

Why I am writing this? I have been giving interviews, so much so that I think I am born to do this. I enjoy talking to people who came all the way from the other side of the globe to meet me, to ask me all kind of questions. Indeed, some of the questions broaden up my own perspective and deepen my understanding, I am grateful for their input. Yet, there are questions which can be answered if they look in my previous written work. So my attempt to work on this FAQ is to weed out those common questions that I get all the time from people who came to interview me. Ah, I got a brilliant idea. If they ask me this question, and I know I have already answered it, I will simply say... please read answer to Q.no. so and so. This would really help me a great deal.

So before you see me, please browse through this Q&A list and maybe when you see me, you will need only to take a photo of us to prove that you have talked to me personally. Wouldn't it be nice? I love seeing you all the same.

Ven. Dhammananda

Q1. Please tell me your name so that I could record it properly. My ordained name is Dhammananda with the stress on the last a, that makes it female. If you stress on the second a in my name that is a male name. So my name is Dhammanandaa And not Dhammaananda. I am known better in the literally world in my lay name ... Chatsumarn Kabilsingh. English books which came out before my ordination (2001) will go under that name.

Q2. How should we address you? You can call me Venerable to be polite. Western people sometimes call me Dhammananda, that is not proper in our Buddhist tradition. The person who will call me by my name like that is only my teacher, but then my teacher also calls me Venerable Dhammananda. I also address my junior as Venerable.

Q3 When and where were you ordained? In Buddhism, as a woman, one cannot be fully ordained right away, so I took lower ordination as a samaneri (female novice) in February 2001 at Tapodanramaya, Mt.Lavinia, Colombo, Sri Lanka. Then after two years as required by the monastic rules, I went back to the same place and received full ordination to become bhikkhuni (female monk) in Feb.2003. I became the first Theravadin bhikkhuni in this country. Allow me to side track a little. Theravadin means belonging to Theravada, some western nuns who do not have knowledge in Pali often made a mistake and write

Theravadan. In 1998 there was one Thai nun received dasasil mata from Sri Lanka she was fully ordained by Fo Guang Shan in 1998, but that was also Mahayana, as she did not get the ordination from Theravada bhikkhus. I mention this, as someone had questioned me for being the first Theravada bhikkhuni with misunderstanding that the nun who received the ordination in 1998 was the first Theravadin bhikkhuni. Venerable in question is Ven.Katanyuta, she is still working in Ayudhya wearing Mahayana robe, because she did not get another ordination from Theravada bhikkhu sangha.

Q4. Do you mean that there were bhikkhunis before you? Yes, my mother, Ven.Voramai Kabilsingh was ordained from Taiwan in 1971 hence she would be the first Thai woman to become Mahayana bhikkhuni in Thailand. I have to add also that there are about 200 Mahayana bhikshunis in Thailand, but they are known only among the Chinese community in Thailand.

Q5, Why do you choose this location to build a temple? I did not choose, it was my mother's farsightedness to purchase this land from H.M. Indrasakdisaci, Queen of King Rama VI. This temple has been here since 1960. She sold her house and property in Bangkok, with limited amount of cash she could not buy 6 rai (Thai acre) of land in Bangkok. So she had to look in the neighbouring provinces, not too far from Bangkok. We need 6 rai, that is the minimum as required by law to build a temple. So it was clear to her then, she wanted to build a temple for women. First time when we moved out here, when you drove from Bangkok there was nothing but green paddy fields. 50 years have passed and now there is hardly any paddy field that we could see on the way to Bangkok, that is what is called development! Nakhonpathom is 56 kms. West of Bangkok, the temple is easily accessable. Buddhism came here in Asoka's period in 3rd C.B.C. for that reason, it is called Nakhonpathom, the first town (that Buddhism arrived). And now it is also the first town with the establishment of the first Theravadin bhikkhuni temple.

Q6. Please tell me about your mother, did she have any difficulty in her time to be the first bhikkhuni? Indeed, ordination has always been the sphere of men and monks. Very few of us have studied to learn that in fact it was the Buddha's intention to have fourfold Buddhists, bhikkhus (monks), bhikkhunis (female monks), laymen and laywomen. So when they see for the first time women wearing the robe, they could not accept. They thought that the robe is only for men. With ordination women will soil the robe with

menstruation. To the latter comment I simply said, well if the robe is soiled then go and wash it. The difficulty that my mother faced was the fact that she received ordination in Mahayana tradition, without training to further give ordination and training, she could not start a sangha (community). I noted this limitation and tried to correct it with our ordination and training.

