of the conference coordinators if I could possibly stay with the Samaneri after the meeting. I wanted to meet this courageous person, to practice with her friends, and learn more about her journey.

I met the Samaneri at the meeting and was very moved by her presence. She spoke with profound conviction about the importance of allowing women to become fully ordained. After the meeting, I made my way to her nunnery to take a deep retreat. While there, we discovered we had much in common. We took refuge in each other, as I was weary from many problems in my country and community, and she was weary from the active resistance to her ordination. We realized that we both felt quite isolated, had few peers accessible to us, and we gave each other great support as we explored ways in which we could renew ourselves and as well continue our work in and for the world.

As I began to learn more about the situation in Thailand as well as other parts of Asia concerning the rights of women in the Buddhist community, I began to think about the icons of Buddhism that reflect our values. I realized that there were few images of women, especially in Southeast Asia. At that time, I knew of no statues of Mahapajapati, the Buddha's stepmother who bravely became the first nun.

I was to learn from Samaneri Dhammananda that in fact there was a small temple in the middle of Bangkok where there was a collection of statues of the first nuns. She had never visited the temple, and we both decided this was the time for such a visit. But before we went, we stopped by a sculpture studio to explore commissioning a statue of Mahapajapati, if that seemed appropriate.

We made our way to WatRajnaddarama and found the guard who opened this sanctuary for us. This little temple was built by King Rama III for his daughter. On entering the temple, we stood in front of the most wondrous sight of 53 Theris, each uniquely casted. At the head of this retinue

of diverse beauty was a larger statue of Mahapajapati. This was an overwhelming and beautiful sight for us, one that moved us to tears.

The two of us then travelled back to the sculpture studio and met with the artist. We were very excited about the project. So much of our work in the world has been about inspiring women. We realized that the creation of the statue might be of benefit to those who practice deeply and are supported by inspiration from the feminine, particularly the courageous nuns of the time of the Buddha.

We wanted Mahapajapati's face to be mature. After all she became a nun when she was nearly 60, and she had endured much suffering. We also wanted her hand gestures to reflect the interconnected aspects of courageous and generous action and profound contemplation. So her right hand is in the mudra of giving no fear, and her left hand is in the mudra of meditation. We wanted her robes alive, soft, and realistic and the contours of her body to reflect her motherly qualities. We wanted the sculpture to be in the Gandharan style as we felt that this period of sculpture radiated compassion, beauty and reality. In the light of the recent war in Afghanistan, the problems in Pakistan, and the destruction of so much Buddhist history, I am happy that we have decided on this style.

It has been more than a year since we began this project. It has taken time to help the sculptor to mature her face and refine the details of her hands, body, and robes. Fortunately, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda (as my good friend is now fully ordained) has been the guide through this long process. She sent me photos along the way so I could make recommendations. And now, I learn that Mahapajapati is here in our midst.

She will be brought to Upaya by Pairin Jotisakulratana, who lived here for the fall and winter at the recommendation of Bhikkhuni Dhammananda. We will open her eyes during the large women's retreat at the end of July when women from all over the world gather to renew their commitment to social action and health.

I am so grateful to have had this precious opportunity to be part of seeing the birth of Mahapajapati in our time. May she guide us all home, as she guided her sisters and friends 2500 years ago.

## **Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo**



Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo is a Bhiksuni in the Drukpa Lineage of the Kagyupa school of Tibetan Buddhism. She is an author, teacher, and the founder of Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery located in Himachal Pradesh, India. Her biography, *Cave in the Snow*, written by Vickie Mackenzie is widely read.

CR: When were you ordained in the Drukpa lineage?

TP: I took my first ordination from Khamtrul Rinpoche in 1964 and novice ordination from H.H. 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa in Sikkim in 1967. In 1973, I went to take higher ordination in Hong Kong. There is no bhikkhuni ordination in the Tibetan tradition.

CR: Do you think that the Bhikkhuni ordination is something that could be sanctioned in your lifetime?

TP: I would hope so. They have been researching it for 30 years. A while ago H.H. Karmapa made an attempt to revive nuns' ordination in Bodhgaya with Taiwanese bhikkhunis. Although 20 Tibetan nuns received the novice ordination through the Chinese Dharmagupta lineage, no further level of ordination was arranged after H.H. Karmapa Orgyen Trinley Dorje left for the West. The intention was to have a dual sangha of Dharmagupta nuns and Mulasarvastivada monks for the bhikkhuni ordination. So far this has not happened.

CR: Would you be interested in doing that?

TP: Yes: Now that my nuns have finished their studies, they are interested in taking higher ordination. But so far, no high Lamas have stepped forward to arrange such an ordination properly. We need the support of these high Lamas so no one can argue about it. It is no good trying with lower-level monks; they would not have sufficient authority. If immaculate lamas that nobody can argue with are supportive and helpful, then I think it could happen. His Holiness the Dalai Lama was supportive for ordination, but most of his monks were not. So, he didn't want to cause any conflict in his Sangha over the Bhikkhuni issue. But most Kagyu Lamas are not opposed. I think it could happen. The Karmapa is the next after his Holiness the Dalai Lama. He has enough authority that people wouldn't quickly oppose him. One of his main advisors is his debate teacher, who has also done a lot of research on the issue of Bhikkhuni ordination.

CR: Do you remember the first time you met Venerable Dhammananda Bhikkhuni?

TP: At that time, she was still Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh. I must have met her at one of the early Sakyadhita meetings. I remember one time we were sitting next to each other at a conference in Delhi. She was still a laywoman at that time, and she said to me, "I have to tell you I have decided to take ordination and eventually become a Bhikkhuni. I asked my husband and sons who gave permission. I know I have to do this because this is also what my mother wanted." Then she said, "Oh but I'm so frightened because I know it's going to stir up so much hostility and opposition. I just don't know what to do. Should I receive ordination? Should I not?" I said, "Of course you have to be ordained because if not you, then who? You are so perfectly placed for this. You're already an eminent scholar, a woman of much experience." She is a very strong, brave lady. Who would do it if not her?

CR: Can you describe your relationship?

TP: Good, it's very warm when we meet. We don't meet very often. I have been to her Nakhon Pathom nunnery once or twice and she has visited our nunnery in Himachal Pradesh. When we

meet, we are delighted to see each other because we both know what we are in for. There's that sense of sisterly support. We sometimes email each other. Some of our nuns also went to stay with her in Nakhon Pathom and liked it a lot.

CR: I imagine you have participated in many conferences with her?

TP: A few. Because, first of all I don't really like conferences. I try to get out of as many as possible! And second, although we're often invited to the same conferences, either she can't make it, or I can't make it. Occasionally we end up at the same conference.

CR: Can you describe the most difficult experience you've shared with her?

TP: I don't know. I think for her especially, it's very difficult in Thailand because there is official opposition. In the Tibetan tradition, they are not officially opposed, they just are not accepting that they can revive the bhikkhuni ordination. If you want to become a bhikkhuni in the Dharmaguptaka (Chinese) tradition, you are welcome to do it. Just don't ask to be ordained in the Mulasarvastivada tradition. So, they are not opposed in that way. In Myanmar, if you become a bhikkhuni, you are jailed. It is actually against the law. They say the Buddha didn't want bhikkhuni. It's very odd that you can make up legislation in a Buddhist country that is directly against the fourfold Sangha. That's seriously weird. In Thailand, it is not as bad as that, you are not going to be jailed, but you are just going to be ignored or kind of looked down upon.

However, there was this one time when we attended a Sakyadhita conference in Thailand. We wanted to do the Patimokkha, so we invited a lot of nuns from Sri Lanka, Taiwan, and Korea. Ven. Dhammananda was looking for a monastery, because in order to do the Patimokkha recitation you need a sima, which is a designated area for recitation. She was looking for a temple in Bangkok that would allow Bhikkhunis. She found one, and we went along. There were about 60 bhikkhunis in our various robes; Sri Lankan in their gold, others in their grey. The Abbot was an old Bhikkhu. He was just overwhelmed! In all his life, he had never seen even one Bhikkhuni and now there were 60 all in his temple! He was almost in tears. He was so overcome. All his monks were there smiling and rejoicing. It was very beautiful. He gave a talk afterwards, and he spoke about how deeply honored he was and how much he hoped Thailand would include Bhikkhunis again. He asked us to stay overnight so he could offer dana the next day. It was extremely encouraging, especially for Venerable Dhammananda, because the other monasteries she contacted said that although they would love to host the bhikkhunis, they couldn't because they would get into trouble. Perhaps because this Bhikkhu was older, he just didn't care. It was very lovely and Venerable Dhammananda was very happy to see that he was so welcoming.

CR: I asked Venerable Dhammananda if she had any questions for you and she said she once asked you to be her teacher, but you declined. Do you remember her asking and why did you decline?

TP: Oh, I'm not anybody's teacher! I don't accept students. I go around and give Dharma talks, but I'm not in a position to guide people, especially someone like her. Venerable Dhammananda is a great scholar of Buddhist Philosophy. She's done a lot of practice, and she herself is an

eminent example of nun – I couldn't possibly put myself in a position to teach or guide her. It would be impossible. More likely I would ask her to be my teacher.

CR: She talked about being troubled by initiation into the feminist tradition because she didn't want to go forward in anger; she wanted to go forward in compassion.

TP: It doesn't work to go forward in anger - we would be just creating more of the thing we are opposed to in the first place. What's the point in that? It doesn't help.

CR: How effective is Venerable Dhammananda as an international leader and advocate for women attaining their spiritual potential?

TP: It seems to me Venerable Dhammananda has all the qualities that are required. She's very learned. For many people, it helps that she had a worldly life with a career and family. She has experienced everything. Then, at a certain point, she was able to let all that go. She used what she gained from her life to go forward onto the path, which she knew she had to follow. She is well-respected. She has always been very careful not to make a stand out of opposition or hostility, but to work within the status quo to change people's perceptions and get women involved. Because if women are not involved or interested, nothing is going to move. It is not a matter of supporting males, it's a matter of getting the support of the women.

CR: She is an extraordinary teacher and speaker. Is that unusual within the realm of bhikkhunis?

TP: I think it's unusual within the realm of Asian bhikkhunis, not so much Western bhikkhunis. There are a number of eminent Western bhikkhunis such as Dr. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Thubten Chodron, Pema Chodron and so forth. Some of them are extremely learned, and have also had a previous life, been married etc. Then they took that as their starting point for their exposition of the Dharma and of the monastic life for women.

In Asia, there are some very strong nuns. Korea, Taiwan, and mainland China have thousands of disciples. For instance, Tzu Chi Foundation in Taiwan has millions of followers. They have state-of-the-art hospitals, schools, and colleges. They do a lot of relief work when there are natural disasters. This foundation is solely run by a modest and gentle nun. There are some strong nuns out there but most don't know English. There are these extraordinary nuns who create hospitals, schools, orphanages, all sorts of things. Socially, nuns are more active than monks. But Venerable Dhammananda knows English, so she has a much more international reach.

CR: Are your nuns involved in social service projects?

TP: No, not at the moment; they are too busy studying. They get up at 5:00 in the morning and go to bed at 11:00 at night. They spend their whole time studying and doing rituals. Every year, they do two months of meditation. They are totally involved in that. After they finish and graduate, we will see what they are interested in doing.

CR: What do you most admire about Venerable Dhammananda?

TP: The fact that she has galvanized all her previous experience and knowledge, taken that, and reintroduced the Bhikkhuni lineage in Thailand. She has gone forth knowing very clearly what she has to do, but with diplomacy and good humor. She never got up on a soap box and shook her fists. She's used her power of persuasion, patience, and good will to gradually move the lineage forward despite all the opposition and all the obstacles. She's gathered more and more support from educated women. In Thailand, the nuns (mae chi) are the bottom of the basket; they are considered to be nothing. If your daughter becomes a mae chi, people sympathize and wonder what was wrong. That would be your last choice in life. This view is extremely unfair socially. There are many beautiful mae chis who are so devoted and so intelligent. But still, there is this awful social attitude towards them.

