

Theravada Buddhism and Women Priests in Thailand

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Isis



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Feminist Buddhists claim their right to ordination

Now there is a movement by a group of feminist Buddhists, led by Buddhist scholar *Dr. Chatsumarn Kabil Singh*, to re-establish the bhikkhuni Sangha in Thailand. Although her crusade has sometimes been greeted with scepticism, if not mockery and jeers, she is adamant about the social benefits of a bhikkhuni Sangha, *"First, an opportunity would be given to women to have status in the religion if they wish to follow their faith."*

Women who now want to forsake worldly matters can become Buddhist nuns, but due to their low status, they are hardly recognised socially or religiously, *"Buddhist nuns are not classified in one of the four groups traditionally comprising Buddhism, there is neither a role model nor a positive image for women who want to practice Buddhism seriously."* The four groups are bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, laymen and lay women. A bhikkhuni Sangha would not only foster spiritual fulfilment for women but could help cure social ills, *Dr Chatsumarn* claimed.

She believes in the theory that the issue of bhikkhunis and that of prostitution are closely related. Unlike women, men can always seek solace in the temple temporarily when their lives hit rock

The gender issue in Thai society has been discussed extensively. Thai women have in recent decades asserted themselves to a great extent to take an equal role in business, politics and society. Yet there is one area where raising the gender issue is still taboo and where equal opportunity is unthinkable, not to mention impractical, and that is the Thai monkhood.

For centuries, men have been raised to believe that the only way to attain enlightenment is to be ordained a monk. Women, on the other hand, have been told, by tradition and by law to accept the fact that they cannot attain such a lofty goal because they cannot be ordained. Looking back through history, the monkhood was available to both sexes as *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*. But the female monkhood has long disappeared from Theravada Buddhism, which is widely followed in Thailand.

bottom. "Those who have failed socially can enter the monkhood as a temporary shelter to recuperate. But that is for men only."

Without a well-established shelter for women, when they are cornered, they often fell forced to enter prostitution. In fact, one study has found similarities between 'women in the whore house' and 'women in the temple'. Many women enter the brothel and the temple with the same goal - to try to return something to their parents as a gesture of gratitude, "For prostitutes, it is material. For nuns, it is merit."



A bhikkhuni Sangha, she believes, would lead women spiritually, guiding them out of ordeals by offering a religious path or simply a temporary shelter in the temple. In fact, the 87 year old bhikkhuni Vorami, the first and only Thai bhikkhuni ordained in Taiwan, has helped out some destitute women at Wat Songdharmakalyani Temple, a bhikkhuni temple in Nakhonpathom.

Prejudice from monks

But the crucial problem of establishing a bhikkhuni Sangha is that of gaining the acceptance of monks, said the Ven. Pra Methi Dhammaporn, "Bhikkhunis have long disappeared from Theravada Buddhism, so a bhikkhuni's acquired status will be questioned, especially if one insists that bhikkhuni be equal to monks," said the venerable monk, who is the dean of the Graduate Faculty at Maha Chulalongkorn Buddhist University.

While ordination of a new bhikkhuni is unlikely, Dr. Chatsumarn said, the ordination of Thai bhikkhunis by Taiwanese bhikkhunis in the Mahayana tradition, which has maintained the

tradition, could be practical. She cited a historical study on Buddhism which indicates that Indian bhikkhunis had ordained Sri Lankan bhikkhunis, who, in turn, had ordained Chinese bhikkhunis. Thus, the ordination lineage had been maintained.

Yet, if the sacred ritual is practiced differently by Mahayana bhikkhunis in Thailand, it is unlikely to be recognised by the local Sangha, warned Pra Methi. To have the local Sangha recognise a bhikkhuni, she has to be ordained under the Theravadin tradition. The Sangha Supreme Council must also consider whether the Vinaya, the code of monastic discipline, would allow the ordination of bhikkhuni.

"We have passages in the Vinaya which have not been interpreted. However, it can't be assumed that the interpretation would result in permission for the ordination of bhikkhuni," said Pra Methi. If the Vinaya allows the ordination of women, the recognition by bhikkhus will naturally follow.

