



Bhāvanā News

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Our Bhikkhuni Ordination in Sri Lanka

by Bhikkhuni Gunanusari

On Sunday, July 2, 2006, I received higher ordination from a chapter of bhikkhunis and bhikkhus at Dambulla, Sri Lanka.

The procedure for applying for the higher ordination at the Dambulla temple is as follows. The aspiring candidates are eligible to apply after having kept their vows as samaneris for five years (two years according to Vinaya rules) or the equivalent. They have learnt Dhamma and Pali from a revered teacher, and must continue staying under that teacher's guidance for another five years after being ordained as bhikkhunis. Formal *upasampada* (higher ordination) preparation begins with the request from the head nun/teacher, on the student's behalf, to the most senior monk, Venerable Inamaluwe Sri Sumangala Nayaka Thera, Chief President of Sri Lanka Bhikkhuni Order. Venerable Sumangala passes this request on to the Provincial Chairmen and Secretary of the Sri Lanka Bhikkhuni Order. The accepted candidates begin a residential training period of three months. The bhikkhuni education facility is specially designed for the training of samaneris for higher ordination. The training is all in Sinhalese and includes Dhamma, Vinaya, history of Buddhism, and Pali. Once prospective candidates pass two examinations during the training and a final written examination after the training the higher ordination is granted. This would be difficult for foreigners who do not speak and understand the native language. As foreign candidates we were only required to participate in the final examination which was held one week prior to *upasampada* ordination.

The bhikkhuni educational centre is located at Kalundewa- the newly renovated centre in a forested part of Dambulla, about 5 miles from the Golden Temple. The head nun is Venerable Bhikkhuni Siri Sumedha, Chief Secretary of Sri Lanka Bhikkhuni Order. She was the teacher appointed to instruct the candidates. Ven. Bhikkhuni Siri Sumedha is the abbess of Sri Ratnamali Aramaya temple situated in Kurunegala

In the July 2006 higher ordination there were fourteen candidates—ten Sri Lankan samaneris and four foreigners. Two of us, Ven. Gunanusari and Ven. Sobhana, came from

Bhavana Society Monastery; Ven. Sukhetta came from Thailand; Ven. Satima, a Sri Lankan-American, came from the USA. The four foreigners were treated with special care, and allowed to use the locked bathroom with shower upstairs which was usually reserved for teachers.

Only four local nuns could speak some English. Three of them are under 30 years of age and have been ten-precept nuns for seven to nine years. The others are above 30 years old and have been ten-precept nuns for more than 16 years. Some stay in very poor villages.

After the examination, Ven. Bhikkhuni Siri Sumedha, directed the candidates in practice for the upcoming ceremony. The rehearsals lasted long hours for several days. Ven.

Bhikkhuni Siri Sumedha made sure we could recite the memorized lines in Pali suitably, respond appropriately to each question of the *antarayikadhamma* (24 obstacles questions) and bow properly. The candidates have to be free of 24 obstructing circumstances before asking for ordination.

The greatest difficulty was standing or crouching position held for long periods, with hands in prayer position (*anjali*) above the head, in sweltering heat. Bowing is the best time for the arms to rest. Following the rehearsals we were practicing by ourselves and trying to stand and crouch with hands above the head to build up endurance.

Later on, the senior bhikkhunis from the ordination bhikkhuni sangha were invited to participate in the appreciation-gratitude reception. This occasion is for the head nun to introduce to each candidate her designated *upajjhaya*-to-be (preceptor) and *Kammacarini*-to-be (teacher) and for the assigned candidate to offer her gift to these designees. Then each candidate expressed her gratitude with a speech, poem or chanting. Ven. Sobhana and I had the same *upajjhaya*, Venerable Bhikkhuni Padukke Sumitra. Ven. Sumitra is an eminent nun who adorns the bhikkhuni sangha.