I admire Venerable Dhammananda for revolutionizing attitudes toward women and nuns. Now people are recognizing women's great potential, especially since there are so many scandals about monks. There's this incredible group of women who are not corrupted by power or control. "Go forth with faith", as the Buddha said. Venerable Dhammananda kept that in her mind the whole way through her journey and has inspired so many women. I think that's what I admire the most.

CR: Couldn't the same be said about you?

TP: On a much lesser scale. We're doing our little bit here to try to encourage women to realize their potential and to get the monks to respect that. On the whole they do respect the nuns once they see them becoming educated and skillful. Tibetan monks are a little bit easier.

CR: When Vickie Mackenzie wrote your book, *Cave in the Snow*, did she work with you?

TP: Yes; I was in the Land of the Medicine Buddha in California with her. They were very kind; they gave us a cottage together. Basically, I answered any questions Vicki had. I thought that nobody is going to read this book. I didn't really take it that seriously. When Vicki sent me the manuscript, I should have read through it, but I was going somewhere else and didn't bother. I thought 'Nobody is going to read it anyway'.

Have you read Vicki's latest book on Freda Bedi? She was another amazing woman. When she was in her 30's, she went to Oxford University and met this Indian student. Against opposition from both families, they got married. She went back to India. She was very involved in the Indian independence movement. She was even imprisoned by the British for campaigning. She was very close to Gandhi and his freedom movement. Then gained some real insight in Burma and became a Buddhist. Later she met the Karmapa, and I met her at a school for young lamas. She was the first one to bring Karmapa to the U.S. She was also the first western nun to go to Hong Kong in 1972 to receive Bhikkhuni ordination. She told me I should go there to Hong Kong and I went there in 1973. She had the first nunnery in India for the refugees.

CR: If you could use one word to describe Venerable Dhammananda what would that be?

TP: Integrity. She is a woman of great integrity.

CR: Is there anything else you might want to add?

TP: I think it's good that her way of moving forward has always been non- confrontational, but at the same time it has always been very direct. That has inspired a lot of women, especially Thai women, who society tells to be submissive and never call into question anything that they are told to do. She has been able to oppose this social norm in such a dignified manner that anyone who has any understanding of the problem at all supports what she is doing. I think she is going about it the right way.

It will take time, but it's a movement that is moving forward. The Buddha always emphasized the importance of the Fourfold Sangha. He never said that it was only up to the monks. From the start, the Buddha emphasized the importance of Bhikkhus, Bhikkhunis, Upasaka, and Upasika. He said that when the Fourfold Sangha is in harmony, practicing and propagating the dharma, then Buddhism will flourish.

By thinking that only monks are the only ones worthy of respect, we are ignoring what the Buddha said. This is why the Therigatha is a good thing, because we can see that nuns were close to the Buddha. They had access to him all the time. The Buddha never said that he was not interested in training nuns and other women. He gave them beautiful teachings. He praised nuns as foremost in meditation, propagating dharma, and wisdom. He was extremely encouraging. So it is very sad that male dominance took over. This was not the Buddha's intention. I don't believe it was ever the Buddha's intention.

## Cindy Rasicot



Cindy Rasicot has been a follower and student of Venerable Dhammananda since 2003. On some occasions, she has travelled with Ven. Dhammananda to other countries. Originally, Cindy intended to write a biography of Ven. Dhammananda with interviews of other's impressions of her. Due to publishing restrictions, Wat Songdhammakalyani is presenting these interviews, instead.

Cindy will return for a second novice ordination in 2022 to honor Ven. Dhammananda's 20<sup>th</sup> Vassa, earning Ven. Dhammananda Mahatheri status. Cindy wrote about her initial meeting and learning from Ven. Dhammananda in her book, 'Finding Venerable Mother'.

“I first met His Holiness the Dalai Lama at his Dharamsala residence in 1980. While I was seated waiting for him, I could hear giggling and laughter. It was so contagious! I couldn’t help but laugh along with him. I talked with him for almost an hour and when I left the whole world looked so different. I was overjoyed. When I visit His Holiness, I take it as an initiation to a new life, a new understanding.”

While waiting for His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Venerable Dhammananda noticed a stack of pamphlets about newly arrived male monks, but no information about women. Since she had written her PhD on this topic, His Holiness asked her to send him her research, “so that they did not have to start from scratch.” When she returned the following year, Venerable Dhammananda noticed the same pamphlets reprinted with the word “nuns” added. She was impressed that such an important person would actually listen to her suggestion and follow through with such a small detail.

Almost 30 years after her initial meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Venerable Dhammananda attended the ‘International Conference on Ordination of Women in Tibetan Buddhism’ as a bhikkhuni, herself. H.H. the Dalai Lama offered 50,000 Swiss Francs as a seed fund for the conference, which was organized by Ven. Jampa Tsedron in July 2007. The conference was held at Hamburg University in Germany with the goal of generating worldwide support for reestablishing bhikkhuni ordination in the Tibetan tradition. At that time, some people hoped His Holiness would issue a statement supporting the establishment of Bhikkhuni ordination.

H.H. the Dalai Lama was invited to give talk on the last day of the conference. The audience consisted of at least 800 participants, most of which were women. A 13-person panel supportive of women’s higher ordination sat at the stage in front of the audience. His Holiness sat in the middle with Bhikkhus to his right and Bhikkhunis to his left; Venerable Dhammananda was the final bhikkhuni in line. After each panelist spoke for their allotted time, His Holiness pulled out a sheet of prepared remarks and said that if the Buddha were alive today, he, undoubtedly, would have supported Bhikkhuni ordination. But since the Buddha was not alive, H.H. could not make that decision on his behalf.

Venerable Dhammananda said she was crestfallen when she heard His Holiness speak. She raised her hand and said: “Your Holiness, when the Buddha was about to die, he gave permission to lift minor rules if the Sangha decides to make a change. So, we don’t need to wait for the future Buddha.” The audience broke into applause.

## **Patricia Brinkman**

Patricia Brinkman was a member of the International Peace Council founded in Chicago in 1995 after the 2<sup>nd</sup> Parliament of the World's Religions. That is where she met Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, who was a University professor at that time. Dr Chatsumarn Kabilsingh was one of the Peace Councilors who travelled to many countries with missions of peace.

CR: Has it been a while since you've seen Ven. Dhammananda?

PB: Yes. It's been many years, which I regret. It's just one of those things. I haven't gotten over to Thailand and she hasn't gotten over here.

CR: Can you describe the work of the International Committee for the Peace Council?

PB: Sure. It was started out of Chicago and was a Council of Churches; they were celebrating their 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Parliament of the World's Religions. There was so much excitement, positive attitudes, and joy that one wondered why it took so long to meet. His Holiness the Dalai Lama said we can't leave this for another 100 years. Dr. Daniel Ibanez Gomez chaired the meetings in Chicago and started calling and visiting various spiritual leaders. My husband was one of the people who helped set up the organization. They were selectively looking for not just religious leaders but spiritual leaders. They wanted to have some religious diversity. But they wanted to make sure those they recruited were known for their spirituality. Venerable Dhammananda's name came up and at the time, she was a university professor, married with three boys. She went on these different missions just as I did. I was the assistant on the missions. Anything they needed, I would take care of such as their food, their bedding, their airline tickets, whatever. It is worth noting the Council never went into a country unless they were invited. The very first mission was in Chiapas, Mexico while they were having guerrilla warfare.

Dr. Daniel Ibanez Gomez and I went down there first to set up the meeting and logistics. The Council followed to support the work that Bishop Ruiz was doing there to mediate peace between the Zapatistas and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The bishop single handedly prevented a war between the guerillas and the government. We accompanied the bishop on his missions of peace to provide security for the people who were suffering. We are there to accompany them and let them know that the eyes of the world are on them, and they are not alone. This is called accompaniment. We went down to Chiapas a second time and met with the guerillas. That was a very interesting experience. That was the first-time outsiders visited the inside of the guerrilla camp. We planned on being there a couple of hours but we were there much longer.

Then we went to Northern Ireland and spent time with Mairead Maguire— a Nobel peace prize winner from Northern Ireland. She became very active in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because the Israelis were destroying homes in the middle of the night as the villagers slept. The Israeli government was destroying the Palestinian homes for no good reason. We prevented the destruction of some of the homes there and brought the eyes of the world there to witness what was going in.

CR: May I back up and ask what the mission of the International Committee for the Peace Council was?

PB: It was basically accompaniment. The work that was being done, for example, in Northern Ireland was to bring peace in that country and between families. We noticed that more peace negotiations were happening there as a result of our involvement. We brought the spiritual

leaders in to oversee the negotiations. Our presence in places of strife helped to create an environment for listening, understanding, and peace. Daniel Ibanez Gomez can give you more specifics because he oversaw the missions.

CR: When did this take place?

PB: Late 1990's into the early 2000's.

CR: When did you first meet Venerable Dhammananda and what was your first impression?

PB: I met her at the very first meeting of the Council that she attended. She was this tall, slender woman, with dark hair, very attractive, and very quiet. You didn't notice her at first. But she was one of those people, when she did speak up, people would listen. She has these little gems of wisdom. I can still remember when we tried to help her with the Home of Peace and Love for unwed mothers. She tried to help these women. I can remember what she said, "Money is a cobra." She would come out with those little gems, and she was always kind. But you could tell right from the beginning that she was a bit unsettled. Over the years she decided she was going to follow in her mother's footsteps and take over her mother's temple. After she made this decision, a calmness came over her and she smiled more. She appeared to be much stronger in herself, more confident.

I remember when she took her first vows in 2000, she came to Madison with a burn on her arm. When she got there, we saw the burn was infected. She could have easily lost her arm; it was that bad. The burn was part of the ceremony to become a bodhisattva. You didn't have to take the burn, but she did. She was so proud of herself. She didn't flinch, she didn't cry, she didn't make a sound— she just took it. They really burned deep into her flesh. If you ever look at her arm it's very scarred from the burn. But she was very proud of that.

When we visited her in Thailand, she asked my husband and I to accompany her to visit two different monks. I remember she got down on her knees and bowed towards them. She stayed in this position while she talked to them. My husband and I sat there as her accompaniment. I think they thought she was going to fight them and tell them how terrible they were. Instead, I think she started to get these monks to understand that she was not there to fight them or take away their power, but to be an auxiliary, a helper to them.

I remember going on alms round with her. It was very interesting to see who came out. It was a predominantly women. They would ask for her advice and blessings. Gradually, I started to see more men showing up, coming out of the houses with their wives on Sunday morning. She was starting to become accepted in her own community, and people weren't afraid. But she had a very hard time in the Bangkok area.

I don't know if it had any influence, but the award as an Outstanding Buddhist Woman from the United Nations in 2004 may have helped her. She never viewed it as a great honor, but viewed it as something that dignified what she was doing and would help her in her work.

I remember when I went to visit her at the temple. I went into the bookstore and she told me, “You want this piece.” It was a clay sculpture of a head of a bhikkhuni. I still have it in my living room. I cry when I think of it. [Patricia cried while speaking about it] Venerable Dhammananda said, “I was teaching myself to sculpt and it was the Buddha’s wife, her head. As I was sculpting, I was praying about my needs. When I was just about finished with the sculpture, in walks a lady and hands me the exact amount of money that I needed at that time.” That sculpture was very precious to her at that time, and I still have it in my living room. She told me when I was talking to her the other day, “You know, I have tried to redo that head and I’ve never been able to do it.” She wanted to know if I still had it. She still remembers it. I thought that was special.

CR: I often felt like she was ministering to me personally? Like when she told you to buy the sculpture, didn’t you feel she was directing her healing powers towards you?