So far, however, there has not been enough public demand for bhikkhuni ordination to have the Sangha interpret the Vinaya. The revival of bhikkhuni, he insisted, was the ideal of a small group of academics, "Even the more liberal Western Buddhist monks, such as the venerable Pra Sumedho, the American monk who believes in the equal status of women, don't ordain bhikkhunis."

Instead of establishing the bhikkhuni Sangha, which may create conflicts about its legal status, Pra Methi proposed that one step be taken at a time. Giving more dhamma education to nuns and improving their status should be the first priority. He said that "Nuns should be given proper education to be able to contribute to society, the same way Catholic nuns do." In this way, women will gradually gain enough support to give them higher status in the Buddhist hierarchy.

But according to Dr. Chatsumarn, the community of nuns (*mae ji*) has been so long neglected that it cannot function properly as a religious organisation for social development. Neglected by both society and the local Sangha, a lot of nuns find it hard to improve themselves because there is very little religious education for nuns. Many find themselves doing chores for monks. At the same

time, seventy per cent of nuns said in a recent survey that they did not have a strong religious commitment. Many admitted that they became nuns to seek refuge or to hide from their worldly failures.

Differences of opinion amongst Buddhist nuns

Dr. Chatsumarn further explained, "Nuns (mae ji) have tried in vain to register and seek education. In national reports on Buddhist temples submitted to His Holiness the Supreme Patriarch, there is not even one mention of nuns."

Leading Buddhist nun, *Mae ji Sansanee Sthirasut* agreed; *"Thai society doesn't fully accept the existence of females in the religion. Being a nun is even worse."* Whether women's status should be improved in Buddhism is for those in the secular world to decide, she mused. For her, religious status does not matter, *"We are not interested in status, what people call us or whether they accept us. We know what we are doing. That's enough."*

Her priority, she said, is to look into herself, to learn more about herself and to realise her religious path and whether it leads in the right direction. *"I am not against any movement to improve the status of women in religion. It is good that Archaan (professor) Chatsumarn has tried to push for more recognition of women. But that is a secular matter,"* she said.

Unlike conventional nuns, *Mae ji Sansanee* has been recognised for her contribution to society and women's causes. She runs Sathienthammasathan as a women's shelter to instill in women morality and spiritual virtues.

Prejudice against women underlies the debate

Prof. Dr. Prawase Wasi, a social critic and Buddhist scholar, agreed with *Dr. Chatsumarn* that there are plenty of destitute women who could be helped by women in religion, *"But it will be too late if we have to wait for the establishment of a bhikkhuni Sangha. I think we should have institutions to support and educate women spiritually and socially. A religious institution*

would be ideal," he said. He felt that a campaign to revive bhikkhuni would raise a lot of conflicts. *"When one demands something unconventional in this society, he or she is treated as a weirdo. The campaign would be treated as a joke."*

Dr. Chatsumarn acknowledged the strong mood of disapproval. *"What I've been asking for is an opportunity to be ordained into the monkhood. But whenever we demand something unconventional, we are treated as if we are making the demand out of 'kiles' (defilement). If the Lord Buddha entered the monkhood to attain enlightenment, so it is implied that life under monkhood is more suitable for enlightenment. Why can't women follow the same path if they have the inclination?"*

Dr. Chatsumarn has gradually built up her movement for bhikkhunis by organizing three-day retreats for the past three years. Women can study dhamma, meditation and asceticism, similar to living in a monastery. *"We are looking for qualified women to spearhead bhikkhuni ordination. For the right candidate, ordination can be carried out right away, either in Taiwan or Los Angeles."* She stressed that the bhikkhuni Sangha should not threaten male monks because they are not supposed to be hierarchical.

Even though the local Sangha may not accept the future bhikkhuni community, *Dr. Chatsumarn* was optimistic. *"It's good that the monks will not pay much attention to us. That way, we can nurture our bhikkhunis without interference. We are not seeking equal status, we only want a chance to devote our lives to Buddhism and society."*

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From Servants of the Buddha