The next day, July 2, we went to the Golden Temple in Dambulla for ordination. First we returned to wearing white clothes—this symbolizes formally renouncing worldly life for a life of purity of heart and mind. An hour before the ceremony, the senior bhikkhunis helped us dress all in white, fully covered our heads with a piece of



A. Sobhana, *upajjhaya* Bhik. Padukke Sumitra, and A. Gunanusari before reordaining as novices

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(Our Bhikkhuni..., continued from page 1) white cloth. The candidates' relatives and friends waited outside the dressing room to greet them. I was so touched to see three of our local supporters, who drove four hours from Colombo, were also there—Mrs. Seeta Abeyesekere, Mr. Pushya Cooray and Mrs. Ramya Cooray. Their presence brought us warmth and joy. They took good care of both of us while we were in Sri Lanka.

The ordination ritual began at 8:00 am with taking five precepts from Venerable Sumangala. Following this, the ordination involved three separate ceremonies: *pabbajja* and *upasampada* from the bhikkhunis and then *upasampada* from the bhikkhus. These ceremonies were held at the Dambulu Parsvaya Uposathagaraya (Dambulu Chapter House/sima hall).

In white clothes we carried a folded bundle of robes and proceeded towards the chapter house for *pabbajja*. The candidates' relatives and friends had already gathered outside the hall. They tried to watch the ritual from the windows. We knelt before the senior bhikkhunis, bowed three times and repeated after them, "Hair on head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin." The reflection on the parts of the body was our first subject of meditation. Then we asked the venerable to receive the set of robes, and to ordain us as novices so that we would be able to end all suffering and attain nibbana. The ritual included taking refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha and receiving ten precepts from the bhikkhuni sangha.

Following this ceremony we walked back to the changing room and prepared for *upasampada* or the higher ordination. We re-robed in bright orange, put on an unbelievable number of layers of robe clothing. We wore the bathing cloth underneath the under-robe, an under-blouse, a long-sleeve blouse, the upper robe. The senior bhikkhunis helped us put on the remarkably heavy satin double-layer outer robe over the left shoulder, tighten it with a belt, then strap the bowl on our left shoulder, hanging behind, and secure it with safety pins on our back to keep it from slipping during the ceremony. Otherwise it could have hit our head while bowing!

Again, we fourteen candidates proceeded towards the chapter house for *upasampada* from the bhikkhuni sangha. This ceremony lasted for approximately four hours. The bhikkhuni *upajjhaya* (preceptor) sat in the middle and all other bhikkhunis sat at both sides. The candidates sat at the end of the hall waiting for their turn. The candidates were divided into pairs. For every two assigned candidates, the ceremony was performed before the designated bhikkhuni *upajjhaya* and two designated bhikkhuni *kammacarinis* (teachers) who witnessed the ordination and bestowed blessing on behalf of the Buddha.

The assigned candidates stood with hands in prayer position (*anjali*) above the head at all time, except when bowing. This is very strenuous but no one dared to let their hands



First step in ordaining as bhikkhunis

drop. The most challenging part is giving suitable answers to the *antarayikadhamma* (24 obstacles), all in Pali. First were the questions about contagious diseases. The answer should have been *natthi bhante* (no, venerable sir). Then the series of questions about whether the candidate was human, free woman, without debt, etc. The response should have been changed to *ama bhante* (yes, venerable sir). I had to be mindful and remember the Pali line before changing the answer from *natthi bhante* to *ama bhante*.

Following this ceremony we prepared for the higher ordination before the bhikkhu sangha of ten bhikkhus and twenty-eight witnessing bhikkhunis. Venerable Sumangala led the monks the bhikkhunis and us to the *uposathagaraya*.

Our *upajjhaya* bhikkhu was Venerable Sumangala who sat in the middle. The bhikkhus sat on the right and the bhikkhunis sat on the left. The candidates sat at the end of the hall, were divided into quartets and waited for their turn. The candidates each offered betel leaves wrapped in a towel to their *upajjhayas* and *kammacarinis* at their first bow to them. This ceremony was shorter and easier since we did not have to do the *antarayikadhamma*.