PB: You always feel a trust, that you can trust her with anything. [Patricia is crying as she speaks] She is always interested in you, in how your family is doing. She never talks about herself much unless there is something she really needs to talk about, like her ordination. I think anyone on the Peace Council would say she is one of the most trusted and revered members. Others were much louder, but down deep you could just feel it in her; her action followed her words. And of course, there were all the trials that she had in her personal life before she decided to get rid of all her earthly possessions, fix her house up, and make sure her sons were taken care of. When she made that decision, it took a big load off her. She was free to be who she was intended to be.

CR: It sounds like your working relationship with Venerable Dhammananda was one of trust and it sounds like you could confide in her?

PB: Oh yeah. She took me to my first midnight market. “You know,” she said, “I shouldn’t be out here, but I need to get this blouse for this woman” The two of us were riding in a Tuk Tuk. I think she loves to get out and feel the air. She just delighted in the Tuk Tuk, the rush of air past her. Everything else in her life was very slow and meditative. Being outside the temple gave her energy and we had fun. People were looking at her, because it wasn’t normal, but she said, “This has to be done.”

CR: Was your organization, the International Peace Council, short lived?

PB: The Council was founded in 1995. When the recession hit in 2007 it was harder to raise funds. Daniel retired and, regretfully, the man who replaced him just didn’t have any interest in fundraising to keep the organization going. The recession had a lot to do with it. People turned inward.

CR: Have you ever asked Venerable Dhammananda for advice or sought her out for personal spiritual guidance?

PB: No. I did not, regretfully. But, as I said, there was such a close feeling that I could have easily done it. I think because we were always so busy with work and all the meetings, we didn’t have a lot of time alone. The time we took off for the market was rare.

CR: Would you say that Venerable Dhammananda is internationally recognized for her work and, if so, does that recognition pertain to her work as a Buddhist scholar, religious leader, environmentalist, and socially engaged Buddhist?

PB: I don't think that the general U.S. public knows about her, which is a shame. I think she's recognized by the United Nations, so she does have some recognition by people who work in the field. I think her NPR (National Public Radio) appearance may have been the first time a lot of people in this country heard about her. I was lying in bed and said, 'I know that voice!' I listened and, sure enough, it was my friend.

CR: It sounds like you've participated in a number of conferences with her. Is there one that stands out in your memory?

PB: At any conference she attended, she was present. But she was never one to stand up to be a leader, like some others. But you always knew she was there and people respected what she had to say. She was never the flamboyant person, as you know.

CR: If you chose one word to describe Venerable Dhammananda, what would that be?

PB: Humble.

CR: Is there anything else you would like to add about your relationship to Venerable Dhammananda.

PB: [crying as she speaks] I just think that it's enduring that we could be apart for ten years and pick up where we left off.

CR: Thank you for your interview.

PB: At the Peace Council we all focused on the things we believed in. We all believed in peace. We never brought up our differences since that would pull us apart. When you brought up what things you had in common, pretty soon you started understanding some of the other stuff. It just made you aware of the richness that maybe your own faith lost, but another faith picked up on. It reminded you of it, so it made your own faith much richer because of the experience you had with the other people. So many people would say, 'How can you go with all this interfaith stuff? You will fall away from your faith.' I said 'No, it's just the opposite.' Meeting people of this diverse nature and recognizing their legitimacy just enriched your own life and your own faith.

CR: What is your faith?

PB: It's Lutheran. My husband was a Lutheran minister. He was highly respected. He belonged to the interfaith council here in Madison. When he died, they had one meeting where they just talked about him [Patricia is crying again]. There was a Roman Catholic priest. At the very end he said, "I have no doubt that we witnessed a prophet in our midst." I think a lot of his strength came from this International Peace Council. When he died, he died on Tuesday at midnight. We had the service on Saturday and there wasn't much time to get the word out. The church was

filled with over 500 people. Many people still come up to me and say, “This is a sermon of Peter’s I pull out all the time.” Allow me to add that Peter preached with love and understanding the people. He was firm in his beliefs and open to learning and changing. Often, when he didn’t understand “why” he would say, “I wonder what the Holy Spirit is up to now.” I can say without a doubt, The Venerable Dhammananda was one of his teachers.

NOTE: Since this interview, Patricia was diagnosed with lung cancer (never smoked) and had surgery. Ven. Dhammananda was a big source of understanding, encouragement and a special love and care to her while she recovered.

## Dr. Varaporn Chamsanit



Dr. Varaporn Chamsanit is a manager at the Women's Wellbeing and Gender Justice Program at Mahidol University in Nakhon Pathom, Thailand. In 2006, she published her PhD thesis, *Reconnecting the Lost Lineage: Challenges to Institutional Denial of Buddhist Women's Monasticism in Thailand*, which she submitted to The Australian National University.

In late 2001 a group of Women Studies graduate students at Thammasat University in Bangkok proposed a course on 'Women in Buddhism.' They invited Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh to be the guest lecturer on the course. As Varaporn explained in her thesis, Dr. Kabilsingh had by that time been ordained as a novice and was known as Venerable Dhammananda. She taught the course, however, it was held at Wat Songdhammakalyani Temple rather than at the University. That's how she met Venerable Dhammananda.

CR: What is the mission of your organization?

VC: I used to lecture on human rights, but now my work is more on gender justice. This program is called Women's Wellbeing and Gender Justice Program. I do advocacy and educational training focusing more on the issue of violence against women.

CR: How did you meet Venerable Dhammananda?

VC: I did my PhD research about monastic women in Thailand and Venerable Dhammananda was the main person in my thesis. I spent time at her temple and maintained contact for about 2-3 years while I did my research. She was very kind and open with me, providing all the information I needed to finish my thesis. I spent two years writing the thesis and graduated in 2006.

CR: What was the focus of your thesis?

VC: It combined anthropology and gender studies. The first part covered the history of Buddhism and how gender has no space in the institutional (Buddhist) Sangha. The second part is about the variety of monastic women in Thailand including Theravada, Mahayana, and Santi Asoke.

CR: What is Santi Asoke?

VC: Santi Asoke is like a sub-sect in Thailand. They have their own strict way of practicing. It's only been around for about thirty years, so it's relatively new. The founder is still alive but very elderly. Santi Asoke conflicted with the mainstream institutional Sangha, so they are treated more like an outcast. They had to change the color of their robes as not to conflict with the mainstream monks. From the beginning, Santi Asoke has included a small group of nuns who would wear brown robes and live in provincial areas. They accept women who long for a monastic life despite living in a place where there is no space for them.

Another part of the thesis is about how Venerable Dhammananda opened the gate for other women to receive ordination.

CR: Can you describe the press's reaction when Venerable returned from Sri Lanka after receiving ordination?

VC: You can see more detail in my thesis, but I will tell you what I remember. I think the press was a bit ambivalent at that time. When she came back, she organized a samaneri ordination for another Thai woman. It was the first time there had been an official Theravada samaneri ordination on Thai soil. It was a sensational issue in the press. The Bangkok Post had an article that said, 'First Thai Woman Ordained is divorced with Two Children.' I'm not sure if you've heard but there are stereotypes about mae chi. Unlike male monks, they are believed to have family problems, are abandoned by their families, have broken hearts, that sort of thing. Any woman who seeks ordination and wears the yellow robes is thought to have problems—divorced or something like that.

CR: So, there was criticism?

VC: Yes. I say the press was ambivalent. On the one hand the press had to be open-minded and interview people from all sides. They had to interview the senior monks who did not support ordination and Buddhist scholars, some of whom supported ordination and others who were against ordination. There might have been monks who supported ordination, but early on they didn't come out and say so.

CR: How does the women's movement in Thailand view Venerable Dhammananda? What does she represent?

VC: Buddhism and feminism, which is quite unique in Thailand. On the one hand, we have the women's movement led mainly by NGOs that work on women's labor issues, trafficking, violence against women, things like that but not on religion. Religion and feminism are on opposite sides. Many of the feminists don't tend to trust institutional Buddhism because it doesn't provide any space for women. Feminists in Thailand are ambivalent about Buddhism.

But Dr. Chatsumarn was known for her Buddhist studies that connected with feminism. Before her ordination, she was well known for her academic work. I knew her as an academic. I still remember some feminists were suspicious of her when she wanted to be ordained. They said, "Now you're going to join the oppressor."

CR: Today are feminists still ambivalent about her?

VC: I think less so. We see that she didn't try to assimilate with the institution of Buddhism. She is still viewed as an outsider. Even women who want to lead a monastic life still struggle against the patriarchal system. So, we still have a common enemy.

CR: Do you think Venerable Dhammananda gained more recognition after she received ordination because she was already well-known in academic circles?

VC: Yes, of course. Recognition and antagonism from the main institution of Buddhism. Before her, there were other Santi Asoke women who tried to lead monastic life. They shaved their head and wore white but didn't call themselves mae chi. Of course, there was the first wave of ordination in 1928, which didn't get too far. But with Venerable Dhammananda's reputation as an academic and her knowledge of Buddhism, she walked through that gate—it was not like other women who kind of snuck in. She opened the gate and walked right through. She created waves. Those who try to keep the gate shut say, 'Oh, that woman is trying to challenge us!' The retaliation against her was quite strong.

CR: Is there still suspicion towards her?

VC: You probably heard that she tried to have Sinhalese monks come here in November 2014. Venerable Dhammananda was one of the few bhikkhunis invited to attend the ordination. She was not involved in inviting the Sinhalese monks to Thailand. However, the institutional Sangha

prohibited foreign monks from traveling here. They were afraid they would give ordination to women. The antagonism is still there.

I see Venerable Dhammananda trying to navigate the path carefully. I'm not sure if it's her intention to keep a low profile. I don't see her going out and challenging the Sangha. The fact that she was ordained is radical enough. So, she wouldn't open up other fronts of struggle.

CR: What would those other fronts be?

VC: Like criticizing the Sangha for its corruption. I think she's quite careful about that and wouldn't make that type of accusation.

CR: Do you think she's well known internationally?

VC: Yes, especially within the Buddhist community.

CR: Where and how is she known?

VC: I may not be the best person to speak about that, but since her academic days she has gone to many conferences. There are not many academics who study Buddhism and Feminism, so her interest is rare. I'm not sure how much of an activist she was in Thailand, but she has been advocating for women's ordination with international organizations, like Sakyadhita. The women's movement in Thailand before her ordination was not interested in pushing for women's space in Buddhism, so her activism has been mostly in international settings.

CR: What do you admire about her?

VC: Her bravery and her courage. I have this very clear image in my mind of her opening the gate for women's monasticism in Thailand. I admire her for her knowledge. I remember when I was first interested in doing research on women's monasticism. I went to her temple and she told me the stories of the Arahats (the first thirteen women to be ordained by the Buddha). She's an amazing storyteller; very powerful. One of the first times I went there, we walked in her garden and she talked about the first women in Buddhism.

I was amazed! Even though I came from a Catholic family, I had heard about Buddhist teachings since childhood. I had never heard about the women during the Buddha's time. I knew about his mother, aunt, and wife, the women who provided support for the Buddha, but not about the ordained women. I was wondering how come? I started to link feminism with Buddhism through those stories that Venerable Dhammananda told me. There is a lot of hidden history about Buddhist women that we've never been told. That's why I admire her. She is so knowledgeable.

CR: Now that I think back on the beginning of our interview, I realize that your current job is working on social issues, but your thesis was on monasticism. Why did you choose to focus on monasticism?

VC: I never thought about it, but now that you ask, I think it's because of how her ordination and monastic life became news. I had been interested in Buddhism before, but I had only read about it from male teachers. I also worked in the women's movement so I had combined interests in Buddhism and feminism— yet I never knew that there would be a path for women to be ordained. It became news in the women's movement.

CR: What is the most memorable experience you have had with Venerable Dhammananda?

