

I have been giving interviews for a very long time and I enjoy talking to people who are interested in my life and work. I especially appreciate those who come from faraway countries just to meet me and to ask me questions. Some of the questions broaden my own perspective and deepen my understanding and I am grateful for their input. Yet, there are questions which could easily be answered by doing a little research online and in the Songdhammakalyani website.

This Q & A is my attempt to weed out those common questions that I get all the time. Please take the time to read through them and to look through the other material in the press kit so you will already have the answers to many of your questions.

Ven. Dhammananda

Q1. Please tell me your name so that I could record it properly.

My ordained name is Dhammananda with the accent on the final syllable and pronouncing the 'a' long. This makes the name female. If you put the accent second syllable, it becomes a male name. So my name is Dhammanandaa and not Dhammaananda. I am known better in the literally world by my lay name, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh. The books I wrote in English before my ordination in 2001 were published with this name.

Q2. How should we address you?

You can call me Venerable to be polite. Westerners sometimes call me by me name, Dhammananda, but that is not proper in our Buddhist tradition. The only person who can me by my name is my teacher. I also address junior bhikkhunis as Venerable.

Q3 When and where were you ordained?

In Buddhism, a woman cannot be fully ordained straightaway, so I took lower ordination as a samaneri (female novice) in February 2001 at Tapodanramaya, Mt.Lavinia, Colombo, Sri Lanka. After two years as required by the monastic rules, I went back to the same place and received full ordination to become a bhikkhuni (a female monk) in February 2003. I became the first Theravadin bhikkhuni in this country. Theravadin means belonging to the Theravada Buddhist tradition. Sometimes this gets miswritten as Theravadan. There are other Thai women who have been fully ordained before me, my Mother for

example, however they were ordained in the Mahayana tradition, not Theravadin.

Q4. So your Mother was a bhikkhuni before you?

Yes, my mother, Ven. Voramai Kabilsingh was ordained in Taiwan in 1971, hence she would be the first Thai woman to become a Mahayana bhikkhuni in Thailand. I have to add also that there are about 200 Mahayana bhikkhunis in Thailand, but they are known only in the Chinese community here.

Q5, Why did you choose the location in Nakhon Pathom to build a temple?

I did not choose it. 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 but with the limited amount of cash at her disposal, 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 needed 6 rai because that is the minimum amount required by law to build a temple. So it was clear to her then that she wanted to build a temple for women. When we first moved out here, on the road from Bangkok there was nothing but green paddy fields all around. Within 50 years not a paddy field in sight anymore, only buildings and highway and that is what is called development! Nakhonpathom is 56 kms. west of Bangkok and the temple is easily accessible. Buddhism arrived here during the Indian Emperor Asoka's period in 3rd BCE. For that reason, it is called Nakhonpathom, the first town where Buddhism was established 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 establish a fourfold Buddhist community comprised of bhikkhus (monks), bhikkhunis (female monks), laymen and laywomen. So, in Thailand when they saw for the first time women wearing the robe, they could not accept it. They thought that the robe was only for men and that with ordination, women would soil it with menstruation. To the latter comment I simply said, well if the robe is soiled then I'll go and wash it. The difficulty that my mother faced was that she had

received ordination in the Mahayana tradition and without training to further give ordination or teach so 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 the misunderstandings and obstacles in her time?

She emphasized Buddhist education and she published a monthly magazine for 32 years. Through her magazine she educated people both on Buddhism as well as on the bhikkhuni issue and 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 to 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 a visionary in 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. It was very popular but soon it was stopped by the authorities. 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 the road that would allow the bhikkhus to get used to the presence of the bhikkhuni’s existence. In spite of the fact that she was the only one, much of the work done in her time prepared the ground for the future of the bhikkhuni sangha.

Q8. Was there any confrontation with the Thai authorities?

Only once when the governor of Nakhon Pathom province reported to the Council of Elders that my Mother was wearing a yellow robe and that maybe she was an imposter 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” and that was that.

Q9. In your own time did you have any trouble with the Thai authorities?

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 and there is both positive and negative aspects to 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 simply invented negative gossip. We do not confront them and we 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 the individuals concerned. She interviewed them, 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 that women could not be fully ordained in Thailand.

Q12. What was the attitude of the Government?

Senator Rabiebrat made a proposal to the government and the Prime Minister, at that time, Taksin Shinawat, appointed Dr. Vishnu Krue-ngarm, the Deputy Prime Minister, to handle the question in Parliament. It lasted 50 minutes, and in spite of the fact that he is a very learned lawyer, he basically agree with the conservative viewpoint of the male monks. It almost sounded as if he had been coached by them. On this issue, I have to say that I was rather disappointed.

Q13. Since your time, how many women have followed your path?

As of 2024, there were more than 285 bhikkhunis (fully ordained female monks) in Thailand, spreading out over at least 30 provinces. (there are 77 total provinces). 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 recall in my mother's time, two senior monks who later became Sangharaja members no. 14 and 15, 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 under construction. Both of them (at different times) gave guidance so that we would stay steadfast on the path of the Buddha. In my time, our sangha visited the acting sangharaja at Wat

Paknam and he received us well. In fact he knew me since I was in my teens. We also visited the Somdej of Wat Yannawa, he also gave us a warm welcome. However, none of them have visited us yet. I do not expect support from them but at least the government should provide a legal space for us as we deserve it from a religious and legal point of view.

Q15. Do you see any change majors change in the country since you were first ordained?

Indeed, the society is more friendly towards us and they are better informed about the existence of the bhikkhunis. They are no longer surprised to see female monastics. Some may still question as to the legal issue, but if I ask them directly if they personally accept us, they say yes to which I respond 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 lay life, my way of thinking, my personal tastes and habits, etc. To begin with, I realized that monastic life was very different from the kind of life I had been leading previously. I came from a very comfortable background, so to adjust from a fancy life with long painted nails and makeup was indeed huge. I spent the first two years training myself to be a good monastic.

Even though there have been some hard times, I have never regretted becoming a bhikkhuni and I am very comfortable with this lifestyle.