One senior monk, who represented the bhikkhu sangha, emphasized the importance of the 311 bhikkhuni rules we would have to observe, recited admonition (*anusasana*) of eight things never to be done, the eight deeds that would ruin our nunhood. Then the ordination was declared completed. After the actual ordination ceremony was over, the newly ordained bhikkhunis made offerings to each of the bhikkhus.

After that we gathered in the auditorium to receive the instruction from Ven. Sumangala and listen to Ven. Bhikkhuni Siri Sumedha's speech. Then we received our nicely laminated ordination certificate from Ven. Sumangala.

It was momentous and memorable. I was fortunate to have been given such a precious opportunity for receiving higher ordination. I am very grateful to my revered teacher, Venerable Gunaratana, who teaches the Dhamma out of compassion, guides me in my daily practice, sets a good example, and who prepared me for this higher ordination. I will do my best to dedicate my life to the practice.

May we be free from suffering; may we be well and happy, and may we all walk on the path of truth and realize Nibbana. ■

Contemporary Bhikkhuni Ordination in Sri Lanka

by Bhikkhuni Sobhana

It is a great blessing that today bhikkhuni ordination in Theravada Buddhism is no longer a novelty. After a lapse of nine centuries, there now exists in Sri Lanka a functional bhikkhuni sangha holding regular *patimokkha* (the twice monthly recitation of the precepts) and properly supported by bhikkhus. Sri Lankan nuns have received *upasampada* (full ordination) in every year since 1998. Over 400 bhikkhunis are practicing, mostly in rural areas. There are 2,000 samaneris (novices) preparing for ordination, as well as 3,000 practicing as Dasa Sil Matas, the older order of ten-precept nuns. These developments should be celebrated by anyone who appreciates the Buddha's plan for a four-fold mahasangha of bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, male and female lay supporters.

Western women in particular have been discouraged from going forth in the Theravada tradition. There are many supportive bhikkhus. (Bhante Gunaratana is among the most venerable of them.) Yet the history of inequities and lack of an established Western female sangha are serious barriers. In a viable sangha, at least four bhikkhunis would meet regularly for *patimokkha* and there would be sufficient depth of training and wisdom. The effort to form such a sangha has been hindered by difficulty in organizing ordinations, so it is encouraging to know that the Bhikkhuni Order of Sri Lanka will ordain qualified foreigners.

In 2006, four international nuns were ordained with this order, together with ten local nuns. The ordination ceremony was held at the Chapter House of the Golden Temple in Dambulla, led by Bhante Inamaluwe Sumangala Thero. Bhikkhuni Gunanusari and I had the privilege of participating in this ordination. Afterwards, I spent vassa (three-month rains retreat) at the home temple of Bhikkhuni Siri Sumedha, who is the head of the Bhikkhuni Educational Academy at Dambulla. I attended several village welcoming ceremonies, the very impressive bi-monthly *patimokkha* attended by up to 115 bhikkhunis, all-night pirit chanting at private homes, and a full round of Kathina celebrations.

I observed that this Sangha was organized out of the Dasa Sil Mata order, which was founded in 1932 by Rev. Sudharmacari (Mary Katharene de Alwis), a virtuous and

capable nun who had studied dhamma and Vinaya in Burma for 14 years. My bhikkhuni teacher, who ordained as a DSM at age 12, explained that they did the same religious work as a bhikkhu, but without any recognition. Their status was always ambiguous—not sangha and not lay. While some DSM nuns were well trained and disciplined in their

practice, others were just destitute widows, who would go to a shop and buy some yellow cloth to wear. In 1986, assisted by the government, a society of nuns was founded with chapters in every region of Sri Lanka. This society provided Dhamma training and access to university level



Newly ordained bhikkhunis at a Buddhist shrine

Buddhist study for the nuns. It was this group of DSM nuns, together with their bhikkhu supporters, who organized the training program and selection procedures for the re-establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha,

Today's Sri Lankan bhikkhunis are drawn from the top rank of the DSM. They already have decades of experience, well established local temples and a base of lay supporters. A few are scholars or recluses, but the great majority do the work of a village pastor. The bhikkhunis are venerated and supported by laity, but still materially quite poor compared to their male counterparts. The ordination of bhikkhunis is opposed by all three bhikkhu sects of Sri Lanka, but quietly supported by individual bhikkhus. Gradually, they are receiving government recognition as clergy. There is no official persecution.