VC: A few. I'm very impressed by the radical nature of her struggle for ordination. But it's equally impressive to me that after being ordained, she had to try to sustain the women's Sangha to make it possible for it to exist in Thailand. To do this she has to be very strategic. As I said, she wouldn't outright criticize the institutional male Sangha. I never heard her retaliate or criticize senior monks who oppose women's ordination.

I've seen the way she interacts with male monks who support women's ordination. She treats them with respect and bows. When I still worked with her, she told other ordained women, no matter how many years a woman is ordained, when you see a male monk, you have to see them as your elder brother or superior and bow to them. She put that into practice. She was a radical feminist and respectful at the same time.

On the surface this may appear to be a contradiction. For me it isn't. This seeming contradiction is woven into her being. It makes it possible for her to sustain the women's Sangha and to work within the conventional system.

I also remember after her ordination, she invited ordained women from other Asian countries to stay with her at her temple. Theravada Bhikkhuni came from Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Vietnam. I saw how Venerable Dhammananda tried to build a community. Everything was new at that time for ordained women in the Theravada tradition. Women had never worn the saffron colored robes—even that was new. Male monks wear their robes open on one shoulder because of the hot weather. That wouldn't be appropriate for women. They have to appear respectable, so they wear a long sleeve blouse underneath their robes. There were no conventional practices for ordained women.

Then the women were trying to fold their sashes. Some people may think it's enough for women to practice spiritually and not be concerned with their outer appearance. But for Venerable Dhammananda, it was important that the bhikkhuni dress appropriately. Also, the way women recite prayers had to be adapted for women. Pali has gendered words, so they had to change some words in chants to reflect the feminine. She had to adjust all these little details from conventional male practice.

CR: Is there one final thought you would like to say about Venerable?

VC: I may not be in much contact with her lately, but I keep her in my thoughts. As a woman, I feel grateful to be a Thai woman alive while Venerable Dhammananda did what she did. Her efforts to build a women's sangha means a lot to many women, even though they may not talk about it. To outsiders, it might look like her work has affected a small circle of women, but what

she has done has had a great impact on women's lives in Thailand. You've probably seen her ability to draw in middle-class, educated women. These are examples of women who have been waiting for the gates to be opened. We have been waiting for a place to study and practice Buddhism. I always feel grateful when I think about her.

## Ouyporn Kuankaew



Ouyporn Kuankaew is the co-founder and lead trainer of the International Women's Partnership for Peace and Justice (IWP) in Northern Thailand. Ouyporn is a Buddhist feminist activist and has been a workshop facilitator in Asia since 1995. She facilitates workshops on feminist counseling, sexuality and anti-oppression, peacebuilding, and nonviolent direct action with Thai NGO and government workers, as well as regional and international participants. She also guides meditation retreats for activists. Prior to IWP, she ran the gender program of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists.

CR: When did you first meet Venerable Dhammananda?

OK: In 1995. We connected by talking about Buddhism and feminism and things. We become good friends after that.

CR: What was your first impression of her?

OK: She's very smart and talks with a lot of wisdom. She's also very witty. We were talking about our suffering and the next moment, we laughed. So since then, when I go to the temple I say, "I need to talk to you because I need to laugh—too much suffering."

CR: Can you tell me about the work you do at the International Women's Partnership for Peace and Justice?

OK: I regularly conduct group workshops on socially engaged Buddhism. Just recently, I worked with Chinese social activists. We combine feminist perspectives like gender and inequality issues with other structural issues of oppression, like class, ethnicity, disability, people living with HIV, and transitioning. We look into how to take action compassionately. We bring in Buddhism because the feminist viewpoint doesn't offer self-care or compassion. Activists feel guilty and don't know how to transform their guilt. They also don't know how to transform anger and fear, especially when they work under a severe government. Many of them feel threatened all the time. It's very difficult and most people don't want to relate to any religion. So, they get stuck.

CR: What do the activists feel guilty about?

OK: They're women. They feel guilty that they don't have time for their family, especially if they have kids. When you go out to work, you pull away and feel like you should be home taking care of your family. Because in our gender we are socialized to believe women are the main caretakers. Right? If they are married, then the man doesn't support them in their work and they feel bad. Right? Women feel more guilt than men. Because in our role, we're supposed to serve everyone, especially in Asia.

CR: Have you worked in groups or organizations where you've collaborated with Ven. Dhammananda?

OK: She's been coming to teach here every year. We used to run a six-week course for socially engaged Buddhism. When she comes, it's very clear that she's a role model, especially in Asia where we were told by many monks that women cannot be enlightened. There were never female monks in Thai Buddhism. They still claim that. So, when Venerable Dhammananda came, she really showed herself in the robe. I remember the first time she came. The women were afraid to touch her. She said "Here, it's just cloth, you can touch me." It's a big taboo. She's also an expert in the history of women's role in Buddhism. So that wakes up many women. If I say the same thing, they don't believe me. But Venerable Dhammananda has invested her life in studying the role of women in Buddhism. She's also practicing interfaith dialogues with Christians and Muslims. Anytime she speaks, she does it so clearly. Her points are so logical and

because of her knowledge, no one can argue. But she also embodies the practice of women who can laugh. She fought through much ignorance, and she can still laugh about it.

CR: Has she been a teacher or spiritual mentor to you?

OK: I think so. You know, when she took the robe, not many people supported her. She was all alone. But Venerable Dhammananda was so firm in her practice and had so much wisdom. She never came out with anger. She came out with clear insight about what she was supposed to do. For someone like her, it was such a deep spiritual training.

I'm also the founder of my center. There's only one center like this in Thailand. I work with a lot of marginalized groups in Thailand like refugees, people who are undocumented, gay and lesbian people living with HIV, and a lot of people who have been abused. There are times when I feel like giving up, when I feel my center has been washed away by the police- I think of Venerable Dhammananda. I think about doing the right thing. She says you just have to pray deeply and ask for support. So, every once in a while, she's not like a direct teacher, but I learn through her example. Especially when there's a lot of difficulty in life and she remains so calm. She continues her practice, gets up at 4:00 a.m., and does her chanting with the bhikkhuni, and in the afternoon, she goes gardening. She's 78 years old! Wow! Her energy is amazing! Her inner wisdom, her sharpness, and the focus that she has.

CR: Did you see her after she was ordained? Did you see her being criticized?

OK: One example would be the isolation she felt. I think at the beginning, people thought that she wanted to be famous. She didn't even get support from the feminist groups because most of the feminist groups were not interested in Buddhism. The fight she had, she had to fight alone. The criticism was that she was just doing it for her own fame. The first three months people said, 'Oh, she must be lesbian.' I asked her what she does when they say things like that. She said, "I don't pay attention." She focuses her energy somewhere else like gardening. And she just laughs at them.

CR: Why did they say she was lesbian?

OK: That was just another way to discredit her. You are going to have all these women coming together, you must be lesbian, anything to defame her.

CR: Do you teach at her temple?

OK: I used to. She invited me to work with the people coming to her temple because most of them come from rural backgrounds with not much education or experience in dhamma practice. Many of them have low self-esteem. There's a big gap between Venerable Dhammananda and them. I often wonder, when this teacher dies, who will take over? Who will carry on? How are you going to train these women to have self-esteem, self-confidence, and be able to lead? We used to talk about how she will empower them, how can we build a power sharing community where the center of power is not with the founder? How will decisions be made? It works now but it won't last after the leader dies. I know many great female leaders. I do the training for the

nuns at Tenzin Palmo's temple. Tenzin Palmo she came to me and said, "When I die, the nuns will go to the Rinpoche and say, "Here, take over the nunnery!" She was afraid that after she built everything, they would go to the male monks, and what's the point of that? We talk a lot.

I think this is what we are facing, the gap. When you have a strong founder, who is so wise, what happens after? There are not many people with that same level of charisma and power. This happens in other places, not just in Buddhism. Often when the leader is so powerful, they have a lot of work to do and there's not so much energy to support the effort to build leadership among the younger women. This happens in a male hierarchy, even within the lay community. We have an amazing founder and then we don't have a second generation, a third generation, to carry on the leadership.

CR: You are a Buddhist and a feminist. Is that a rare combination in Thailand?

OK: Very rare. Venerable Dhammananda says she's a Buddhist first and a feminist second. I say that I am a feminist first. Even if I were a Buddhist first, I would become a feminist, because Buddhism is so anti-feminist. I think I am lucky to be a feminist, so I know the Buddha's teachings and the monks' teachings.

CR: So, you are primarily a feminist and what does Buddhism teach?

OK: Buddhism is really looking at the root cause of suffering but from inner connectedness. I find the teaching of non-duality very powerful. There's no right or wrong. Things happen because of the root cause. When we look at the root cause, we understand we are tackling the belief system of the male hierarchy; we are not looking towards the people. It's not hating people, but it's the ideology that socializes people. When I work like that, I have the space to hold but still challenge. I challenge from understanding, not from anger. I keep laughing, with hope and joy inside myself.

CR: The feminists in your country who are not Buddhists, they don't support Ven. Dhammananda?

OK: They don't object to her, but they won't come and say let's combine our efforts. We have many issues. We have domestic violence, we have abortion, we have the lesbian issue—but they are not combining the religious movement with the feminist movement. And I think that's very sad, because good or bad, religion impacts most people, especially grass root women. These women suffer because they believe the wrong teaching of Buddhism. 'Oh, I'm poor,' or 'My husband beats me because of previous karma'—that's not true. When feminists are upper and middle class, they don't need spirituality as a refuge, or religion, because they have other sources of power. When they know that, I find that spiritual training is such an amazing way to empower women. Buddhist women from Burma, Cambodia, Thailand, Sri Lanka have such strong faith, especially grass roots women. But the teachings from hierarchical male monks do not empower grass roots women and do not empower women in general. So, the majority of feminists miss the opportunity to work with grass roots women in a spiritual context.

CR: In essence, what you do is deconstruct male hierarchy and place Buddhism within a loving and compassionate context.

OK: Yes, through loving kindness and compassion but also by showing that the Buddha (Venerable Dhammananda always impress me with this) is not just the first feminist, he also deconstructs the Brahmin caste system. He educated people about gender equality; they were so ignorant. Most feminists who don't study Buddhism don't use this as a tool in their analyses. They might have an analysis based on human rights, but it's not enough because many women are deeply impacted by religion and Buddhism. When you don't give them the tools, another way of analyzing the situation, they get stuck.

CR: Have you seen the Thai Bhikkhuni lineage progress in your lifetime? If so, how important is Venerable Dhammananda's ordination to that effort?

OK: I think she is the one who created that space. We faced many challenges early on. It looked like it was only me and her. We did INEB (International Network of Engaged Buddhists) conferences many times in Asia. She's really someone who opened the space for women in Theravada tradition, not just in Thai Buddhism. She opened that space and brought the Buddha's teachings about women back into relevance. He said that women can be enlightened and that women are supposed to take leadership to help Buddhism flourish. If Buddhism is really going to alleviate the suffering of human beings, then women have to take leadership, share that leadership with men, the teaching, everything. I think Venerable Dhammananda did that and I don't think anyone else could have done that because she has all the power. She has social status: she is from the upper class. She has her knowledge: she has wealth. With all that combined, she used it at the right time in the right place. I don't have that power. I haven't seen anyone else who has had that kind of power and influence in the history of Thai Buddhism. She did it so well.

CR: Is Venerable Dhammananda a role model for women in other Asian Buddhist Theravada countries?

OK: Yes. Even from other traditions.

CR: So, she is well known outside of Thailand?

OK: She is one of the leading feminist Buddhist scholars in the world. Even before she received ordination, I often saw her with Christian feminist leaders and Muslim scholars from other faiths and religions.

CR: What do you think Venerable Dhammananda's most important contribution has been as a feminist and Buddhist scholar?

