

My Experiences in Ordaining Bhikkhunis

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I am not an expert on the Vinaya, although I have read it several times and I think I know it well enough to know the arguments for and against bhikkhuni ordinations. But I was not invited as an expert, but rather as someone who has been intimately involved in helping women take bhikkhuni ordination for the past twelve years. And I am going to tell you the story of how that came about.

I was the first American woman to take full bhikkhuni vows in the United States. In 1976 my master ordained me with the permission of bhikkhunis from Fo Gwang Shan, Taiwan. After his death in 1980, I became the abbess of International Buddhist Meditation Center, a position which I still hold today.

In 1994 I had a group of students who had been studying with me for a number of years, in preparation for final ordination as monks and nuns. I had already given them novice ordination and they were ready for the final step.

So, I went to Ven. Dr. Havanpola Ratanasara, the elder Singhalese monk, with whom I had been teaching courses at the College of Buddhist Studies, Los Angeles. He was highly regarded in the Theravadan community. So one morning in February, I approached him in his office and told him that I had a group of students who were

ready to take final ordination. I asked him if he would act as the uppajhaya in December at a grand ordination ceremony. He said that he would be happy to do so. Then, with great trepidation, I said, "There is only one thing though, Bhante. My students feel that since I am their teacher, I should ordain them,."

He replied, "Let me think about this." Five minutes later, he said, "Karuna, since I am the Uppajhaya, the main duty I have is to make sure that the person leading the ceremony is qualified. And I appoint you." I replied, "Thank you very much, Bhante. I accept your generous offer."

That night I thought about Bhante Ratanasara's offer to me. The next morning, I went downstairs to his office and told him, "Bhante, I am grateful that you appointed me to lead the ordination ceremony. But I do not think I should do it alone. Why don't we share the role of the Ordaining master? Bhante thought it was a good idea, so we sat down together to split the ceremony in half. We used the same ceremony that the late Ven. Thich Man-Giac had translated into English twelve years earlier when we ordained the last of Dr. Thien-An's students who had not yet been ordained as bhikkhus. At that time I played the role of the representative for the monks and nuns.

Bhante Ratanasara and I had several discussions about bhikkhunis and whether or not it was good to open up the ceremony for women other than my own students. We agreed that we should open it up to women who were good candidates, but who did not have the opportunity to ordain. I trusted Bhante's view points, because I knew

that he was well schooled in Vinaya matters, We looked at all the exceptions that the Buddha had laid down regarding ordination for both men and women.

We divided the Upajjhaya's role in two, assigning Bhante to read half of it and for me to read the other half. We did the same for the vice uppajhaya and the Vinaya Master, thereby, doubling the number of the ordination masters: one male and one female for each role. The next step we took was to write all of the Buddhist masters living in the Los Angeles area, who had been ordained more than ten years. In the letter, I explained what we were doing and asked for their response: either I approve what you are doing and will be happy to participate; I am sorry, but I have another commitment; and I do not approve. All of the answers that returned were either the first or the second option. No one returned a negative answer. Then I visited the people that I thought would agree to be one of the six major ordaining masters. The stipulation that I lay down was that they were to have received their bhikkhu/bhikkuni ordination at least 15 years ago and that they were in good stead in the community.

I came up with very good people for each of the positions: another Sri Lankan monk, (because the Thai monk we had originally selected had to be in Thailand on that date) and a Chinese monk; a Vietnamese and a Korean nun. And of course, Bhante Ratanasara, who was the second Singhalese and myself as an American. Then our planning started in earnest. Unfortunately, in April, I had a serious stroke and a lot of the hands-on planning was left to my eldest daughter who was working for the center then. (I had been married for ten years before I started my Buddhist studies in

earnest.) But since we had discussed several times what was going to happen, she did a beautiful job of executing the plans while I was in an Aryavedic Buddhist Hospital near Colombo, Sri Lanka.

When the day of the ordination came along, we had, besides the six ordaining masters, another thirty witness masters, all ordained for at least ten years. And they came from all Buddhist countries and traditions. We had Sri Lankan, Tibetan and Thai bhikkhus, and bhikkhus and bhikkhunis from China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Europe and the United States.