Q7. How did your mother deal with misunderstanding and obstacles in her time? She emphasized on Buddhist education, she published a monthly magazine which she continued to keep it up for 32 years. Through her magazine she educated people both in Buddhism as well as bhikkhuni issue, at the same time the magazine provided a space for her to reach out to her readers who were also her supporters. When she was young she had a brief exposure with Christian nuns, so she also tried to teach her nuns to be self-sufficient. In this respect, she started a printing press, and also a stone factory to bring income to support her community. She was farsighted for her time. We have much to learn from her. I was trained along with other nuns in her community. One keyword I learned in my life is to be “self- sufficient.” In order to make access to the bhikkhus’ world, the first attempt she did was to open her home to give English tuition to the monks, that was very popular but soon was stopped by the authority. Later she offered to provide ordination for monks, and also offered more than 100 Buddha statues to bhikkhus living in remote area. This indirectly helped to pave an inroad to allow the bhikkhus to feel the presence of bhikkhuni’s existence, inspite of the fact that she was the only one bhikkhuni, much work had been done in her time preparing the ground for the future of bhikkhuni sangha.

Q8. Was there any confrontation with the authority? Only once when the governor of Nakhon Pathom province where our temple is situated, reported to the Council of Elders that she was wearing yellow robe and maybe she an imposter and defaming Buddhism. It so happened that Most Venerable Phra Prommuni (Phin Suvaco), her own teacher, was one of the committee members in that Council. He simply asked other members whether they themselves can wear that light yellow color. They all responded negatively. In that case why should they not allow others to wear that color, the Council ended the case by simply remarked that “they do not see that she defamed Buddhism.” that was the only time that her case came up to the Council.

Q9. In your own time do you have to face the authority? None, only gossip in the media, but of course social media in this time is much

more wide spread and more effective than in my mother's time, there is both positive and negative aspects in it.

Q10. How do you handle it? We are most willing to give the correct information to those who are sincere in their pursuit to know about the truth. But there were cases of people who simple carry out negative gossip, we do not confront and cannot waste our time handling someone else's negative energy.

Q11. Was there any assistance from any other channels? I have to say that the media have remained supportive. In 2004 Senator Rabiebrat, set up a committee to study the issue, it took her 6 months to meet individuals concerned, interviewed and collected information and made a proposal to the Council of Elders, but nothing changed. Apparently the Council of Elders did not seem to have even studied her proposal. They turned down her request repeating the order of the Sangharaja of 1971 to support their stand.

Q12. What was the attitude of the Government? Senator Rabiebrat made a proposal at the government level, the Prime Minister (Taksin Shinawat) appointed Dr. Vishnu Krue-ngarm, Deputy Priminister, to handle the question in Parliament. It lasted 50 minutes, in spite of the fact that he is a very learned lawyer of the country. On this issue, I have to say that I was rather disappointed. He repeated exactly the answer of conservative monks. It sounded as if he was being coached by them.

Q13. Since your time, how many women have followed your path? After 18 years, there are now more than 285 bhikkhunis (fully ordained nuns) in Thailand spreading out in at least 30 provinces. (We have 77 provinces in the whole country) The bhikkhunis are represented in all 4 regions, north, central, north east and south.

Q14. Do you see the difference on the attitude of the Council of Elders from your mother's time to your time? I never thought of it. Now that you asked, I recalled in my mother's time, senior monks who later became Sangharaja no. XIV and XVI came to visit our temple on their own. That is, we did not invite them, they passed by and made a stop to see how we were doing and blessed us. During that time the uposatha hall was underconstruction. Both of them (at different time) gave guidance so that we keep on the path of the Buddha. In my time, our sangha visited the acting sangharaja at Wat Paknam, he received us well. In fact he knew me since I was in my teen. We also visited the Somdej of Wat Yannawa, he also gave us a warm welcome. However,

none of them visited us. The sangha also is going through difficult time within itself, so I do not expect support from them but at least the government should provide a legal space for us as we deserve it from religious and from legal point of view.

Q15. Do you see any change within the past 18 years since you were first ordained? Indeed, the society is more friendly, they are better informed about the existence of the bhikkhunis. They were no more surprise to see female monastics. Some may still question as to the legal issue, sometimes I just ask them directly if they personally accept. They would answer positively, then I told them that for me they represent the voice of society. With this attitude, it really helps them to understand the issue in a direct and experiential way.

Q16. In the beginning did you have any difficulty leading your life as monastic, how did you deal with the change from laylife to monastic life? Yes, there was a great shift, I was struggling to overcome my laylife, my way was thinking, liking, etc. To begin with I realized that monastic life is very different from the kind of life I was leading earlier. I came from a very comfortable background, to adjust from the life with long painted nails itself was a great shift. I spent the first two years to train myself to be a good monastic.