OK: I think she is the first person to bring a feminist lens to reflect on how much Buddhism has been damaged by the male hierarchy, by male dominance, and the ignorant male dominant views and practices. She was an activist too, not just a scholar. She herself was ordained and led that movement as an ordained woman.

CR: Is there still a lot of resistance among monks in Thailand towards women's ordination?

OK: I think they are not organized. You can read about the fall of Thai monasticism over the past many years. There is so much corruption among the male clergy. They have so many problems in the male sangha; they can't even address those issues. This is why Venerable Dhammananda strives to practice well and is really admired by so many progressive male scholars. If you look at the news when she organizes an international conference, a lot of lay male scholars come—it's impressive. They know that Thai Buddhism has been falling apart over the last thirty years and they have no way to fix it. So, these scholars are hopeful and supportive because she is a new light in Thai Buddhism. She gets a lot of support from lay people, lay scholars, even politicians, and hierarchical people. Some monks support her, but most monks don't voice their support. Some of the monks still debate it, saying, 'Oh we never really had the tradition (Bhikkhuni lineage).' I think her main support comes from well-educated men and women who care about Buddhism.

CR: Is there anything unique in Venerable Dhammananda's approach to Buddhism that distinguishes her from other Bhikkhuni you have collaborated with?

OK: I think she is an activist. She's not just a feminist, she's addressing environmental issues through socially engaged Buddhism. You can see her temple collecting garbage to recycle. She's down to earth. You see her working with women in prisons. When she wants to do something, she doesn't just talk about it, she does it!

CR: Have you ever presented at the Sakyadhita conferences?

OK: I used to when I didn't have so much work at my center.

CR: How effective is Venerable Dhammananda as an international leader and advocate for women achieving their spiritual potential?

OK: Oh, I think she is widely recognized. She has held an audience many times with His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other world leaders, particularly in Buddhist circles. She keeps going and working with other famous women.

CR: If you could use one word to describe Venerable Dhammananda what would that be?

OK: She is a leader who shows how to take wise and compassionate action. She combines that bold, wise, compassionate, witty, fun and loving attitude and she keeps going. She never looks depressed, she just laughs!

CR: Is there an experience that stands out in your mind as the most memorable?

OK: She is a member of this one prestigious organization. It's a royally nominated council that's very highly regarded in Thailand, something that deals with literature. She said that when she was ordained, she walked into a meeting with a robe for the first time and some of the people turned away from her. She thought that some of people didn't like her. She said she felt very

compassionate and sorry that her presence disturbed them. So, we talked about her bringing them tiger balm next time. And we laughed. Instead of feeling angry and trying to analyze their behavior, she feels sorry for disturbing them. When you do something that's so out of their frame of reference, they react negatively. But she looked at it so calmly and was able to not let it affect her. In her life, that is how she operates. She is very clear and doesn't get disturbed by negative energy.

CR: Is there anything else you would like to add?

OK: I think you are doing a good thing. I'm very happy you are doing this project. Many women will read this book and it will mean a lot to them. Venerable Dhammananda changed my life. She is the first Buddhist woman to tell me that women can be enlightened. I was thirty-three. I never heard that before, because you always learn that women are dirty, that they cannot ordain, that enlightenment is not even a subject that Thai women should discuss. She turned that around. As a Thai woman, you are not supposed to be close to a monk because you are sexually attractive. No. The Buddha never said so. Instead of saying 'Women are bad,' he said, 'Be careful and train your mind.' The Buddha told Ananda to train his mind, not blame women. The Buddha noticed that when you choose the celibate life, you can be distracted by the sexuality of women. But Thai monks translate that to mean that women are bad. They skip the line about being celibate and training their mind. Monks say 'You're bad. Your body, your sexuality is bad.' So, when a sex scandal happens, Thai society blames the woman. Venerable Dhammananda cracked that belief and showed the truth about what the Buddha said. She really challenged the teachings about women from the male hierarchy— she showed that they were wrong. Women give up and have low self-esteem. So, when women have suffering from society and their family, they don't get the spiritual encouragement from male monks. The more we talk about it, the more we live life like Venerable Dhammananda, not just in Buddhism, but in any religion or teaching—how many of us women will wake up? How many of us will find our own wisdom to change our life, to change our family like her?

## **Professor Manuel Litalien**



Manuel Litalien is one of few westerners who had an opportunity to know Venerable Dhammananda before her ordination. He took a graduate course and participated with conferences with then Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh at Thammasat University in the late 1990s. The last international conference she organized before ordination was 'International Ramayana Conference' in 2000. Manuel Litalien was there as a volunteer.

Once he returned home to Canada, Manuel maintained contact with Ven. Dhammananda. He is now chair of the Department of Social Welfare and Social Development at Nipissing University in Ontario, Canada. He will return to Thailand in 2022 to celebrate Venerable Dhammananda's 20<sup>th</sup> Vassa.

CR: Please describe your academic work and how your studies intersect with those of Venerable Dhammananda.

ML: My academic work is an extension of what Bhikkhuni Dhammananda started in 1999, but my passion for fighting injustice has been instilled in me for a long time. I was raised in an environment where equality of opportunity is very important. I was taught that your gender shouldn't prevent you from doing something; if you want something to happen, you can make it happen.

As soon as I embarked on my master's, I was wondering how do to fight injustice and poverty. Initially, I wanted my master's to focus on books by Herman Hesse. I found out Herman Hesse is one of the most studied scholars in the world, so I was discouraged from the get-go to study his works. My supervisor asked me 'What distinguishes you from other scholars?' Well, I lived in Thailand and could speak Thai. He said to focus on Thailand instead. I knew that there was inequality between the monks and the nuns because of my experience in high school.

I found a book written by Chatsumarn Kabilsingh. I was reading through 'Women in Buddhism' and her name came right up. I wanted her to be my co-supervisor so I wrote to her. It took a while for her to respond but as soon as I got her email, we had a very strong connection. She was really happy that a Canadian man would be willing to travel halfway around the world to study women in Buddhism.

Once I arrived in Bangkok, we set up weekly classes for the duration of my six-month stay. There were to other students in this private course. She taught me how to do literature reviews and told me different universities and government institutions have different resources. The most important thing she taught me, however, was that theory is important, but practice is always better. If you only focus on theory, you're being a passive actor. You must be an action-driven academic and live the theory.

She would encourage us to practice 'living-the-theory' every time we had a class. For example, she would talk about The Ramakien (Thailand's national epic). Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh would tell us to go and see the artwork inspired and manifested by The Ramakien. She would ask us, "How does this discourse come to life? How does it affect people's behavior in everyday life?"

She had this capacity to move between the academic, abstract, and experiential worlds. She wanted to show us how to bridge these worlds, too. Some days she would make us go sit in a park. Or she'd say, "We've done enough of this, let's go to a temple."

Even now, my work is based on this kind of experiential learning: The idea that being community driven requires you to go out into the world and interact with it. My current research looks at the intersection of religion and politics interact in Southeast Asia. I'm trying to understand how people view these interactions as positive or negative.

I didn't realize the political nature of my research until I started my Master's in Comparative Literature. Once I compared Ven. Dhammananda's discourse with a discourse from Mae Chi

Sansanee, I realized the issue is inherently political. After my master's, I pursued a PhD in Political Science. You become your topic in a certain way. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda said, "How can I make a difference? By becoming a bhikkhuni."

This mentality really resonated with me and continues with me today. I teach my students how to be active, rather than passive citizens. If you have a project, start the theory and once that's done, apply it. Consider what kind of positive impact your research has on the community and how you can put that into action.

An expression that Ven. Dhammananda embodies is 'If there is a will, there is a way'. It's a will that is based on compassion and informed decision. Her decisions are always well-documented, and I admire that about her. If you look at Buddhist texts, you can find areas where you justify can justify the revival of the Bhikkhuni lineage. The Supreme Sangha Council still doesn't recognize bhikkhuni, though. I am concerned with the role of Buddhism in the social sphere.

In the Thai case, the Supreme Sangha Council is a social construct. It's not something that's been there for millennia, and it wasn't around during the Buddha's time. So why do they hesitate to recognize bhikkhuni? Some conservative monks argue women cannot receive ordination because the Bhikkhuni order has died out. But there are other ways to look at this situation. Some Buddhist scholars argue that we can revive the bhikkhuni lineage through other lineages connected to the Theravada tradition. For example, these scholars say the lineage from the Buddha's time is not interrupted because there was no such thing as Theravada, Mahayana, etc. at the time.

The work I did during my master's is the foundation for who I am as an academic now. My interest in equality and justice was encouraged by Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh. She has been an inspiration to me.

CR: You wrote that as a master's and PhD student, you had many eye-opening moments with Ven. Dhammananda. Can you describe one such experience and how Venerable Dhammananda helped you open more deeply into yourself?

ML: The first moment was when she taught meditation. I realized how generous she is: she never hesitates to give. Even when there's hardship, she stays rooted. She has a very strong practice, which I think comes from her mother, Venerable Grandmother. I met her once, but she was quite frail.

I keep having these eye-opening moments. It's like Venerable Dhammananda plants a seed in you and then you realize what it means many years after. I know it's going to be a life journey for me to come up with all these little seeds that she planted here and there.

CR: You're raising an interesting quality. Venerable Dhammananda is not only a teacher, she's also a spiritual healer; She's trying to help you grow as a person.

ML: These eye-opening moments can happen whether or not she's there. I have them all the time. When I'm reading, I'll realize, 'Wow! That's what she meant.' Or I'll have a moment

where I can connect the dots because of what she taught me. She gets to you, but she gets through to you. Sometimes she operates like a mirror, as well. It's not always the comforting image you would like to see.

One time we were talking about mindfulness and I was in a hurry. I was excited and my brain was about to explode. I bowed three times but very rushed. She said, "Remember to be mindful." I thought, 'Shoot, she's right.' I was doing it quickly because I wanted to leave and start writing about something she said. She reminded me that it's okay to just be here, right now and do this properly.

She often gives me these gentle reminders because I'm a passionate individual. I'm afraid to lose my ideas when I have them. But Venerable Dhammananda has taught me that even if you lose something, we can cherish that moment of awakening. She helps me connect dots I'm struggling with and suddenly my light bulbs go off.

Here's another example: We are both academics. One day, I was on the phone with her talking about new projects and theories. She asked me if I was in Bangkok and if I wanted to go visit a province with her tomorrow. I told her I couldn't, because I had other commitments. Then I realize that she was opening the door for the new projects I was just telling her about.

I paused and thought, 'Well, I can do this.' Venerable Dhammananda is the sort of woman who says, 'If you think you can do it, you can. Don't let anything stop you from thinking you can do this.' Suddenly, I tossed my schedule aside and went to witness the ordination of a bhikkhuni with Venerable Dhammananda. She never asked for reports. She never asks for anything. She gives, gives, and gives. Whenever I'm with her, there are so many projects to do. If you're saying something and she can open that door for you, she will do it. She's there no matter what: She's always accompanied me through hardships. She's very supportive and generous.

CR: Can you give an example of a hardship she helped you through?

ML: My master's was quite a challenge. When she knew I was having a hard time finding the documents that I needed for my master's, Venerable Dhammananda connected me with another student who had a car. I was able to do an exhaustive literature review on my topic. Without that student, it would have been impossible. She was able to connect me with the resources I needed to meet my goal. When I arrived, I was like an empty shell. I was asking for her to feed me knowledge. Her ideas can fill you for several lifetimes. She's very creative and one of the most prolific academics I know. She reads, she writes. She's very humble and not at all condescending. She's not confrontational and very well informed. She communicates in a way that makes you reflexive. Sometimes that's hard because you think you know something, but she opens your eyes to other information. I've seen it in action.