In the letter I had sent to the masters, I invited them to have any students that they wanted ordained, to participate in the ceremony. So, we had quite a few more than just my students. We had several Vietnamese and Western Tibetan men and women.

The ceremony took three hours to execute. In all, we ordained 11 women as bhikkhunis:

7 in the Tibetan tradition; three Vietnamese Mahayana , one Vietnamese Theravadan; one Vietnamese man and two American men as Bhikkhus, two American men as Zen Dharma Teachers; three Vietnamese women as s'ramanerikas, one Vietnamese boy as a Sramanera, two American men as sramaneras; five Americans as atthanga s'ilas (8 vow) people and eight upsakas/upsaiikas.

Then three years later we performed a small grand ordination: this time ordaining two Theravadan women as bhikkhunis, one Nepalese, the other Sri Lankan, and several American Tibetan practitioners and an American woman in the Korean tradition. We also ordained several American sramaneras/sramanerikas.

In 2004 we held our third large Grand Ordination. It came about because one of IBMC's residents was a Tibetan practitioner. She has been ordained as a novice several years earlier and she asked me to ordain her as a bhikkhuni.

I told her, "That is impossible. First, I cannot do it for just one nun. The second reason is that it will cost us a minimum of \$10,000, which the Center cannot afford." But she asked me several more times. I knew that she was sincere and would make a good Bhikkhuni. She said, "What if I find a group of another 20 women who want to become Bhikkhunis? I told her, "All. right." So Rev.Chitta went to work, writing to several American Tibetan women that she knew. She also posted a notice on the internet about the possible ordination. Soon, applicants from around the world wrote her and asked if I would ordain them as Bhikkhunis. I relented, making up a letter to be given to each of their masters, explaining that they would have to agree to train their student for another five years after her final ordination. Armed with letters from their masters, I went through each one to determine if she were a fit candidate, altogether we had 25 women, most of them from the Tibetan tradition as bhikkhuni candidates. They came from around the globe: from France, Spain, Germany,

Switzerland, Australia, and both coasts of Canada and as well as Americans from Arizona, New York, Maryland, Florida, and California.

We also ordained a Theravadan woman from Germany as a bhikkhuni and a Theravadan woman from Spain as a novice. But we also had men who were ordained as s'ramaneras and bhikkhus. In addition, we ordained both men and women as Zen Dharma teachers. These people received the same training as the bhikkhu/ bhikkhuni candidates had, but differed because they were either married or working outside of the temple.

All candidates were required to stay at the center for two weeks, preparing for their ordination. They were kept quite busy from 6 am to 10 pm every day, studying the vinaya, as well as sharing their particular chanting and service styles with the others.

We did not ordain them into a particular school. At the ordination, they took on the robes of their particular tradition and the name that their own teacher gave them. We just admitted them to the Order, with the understanding that their own teachers were still their masters and that they were to remain true to their own tradition. The women were so excited by the ordination that they have asked me to give another one in ten more years, so that they can participate as masters. So, for right now, that is our plan.

Although I was not concerned with whether or not the women were siksamanas, the fact that they had been novices for at least three years meant that for all practical purposes they were. We used the Dharmagupta Vinaya as the basis for the ceremony and the monks and nuns were schooled in it. As trainers, there was a Sri Lankan monk, who was also Vice Abbot of my temple, International Buddhist Meditation Center, one of my fully ordained Dharma teachers and myself. As I mentioned earlier, the master's participating in the Ordination were from the Theravada traditions of Sri Lanka and Thailand; Mahayana monks and nuns from all traditions and countries, and Tibetan masters.

We kept the traditional ceremony and did not deviate from it. When it came time to give the bhikkhu precepts, the male uprajhaya read that part of the ceremony. When it came time for the bhikkhuni precepts, I gave them. Instead of having two separate ceremonies for men and women, we ordained them all in the same ceremony. But we made sure that it followed all of the necessary requisites.

In the last ceremony, we ordained 20 Western Tibetan women as Bhikkhunis, one Theravadan woman as a Bhikkhuni and four Vietnamese Mahayana nuns as Bhikkhunis. We also ordained six men and women as Zen Dharma teachers. In addition we gave novice ordinations to both men and women.