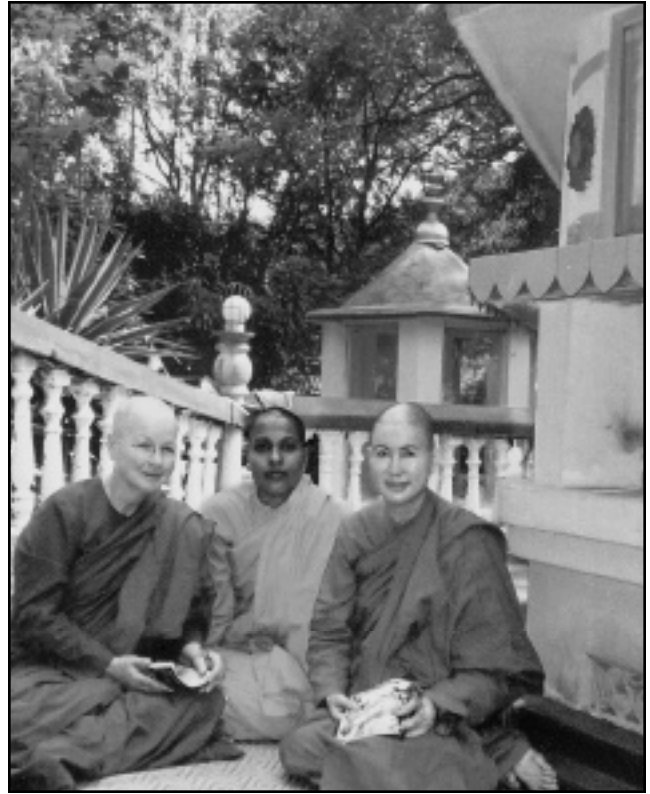
If any North American woman has the interest in going forth and receiving full ordination, here are some points to consider about ordaining at Dambulla:

- ❖ The candidate should have three years of monastic training before ordination. Among our international group, some counted their upasika and anagarika experience, (dwelling at temple as lay residents and observing eight monastic precepts). Experience in Mahayana settings was also counted, as well as Theravada novice training.
- ❖ She should be sponsored by a respected Theravada monk who agrees to supervise her in her homeland for five years following ordination.
- ❖ There will be a qualifying examination. Local candidates receive a three-month training course, (continued on page 4)

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(Bhikkuni Ordination, continued from page 3) but unless she is fluent in Sinhalese, the foreigner must prepare at home under her own teacher. The curriculum includes Bhikkhuni Patimokkha, Culavagga, Dhammapada, suttas, history of Buddhism and history of the bhikkhuni sangha from its ancient founding up to recent developments. Local candidates are expected to memorize large blocks of text in Pali, but it is possible to pass the examination with a very slight knowledge of Pali.

- ❖ Ordination is given annually, shortly before the beginning of vassa (July full moon).
- ❖ If a candidate has no bhikkhuni sangha at home, she may consider spending time in Sri Lanka. The teachers particularly advise staying with a bhikkhuni sangha for the first vassa.
- ❖ It is possible to obtain the full monastic training and supervision in Sri Lanka. For example, a samaneri could study Pali and Buddhism in a college setting, while learning Vinaya within a bhikkhuni dwelling. If she is not fluent in Sinhalese, the options are very limited, but there are a few English speaking bhikkhuni teachers.
- ❖ Naturally, she should first establish herself with a well-trusted, skillful primary teacher. Then, while learning Dhamma and Vinaya, let go of the attachments, commitments and habits of household life. Only then should she make the decision to take bhikkhuni ordination. May she attain nibbana! ■



At the Bhikkhuni Training Center before ordination, Samaneri Sugunamali (center) helped the Bhavana nuns with their chanting.

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