During the Ramayana Conference, a participant's belongings were stolen. That person became very agitated because her passport, plane ticket, and hotel key was stolen. Instead of saying, 'Why did you leave your purse unattended on a chair in Bangkok,' Venerable Dhammananda was very accepting and supportive of this woman in crisis. She wasn't even a bhikkhuni at that time, but I could see the monastic in her. If Venerable Dhammananda could have given this

woman her whole monthly salary, she would have. Everything turned out to be fine, but the way Venerable Dhammananda handled this situation was superb. She was just there to help. The person never felt judged. The person wouldn't have to worry about money. If the woman needed to take a taxi, this was provided to her, and nothing was asked in return. There are bad people everywhere, but there are also amazing people there to help you.

So, she's been another source of inspiration in terms of being herself: very composed, very loving, very caring.

CR: What was your reaction when Venerable told you she was going to be ordained?

ML: Very supportive. Very few people know that two other students and I drove her to the airport when she was going to Sri Lanka. I witnessed history in the making. I saw her leave as Chatsumarn Kabilsingh and come back with her head shaved. She briefed us on the transition from lay person to ordained person. It was unique for me to be right in the middle of it. Surfing alongside her was the only way to grow by Dr. Kabilsingh's side without drowning in the depths of her expansive knowledge of theories, experiences, and insights.

I knew she was making a big move for herself, for women in Thailand, and for women in general. She's an inspiration for so many women in Vietnam, Malaysia, Myanmar, Cambodia. I know many people criticize her for being a feminist because they see it as antithetical to their culture. There are all sorts of weird takes on this. If you're advocating for gender equality, does that make you a feminist? Some people ask where her inspiration for gender equality comes from. She always says there's more than one source, but her mom was a big one, even though she was never educated in the West.

She was critical of herself as a professor. Some said she was hard-headed, but I don't think so. She's determined in her practice and full of wisdom. She doesn't want to hurt anyone; she just wants to practice as a fully ordained bhikkhuni. What's wrong with that? It's tricky. I can see why some people think this is confrontational, but what she really wants is just to practice. She's not there to take anything away, she's there to complement. Why wouldn't you want to see what women have to say about Buddhist practice?

CR: Is there anyone else you suggest that I interview?

ML: Hard to say. There's a lot of academics who know her. Sure, I can name a few, intellectually she's well respected. Even if you disagree with her views, Venerable Dhammananda is an advocate for women's rights in religion. It's more than just Buddhism. Many people go to the Sakyadhita Conferences to pay their respects. She knows her work. She's an inspiration to people around the world.

CR: Would you say that Venerable Dhammananda is internationally recognized for her work? If so, does that recognition pertain to her work as a Buddhist scholar, religious feminist, environmentalist, socially engaged Buddhist? All of the above? Can you give any examples?

ML: She's a Buddhist scholar. She has an important voice in a transnational community of women interested religion and gender. Her work connects to inequality and empowerment. It connects to important terminology that agencies like the United Nations are using to develop the economic forum.

Her name will come up in conversations about gender equality in religion, access to education, etc. All these spheres are connected in some way. She is an important voice not just in the sense of Buddhism but in women's empowerment. That's why she's borderless. She echoes a lot of the struggle from women in the Tibetan tradition, as well. It's very interesting to see how she connects with a wide spectrum of spheres such as economic development studies, anthropology, gender studies, and social work. Her voice is very important to academia but also important in terms of social development. That's why I think her voice reaches further than Thailand.

CR: One word that describes Venerable Dhammananda?

ML: Equality.

CR: Your most memorable experience with Venerable Dhammananda?

ML: The Ramayana conference was a great one. She brought us to places where you could see the Ramakien. We were able to experience the spiritual, not just thinking about it, but really experience it.

Venerable Dhammananda is constantly a source of spiritual guidance for me. I used to go to Thailand for six months every year. Now I only go for two months every other year. I'm like a son who goes back to his roots, his mother. That's why we call her Luang Mae—Venerable Mother. She continues to be a source of inspiration for me. If it was not for her, I never would have been able to finish my thesis. Doors open when you're around her.

I remember when she first was ordained. She got a bad reaction from the media. But she sailed through that. She's well grounded. I've seen her go through so many hurdles.

She's big on looking at post- Venerable Dhammananda. What happens after she is gone. She's still there, she's still strong. But it's a discussion that we need to have. I don't think it's a question of replacing her, but it's a big unknown. The fact that she is so involved and precise in documenting everything is so important for women. Her views are timeless.

## **Dr. Amarjiva Lochan**



Dr. Amarjiva Lochan graduated from the University of Delhi, India and teaches History and Religions of India with a special reference to the Indic elements in Southeast Asia. He is Dean of International Relations at the University of Delhi. Dr. Amarjiva's many publications include 8 books and 48 research articles. Internationally, he is one of the most widely travelled Indian scholars (has been to 84 countries) with over 100 trips to Thailand. He has recently been appointed as Vice President of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR), an academic body under CIPSH, UNESCO.

When Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh was Chair of India Studies at Thammasat University, Dr. Amarajiva Lochan assisted her in organizing the International Ramayana conference in 2000, just prior to her ordination. In 2016 he also assisted her in organizing the 2<sup>nd</sup> ABC (ASEAN Buddhist Conference) in Thailand and the 3<sup>rd</sup> ABC (Asian Buddhism Connections International Conference) in 2018 in Indonesia.

CR: When did you first meet Venerable Dhammananda?

AL: I met Venerable Dhammananda when she was still Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh. Even before going to her university, I had the privilege to participate in a seminar with her on Buddhism in Sri Lanka in 1988. We had a casual two-hour meeting during a two-day conference.

She completed both her undergraduate degree and PhD in India. She was able to pick up the local languages in both places where she studied. Her first degree was in Philosophy at Visva-Bharati University, better known as Santiniketan, Home of Peace started by Rabindranath Tagore, a Nobel Peace laureate. He was the first Asian to get a Nobel Prize in Literature. She enrolled as a very young girl, when she was only 17. Her memoir on Santiniketan days as a teenager (Letters from India: 1962 to 1965 edited by me in 2012) shows the making of a girl with determined mind and exhibits her immense power to absorb. She received her Master's in Religion from McMaster University in Canada and her PhD in Buddhism in Magadh University in Bodh Gaya.

As you know, Bodh Gaya is a Buddhist place of pilgrimage because of the Bodhi Tree. I was born here. In 1993, we had an International Association of Historians of Asia (IAHA) meeting. It is the most prestigious association of Asian Historians. It meets every three years. In 1996, I was in Thailand helping the University program. I felt much closer to her because she had written something on the bhikkhuni issue. We discussed certain points about that. Since I had some knowledge of Pali and Sanskrit, I could participate in the discussion much more easily than others. When you want to talk about Bhikkhuni, consult the Tripitaka. Our shared interest in the Tripitaka started a close relationship.

In 2000, when she was the Director of India Studies Centre at Thammasat, she asked me to come and help the Centre administratively and scholarly. During that time, she organized an international Ramayana conference. I was the Local Secretary and she was the Patron of the Conference. We became even closer during that time since we were working so much together.

CR: Are you a Buddhist?

AL: I practice both Hindu and Buddhism because Bodh Gaya has both systems. If you say asking if I follow Buddhism as it's practiced in Thailand, that's a different thing. In Thai Buddhism, you find people who give alms and find monks who collect alms. In India, they don't do that. Here, what we do is have early morning Puja and celebrate all the Buddhist days on the calendar.

CR: Were you in Thailand when Venerable Dhammananda came back from receiving ordination?

AL: I was in Hawaii when she received ordination. Soon after, I went to Bangkok because she hinted she was planning something. She used to call me by my Academic Thai name, Amorn, which means immortal. She told me "Amorn, I am going to make a drastic decision. I am very concerned how I will cope afterwards." It was a very tough decision for her. She had been championing women in Buddhism very strongly. I remember in the 1980's I took a picture of

her. She was talking with a Sinhalese monk. Her face was cast down, not looking at the face of the Buddhist monk, which is the practice of respect by Buddhist lay woman. I think I have a picture somewhere where she is politely debating women's right to be ordained. I supported her argument.

CR: Did she talk about the difficulties of leaving her family or husband?

AL: She talked about the impact changing her life would have on others, but she said she was prepared for that. She did not show any weakness of human attachment. Her sons were fully grown. One of her sons is my age, so I could empathize with some of her thoughts. While discussing her new status, she never showed any doubt of strength. Her determination was very strong. If she wanted to do it, she would do it. I wanted her to delay for one year because of the academic center, nothing more than that. She said, "Yes, I hear you. I will do what I will do." The morning after I left Bangkok, I got a call that she received ordination. Seeing her in her new attire was very emotional for me.

CR: Do you remember what happened?

AL: She was sitting very peacefully with her legs crossed like a proper monk. She was very talkative but suddenly she was silent, which made me very uncomfortable. As a monastic, she had to follow the precepts and not be worldly. The Theravada system is not like Tibetan Buddhism. In Tibetan Buddhism, you are allowed to laugh. Here, you are not allowed to laugh, especially in public. The Buddhist Sangha in Bangkok debated her ordination often in those days.

Anyway, I felt a lump in my throat when I saw her sitting cross-legged. The most common name that I called her was Ajahn, which is the Thai word for teacher: She was Ajahn Chatsumarn. Now, Ajahn Chatsumarn became Venerable Dhammananda. I didn't know how to address her, because it was my first time addressing a Theravada bhikkhuni. I knew how to talk to a Buddhist bhikkhu, but I was so taken aback that I kept holding my palms and sitting in front of her. I saw that she was really following the precepts and remained very calm, cool, and silent. Previously, she had beautiful hair. Now she had her head shaved. That showed her determination to only to write about bhikkhuni, but to become a bhikkhuni.

CR: Did you feel sad?

AJ: I had a lump in my throat. It was hard to swallow. I wasn't necessarily sad, but I knew that her elder son was already 35-36 and she had a granddaughter. I wondered how she was going to handle her children and grandchildren. She knew some of the Hindi dialect that I spoke as a child, and I felt like that was another motherly bond I had with her. She said, "Of course, they are no longer my family, but part of my larger family, they are not my only family. My family now has increased, and I belong to a larger family." Then I saw her granddaughter come and not able to sit in her lap. As a bhikkhuni, Venerable Dhammananda could touch her granddaughter, but not her sons. She said it would be very difficult for her because she could not even touch her own sons. That caused her pain as a mother, but she was prepared for that. But her granddaughter did not come to her at all. Instead, she clung to her father, too shocked to approach Venerable

Dhammananda. She probably wondered ‘Who is this lady who has suddenly come into the house?’ She no longer looked like her grandmother. When she was a professor, she was very modern and fashionable. Her skirt used to be very modern, her shoes were very nice. Her physical appearance was highly presentable. Suddenly, the granddaughter saw her grandmother in the darker yellow robe, not the shining orange. She didn’t use the shiny yellow-orange robe, which many Thai monks used, because they were expensive, and gave you a certain glow. She wanted the robe to be a very natural and a dull color of a dark yellow robe. This is the choice that she made. No one else may have noticed, but I knew her so well that I felt I could now see her dedication to Buddhism and human issues.

I remember another story which was our first or second meeting after she became a Bhikkhuni. Chintana, her secretary at the India Studies Center, started crying when she saw Venerable Dhammananda in her new attire. She was sobbing uncontrollably. I don’t think she knew Venerable Dhammananda planned to become a bhikkhuni because Venerable Dhammananda didn’t make a public announcement about her ordination. I think only her sons knew about it. There were certain arguments back home but those are private arguments. As you know she is very strong willed. Once she decides something, that’s it. She speaks so softly. Even in her more talkative days she was soft spoken. Her aura was projected through her choice of words and body language while teaching. Chintana was very shocked and disturbed. Three years ago, Chintana also became a bhikkhuni. I emailed her and she responded with a picture of herself in the yellow robe. I asked her, “Is it now my turn to cry?” That was a very funny moment.

That reminds me that I was the first person to introduce Venerable to email. She goes everywhere in the world and says, Amarjiva created this. She is very humble and thankful. If you do a little thing for her, she never forgets and always acknowledges your action.

CR: Were you there when she was publicly criticized after the ordination?

AL: I address her as venerable mother, Luang Mae. The criticism came from a small minority of people who do not want to allow Bhikkhuni into their ranks. When you talk about the general public, people are not very concerned about you becoming a Bhikkhuni because she was not ordained in Thailand. She took the criticism in a positive way and was not worried at all. She said, “The criticism will keep my issue in the public domain.” She felt people would start learning about the issue. In Thailand, there are many Buddhists who don’t have a very good understanding of women in Buddhism.

In the Theravada tradition, you depend completely on original discourses of Lord Buddha. You don’t depend on gurus or Bodhidharma as you do in the Mahayana tradition. The only guideline for your life is the Tripitika, but people in Thailand have no idea about the Tripitika. She said, “I’m not worried about the criticism and crying about me and my status because it keeps the issue burning in the minds of people.” Then I added, “Look it’s not only the issue. You will still be in the public domain as an individual. You are standing for a cause that is very timely and required to highlight the role of women and the Bhikkhuni lineage in Buddhism. But you too will become a mentor and will become an icon and a leader for other people.” After the first 5-6 months of criticism, she started to get adulation from some scholars in the country.

CR: You are currently involved with the Asian Buddhist Connection, correct?

AJ: Venerable Dhammananda and I agreed to have the name changed. At this time, there's a huge gap in Asia with no common platform where Asian Buddhism is concerned. We're trying to create a larger platform to discuss the Bhikkhuni order.

CR: What do you think Venerable Dhammananda's single most important contribution has been as a Buddhist scholar and feminist?

AL: I think she has connected the Buddha and Buddhist knowledge to motherhood. That is her biggest contribution. The Buddha's compassion was being learned and taught and understood without the benefit of a mother or female influence. They talk about the Buddha's metta, or loving kindness, and most of the characters are male in the public discourse and books. She brought motherhood into Buddhism.

CR: What do you mean by motherhood?

AL: The idea of mother being an important part of Buddhism. The idea of not only biological mother, but the umbrella of "Motherness" if I can invent that word. Her knowledge of Bhikkhunis, Theris, of ancient Buddhist literature. When she goes to collect the alms, people support her as if she were their mother.

CR: How would you describe your relationship?

AL: We hold a similar vision and are dedicated to creating that. She knows my children and treats them like her grandchildren. Whenever she has the chance, she gives them something. She has been to my house. And I feel so blessed that we can discuss things freely.

CR: What quality do you most admire about Venerable Dhammananda?

AL: First of all, her dedication to the cause. Her determination is fearless. Second of all, she cannot be won over by money and material goods. Her vision is very attractive. If she has to learn, she can learn from an idiot like me. She is willing to learn from anyone. She makes you feel that she's part of that, you feel like you belong to her, without any umbilical cord, or dependency. My relationship with her is one of the longest I've ever had, as a scholar, a Buddhist woman, a mother, a curriculum creator, and University Professor.

## **Theodore Mayer**

Theodore Mayer has worked for the International Network of Engaged Buddhists since 2014. He has designed and implemented higher learning programs such as The School of English for Engaged Social Service. It is a transformative learning course that centers around English but is designed for young adults who are committed to personal and social change.

CR: Could you describe what you do in your job?

TM: I work for the International Network of Engaged Buddhists. I've been working for them since August of 2014. They hired me to design and implement higher learning programs that various leaders in INEB have dreamed about for quite some time. The idea is that they would be holistic, transformative learning programs that would reflect the values of INEB as a very non-sectarian Buddhist network. They asked me to design a Masters in Socially Engaged Buddhism, which I did; it is currently on hold for complicated reasons.

In 2014, I created an English course for the various kinds of young activists in INEB, so that we would have a greater pool of people who would be capable of doing the master's. The course is called The School of English for Engaged Social Service and we are now in our third year. I designed the course for young adults who are committed to some kind of personal and social change. It includes all the practices and kinds of basic knowledge that would help someone get their bearings in this complicated world.

CR: So, it helps them get their bearings as an activist?

TM: It helps them get their bearings as a person because the contemporary world is so complex. It's easy to get confused, to feel hopeless, and so on. The course helps them build confidence. We also provide an anthropological perspective of inequality to show how it's built into the current system. We practice co-counseling, which is a listening practice tools to work with people on an emotional level. We do meditation. We talk about what allows learning to happen with people's full intelligence. We also do a lot of goal setting and encourage student leadership.

CR: Why do you bring your students to see Ven. Dhammananda?

TM: I think I've known her since I started visiting her temple in 2000 or 2001. I just began a job at Webster University in Thailand, which is a few hours south of her temple. I'm an anthropologist and studied socially engaged Buddhism in Thailand. I heard of her because she's done some work on environmentalism from a Buddhist perspective.

I learned of her really significant role in the Theravada Bhikkhuni revival in Thailand. But actually, her role has gone beyond Thailand. I have notes and interviews going back to 2001. That's when I started taking students to see her. I take my students to see anyone who has inspired me to broaden my vision and allowed me to understand Thailand and Thai Buddhist social issues. She inspired me and opened up my world to shifting roles for Buddhist women. I want my students to meet inspiring leaders like Venerable Dhammananda, especially in the course that I'm teaching now, which is the school of English for Engaged Social Service. This course heavily involves leadership; we want students to meet someone who is leading on behalf of women and who is leading within Buddhism. It's important to see her impact on Theravada Buddhism beyond Thailand.

She's also an engaging speaker and a fantastic storyteller. She creates really engaging narratives about Buddhist ideas and history. She's an accomplished scholar, so when she talks about the history of women in Buddhism and the Vinaya she has a really solid foundation. You know her

PhD was about that. I love that about her. She has a very lively and engaging personality and a really great sense of humor.

CR: Are your students mostly Thai?

TM: No, our students are international and that's what's exciting. Some of them are from the most marginalized communities. We've had untouchables from India, students from Indonesia, Laos, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, China and Thais. It's a really complex mixture of young adults mostly from Asia.

CR: How did you first find out about Venerable Dhammananda?

TM: To be honest, once a researcher meets a person involved in Thai socially engaged Buddhism, you have a pathway to meet everyone involved in it. The community refers, relies, and supports one another thoroughly. My meditation teacher was one of my key connections. I also read some of Venerable Dhammananda's books and sought her out for a meeting.

CR: Has she been a teacher, a colleague, or a mentor to you? All three?

TM: She's one of four people in the world who I regularly give thanks to for being a mentor. But I also consider her a colleague, teacher, and friend.

CR: What kind of mentor has she been to you?

TM: Her teaching has inspired me. I think of teachers as being a kind of reference person; Someone who's thinking so clear that it helps me get a clearer picture of reality. If I feel troubled or have a shift in perspective, she's been welcoming to me. She's also been welcoming to my students.

I've personally had a few times I sought Venerable Dhammananda's advice. Once, I had a contract that wasn't renewed at a job I'd worked at for many years. She was like a personal counselor to me. Not intensively, but we had a few exchanges when I went to the temple. She encouraged me to completely forgive the people who I'd felt wronged me. Another more recent occasion was when my brother-in-law died in October 2017. I asked if Wat Songdhammakalyani could put him in their prayers and chants, and she did that.

CR: Have you collaborated with Venerable Dhammananda as part of other groups or organizations?

TM: I was responsible for the social sciences program and started a small Buddhist studies certificate program as a professor at Webster University in Phetchaburi. Either before the program or as part of it, I designed a three-part course called Women in Buddhism. I would teach the introductory part and assign students texts about women in Buddhism. The second part was a three-day intensive class at Venerable Dhammananda's temple. Then we visited Ouyporn Khuankaew in Chiang Mai and she led a three-day workshop with the students. They wrote papers after each of those field classes

CR: How did you get involved with ABC?

TM: I hadn't finished my PhD dissertation yet, but I would hope to write a book on what I've studied. Probably the most extensive piece I've written is this piece on Women in Buddhism. Ven. Dhammananda is a scholarly contact as well.

Before I'd finished my dissertation, Ven. Dhammananda invited me to present a paper at the second ABC conference in 2017. She's also invited me to present in Indonesia in 2018. She's been supportive and providing chances for me to present at conferences where I would feel comfortable. She's a leading member of INEB so we have some occasions to meet for that. I first presented the INEB institute concept to the leadership in 2014 in an effort to create higher learning programs. After my presentation, Ven. Dhammananda said "I am happy to pledge 100,000 baht." She was so generous. It was a huge confidence boost for our work. Later, she even considered using a vacant portion of her temple to host our university campus there. But we both decided it was not the ideal location and now she's using that for other purposes. But that's was another indication of her support.

CR: How do you think Ven. Dhammananda's ordination impacted the Thai Sangha?

TM: A huge volume of literature has been written about the Thai Buddhist Sangha by anthropologists and other scholars. Some people call it 'Thai State Buddhism' because it was designed in 1902 based on the pattern of the Church of England and Thai bureaucracy. An act of government put all Thai Buddhist temples under a hierarchy, which is bureaucratic in itself. There are also connections to government in other ways—the government offered ranks and titles.

Phra Paisal and others have critiqued the Thai Buddhist Sangha, especially its stagnation, conservatism, and corruption. I've previously written about the influence women leaders have over discussions regarding the Thai Sangha. Ven. Dhammananda has definitely influenced the Thai debate about the Sangha. I don't think she's really influenced the Thai Sangha itself. It's very difficult because it has entrenched power and it has entrenched patterns of leadership. Sometimes it seems impervious to change. Even though Phra Paisal's book on the state sponsored Sangha proposes many practical changes, it also indicates the potential difficulty of these changes. I would put it this way: Venerable Dhammananda's ordination and the growing number of bhikkhuni in Thailand is one emerging trend that is weakening the state sponsored Thai Sangha and presenting a challenge to its encrusted ways.

CR: When you say state sponsorship, what do you mean? What is the relationship of the Thai government to the Sangha?

TM: It's tricky because in some ways it's part of the bureaucracy. For example, abbots get a salary from the government. Thai temples were once controlled and sponsored by their communities, just like Sri Lanka and other Theravada countries. But the 1902 Sangha Act made all temples part of a national scheme wherein every temple was under another level of temple, and under another level of administration. The top administration is the Council of Elders and

there is a National Office of Buddhism, a government office whose mission is to protect Buddhism. I can't remember specifically what they are authorized to do.

CR: Who appoints the Supreme Patriarch?

TM: I am not sure; I think the King does. Phra Paisal argues that while temples used to respond quite well to the local community that sponsored them, the bureaucratization of the Sangha turned monk's heads towards the level above them. Any monk who wanted to get an education or a higher administrative position would want to please his superiors. It's a state-sponsored Sangha in the sense that the state created a bureaucracy within Buddhism. That's not true in Sri Lanka, where monks can actually run for parliament. But in Sinhalese Buddhism is not under a single authority, is not under a 'Church of Sri Lanka.' Conversely, Thai Buddhist Monks and the Sangha are under a single authority, equivalent to 'The Buddhist Church of Thailand.' It's a complex question.

CR: I assume you've seen progress in the revival of the Bhikkhuni lineage in Thailand. How important is Venerable Dhammananda's ordination to that effort?

TM: It was absolutely crucial. I think that if she hadn't been ordained as a samaneri and a bhikkhuni, I'm not really sure that others would have done it. It's hard to say. You couldn't really prove that. For instance, there's a very well-known and prominent Bhikkhuni in the north now who doesn't really think of herself as under Venerable Dhammananda's wing. But the fact that Ven. Dhammananda went to Sri Lanka and received ordination, she paved the way so that other Thai women who could also do that.

But also, another bhikkhuni that I interviewed said some things that were critical of Venerable Dhammananda and then she didn't want me to include that but it turned out to be really critical to a point I was making.

CR: What was she critical of?

TM: You have to understand the context and it would help you to read my paper. Just briefly that bhikkhuni I spoke to is very strict and has a very austere practice and she grew up with that understanding of Buddhism. Her charisma and prestige are based on a very austere practice. So she was critical of Venerable Dhammananda for what she considered being lax in some areas. You would understand that Venerable Dhammananda takes a liberal approach. For example, she used to walk barefoot when she did the alms rounds, but two times she was cut so badly by broken glass from street fights the previous night that she had to go to the hospital. Finally, her supporters and even the lay people who were giving her alms suggested that she wear some kind of slippers and she interpreted that as being acceptable. I believe she has textual support for that particular decision as well.

Venerable Dhammananda borrows and learns from different traditions: Mahayana traditions and Tibetan traditions. She has a program encouraging lay people to recycle trash. She tells people to bring their recycling as a form of dana, of giving, merit making. I think that will be both a fundraiser and a way to encourage environmentalism, which she learned directly from the Tzu

Chi foundation in Taiwan. Here's another piece of critique, she borrowed a tradition from some of the Japanese sects where they would sew a little label into their collar to indicate what tradition they were following. This other bhikkhuni said well you don't need to have those labels. She thought it was arrogant, you don't need to announce your school or your tradition through a label on the collar. Venerable Dhammananda has a very good reason. If her followers and the bhikkhunis who are part of her order commit wrongdoing, then she would know by asking "Which bhikkhuni was it?" Was it a bhikkhuni who was following her, because the label would be on the collar.

Many people have had the chance to learn from her and I'm positive that she wrote about her experience going to Sri Lanka. That had a big impact. Venerable Dhammananda is perfectly qualified to play that role because she's a respected scholar in the area of bhikkhuni revival and the Vinaya and has hosted a TV Dharma program for quite a few years. She has always been very precise about what the Buddha said and what is required for female ordination. Venerable Dhammananda believes the Buddha authorized male monks to ordain female monks and the Buddha never rescinded that authorization. I have heard the same argument from a very famous monk in Northern Thailand. He was referring to other bhikkhunis, but he said the same thing. He said that when the Buddha was enlightened, he was challenged by Mara who said 'You've accomplished your goal, now you can just pass away.' He claimed the Buddha replied, 'No, I will not pass away until I have established the male ordained Sangha, the female ordained Sangha, the male lay Buddhist society and the female lay Buddhist society. Those four components of the Buddhist community will allow Buddhism to survive and flourish.' This elderly monk said that if the Buddha established the fourfold Buddhist community for Buddhism to flourish, then he's okay with female monks.

CR: What do you think Venerable Dhammananda's single most important contribution has been as a Buddhist scholar and feminist?

TM: I think Venerable Dhammananda has created a new social space for Thai women within Buddhism. By social space I literally mean a practical spot, or role that women can now take. She has made a big shift in people's perceptions. All her weekly journal articles, books on Buddhist women, books on the Buddhist sangha, book on her Sri Lankan lineage contribute to this. Ven. Dhammananda has really created a space in her own temple where women can receive training, to become short-term or long-term samaneras, and become bhikkhunis. Some people refer to this as 'agency', which can be transformative for society. Structurally and legally speaking, up until her ordination you simply couldn't think of becoming a bhikkhuni in Thailand. But now you can! She's also been careful about choosing respected lineages to receive ordination from and precisely following the Vinaya to show her legitimacy. She has the background to argue for what she's doing. She's not doing it on a whim: She's doing it very thoughtfully and carefully. She's created a new space within Thai Buddhism for women and she's also been supporting bhikkhunis in Southeast Asia, so she's having a broader impact. I don't think she's the only one. I include Ouyporn in my paper. She has also created a social space for women and then there's also a leader of mae chis who I've also included in my paper because she also created shifts in what mae chi can do. Ouyporn really has created a new space for lay women for the practice of Buddhism.

CR: How has Ven. Dhammananda's leadership and advocacy for women's spiritual potential been internationally effective?

TM: That's a little bit harder for me to answer, because I haven't really witnessed on a world stage. I would guess she has played an important role in Southeast Asia. She's well known, especially for her writing and as the founder of initiatives like Sakyadhita. She was invited to a 1980s international conference on bhikkhuni issues by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. She's expressed disappointment that H.H. the Dalai Lama hasn't taken more decisive leadership in ordination for Tibetan women.

CR: Would you say Venerable Dhammananda is internationally known for her work? If so, does that recognition pertain to her work as a Buddhist scholar, religious feminist, socially engaged Buddhism, or environmentalism?

TM: I think she's had an impact in all of those fields. She began researching Buddhism and environmentalism early on in her academic career. In 1988, two villages were inundated in a mud slide, which led to a huge environmental movement in Thailand. Now, she's turning her monastery into an eco-temple. I think her biggest impact has been as a trailblazer for Theravada bhikkhuni revival.

Sometimes international subtly means North America and Europe; that's not accurate. International includes Taiwan, India, Southeast Asia, China, all these other places that are Buddhist. I think the core of her work is supporting bhikkhunis internationally, then all the other fields support that. She's used scholarship in important ways to support the movement. As she thinks about building the Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha, she's thinking about the qualities that an effective Sangha should have. For example, she's been inspired by the concept of Eco-Temples. Now she views environmentalism as part of an effective Bhikkhuni Sangha, along with education and training.

CR: Is there still a lot of resistance among Thai monks for women's ordination? If so, please describe.

TM: There is resistance from the higher ups. There's resistance from the Council of Elders. There's resistance from a lot of Thai monks because they argue that a bhikkhuni lineage is essential to ordain bhikkhuni in the present. Since bhikkhuni lineage died out, they believe it's impossible to revive. You may or may not know that Ven. Dhammananda carried out ordinations for the first time on Thai soil in November 2014. That created a huge backlash from the Council of Elders and the public got involved. The Council of Elders pretty much prohibited Thai monks from giving ordination and forbade the Thai foreign ministry from allowing other Theravada Buddhist monks into Thailand without a letter of permission. They basically said, 'You can't come to our country and ordain women.' I believe there is a legal challenge at some level based on religious freedom and human rights. I don't know if it's going to the courts or not. They were very high ranking Sinhalese monks who came to give ordination to Thai women. I don't think there were any foreign women. I think only 8 women received ordination out of a group of 40-50 women. The rest were ordained as samaneris. There must have been a misunderstanding because the press got it wrong. They thought all the women were ordained as bhikkhunis. It seemed

dramatic and scary to all of a sudden have 50 women become bhikkhunis. Also, that monk from Sri Lanka appointed Venerable Dhammananda a pavattini, a preceptor, someone who has the right to ordain others. She has that right by virtue of being 12 years ordained as a bhikkhuni. But you still need the bhikkhu sangha involved...she could not ordain bhikkhuni on her own; that would violate the rules.

CR: Is there anything unique in Venerable Dhammananda's approach to Buddhism that distinguishes her from other bhikkhuni with whom you collaborate?

TM: It's funny because it goes both ways. Within the Thai context, she's very international and cosmopolitan. That's partly a result of her background as a scholar and partly a result of her work as a socially engaged Buddhist within an international network. She is happy to learn from other traditions: Mahayana, Tibetan and so on. For her, that's part of learning. She differs from other Thai Bhikkhunis because of her high scholarship and commitment to socially engaged Buddhism. There's also her knowledge of other traditions, or 'rubbing shoulders' with other traditions. From the international perspective, she's recognized for being Thai.

CR: What quality do you most admire about Ven. Dhammananda?

TM: Her persistence in following her dream to create this new social space for Buddhist women. That persistence has many different elements to it, including her scholarship, her care and thoughtfulness, but also her GUSTO! She thinks she wants to do something and she does it! She's literally built a community that has financial stability and a foundation— that continues to be an inspiration to me. I really admire people who have built real live communities against the mainstream. That's powerful!!

## Monica Thaddey



Monica Thaddey is the founder and president of the Mahabodhi Metta Foundation in Switzerland. She established this foundation in 2000 with intent to promote and support the charitable humanitarian projects of the Theravada Buddhist Maha Bodhi Society in Bengaluru, India. Thaddey has found that many projects come to a halt once she withdraws her support. Thaddey knows that when she supports Venerable Dhammananda, however, the project will be maintained regardless of sponsorship.

CR: When did you first meet Venerable Dhammananda Bhikkhuni and what was your first impression?

MT: Many years back, Bhante Ananda from Mahabodhi Society Bengaluru, India, told me about an outstanding bhikkhuni living in Thailand. I immediately wanted to get her email address. I was deeply impressed to hear a woman had been courageous enough to restart the bhikkhuni lineage in the Theravada tradition. She did this despite everybody saying female ordination is fully against the Buddha's ruling that bhikkhuni ordination must be performed by both male and female monks.

In 2013, I began an extensive email exchange with Ven. Dhammananda, who is expert in many fields and wholeheartedly spreads the teachings of the Buddha.

CR: How would you describe your relationship to Venerable Dhammananda?

MT: I am in regular email contact with Venerable Dhammananda and I am very committed to her goals and wishes. If I had any questions regarding bhikkhuni ordination that I needed clarification on, for example, if I was uncertain about points regarding the bhikkhuni ordination, she helped me to understand the whole matter in a clearer way.

CR: How often do you visit Venerable Dhammananda?

MT: I visited Venerable Dhammananda for the first time in April 2017. I returned in April 2018.

CR: Have you taken any trainings or classes with Venerable Dhammananda?

MT: I have not since I received my first Dhamma-education from Venerable Achariya Buddharakkhita and Venerable Ananda of Mahabodhi Society, Bengaluru, India.

CR: What specific projects have you helped support at Songdhammakalyani Temple?

MT: I support Venerable Dhammananda in her undertakings to strengthen her mission whenever I feel it to be the right timing. I don't fund specific projects, as she herself knows best, which needs are pertinent.

CR: Is there anything unique in Venerable Dhammananda's approach to Buddhism that distinguishes her from other Bhikkhuni with whom you have collaborated?

MT: Venerable Dhammananda fights for emancipation within Buddhism. The whole subject about the life of females during the Buddha's time came into my deeper focus. There were women with incredible qualities who inspired others to walk in the footsteps of the Buddha. Bhikkhuni reached the highest levels of enlightenment, and were in no way inferior to bhikkhu. Although, it seems the stories of these bhikkhuni might have been perceived as less important while gathering the Tipitaka-texts after the Buddha's death.

Nowadays, women should have the right to receive ordination as bhikkhuni. This addition would strengthen the Sangha immensely. Therefore, in my opinion, Venerable Dhammananda is playing a vital role in the survival of the Buddha Sasana world-wide.

CR: What do you most admire about Venerable Dhammananda?

MT: I admire Venerable Dhammananda's courage and perseverance, as well as her equanimity, dedication, and patience. Ven. Dhammananda is expert in many fields and demonstrates how wholeheartedly she spreads the teachings of the Buddha.

CR: Would you say that Venerable Dhammananda is internationally recognized for her work?

MT: Venerable Dhammananda is internationally recognized for her incredible contributions as a socially engaged Buddhist and a Buddhist scholar. She always emphasizes that the Buddha taught that the Sangha consists of four groups - ordained men and women as well as lay men and women. Ven. Dhammananda, as the first fully ordained Theravada Bhikkhuni in Thailand, not only started a temple outside of Bangkok, but also works hard to spread the Dhamma in a much broader way. She travels tirelessly to different parts of the world, speaking to audiences about the need to restore the fourth pillar of Buddhism.

CR: If you chose one word to describe Venerable Dhammananda what would that be?

MT: A Bodhisattva.