



# The Time Has Come

The traditional “eight heavy rules” institutionalize women’s second-class status in Buddhist monasteries—women must submit to male leadership,

senior nuns must take their place behind junior monks—and in most Buddhist lineages women are denied full ordination.

Former nuns **Thanissara**, **Jitindriya**, and **Elizabeth Day** look at new controversies that are focusing attention on this long-standing injustice and call on Buddhist leaders to engage in a genuine dialogue for change.



In the early '90s at a Western teachers meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, two prominent Western practitioners, Jetsun Tenzin Palmo and Sylvia Wetzel, invited His Holiness and the other senior teachers to listen while the terrible conditions for nuns were described to them. Then Sylvia offered a guided visualization where all the male images that surrounded them, the teachers, gurus even the Dalai Lama himself, were transformed into the form of women. Men were welcome to participate, but were asked to sit in the back and help with the cooking. It was a powerful moment for all at the meeting, particularly when His Holiness really “got” how deeply disempowering the lack of support and the male shaping of Buddhist forms are for women. His response was to lean his head on his hands and weep. —Jack Kornfield

**WE HEARD IT THE WAY** many things get communicated these days, through Facebook. The news confirmed what at first had seemed like wishful thinking: the first full bhikkhuni ordination of women in the Forest sangha of Thailand’s most famous meditation master, Ajahn Chah, had taken place on October 22, 2009, in Perth in Western Australia.



THANISSARA (Mary Weinberg) was one of the first women to be ordained in the West as a nun in Ajahn Chah's Forest tradition, initially as a *mae chee* (eight-precept nun), then as a nun in the siladhara order, based on the ten-precept ordination. She left the order after twelve years. She is director of Dharmagiri Hermitage and Outreach in South Africa, and a facilitator for the community dharma leader program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California.



CINTAMANI (Elizabeth Day) has been a Buddhist practitioner for sixteen years, including six as an ordained member of the Amaravati and Cittaviveka (Chithurst) Theravada monastic communities in Britain. She has a doctorate in cultural studies and teaches and practices psychotherapy in Melbourne. She is currently editing a collection of writings by Buddhist women practitioners.



JITINDRIYA (Lorraine Keats) was a nun for seventeen years in the Ajahn Chah/Ajahn Sumedho Forest tradition. She took ordination in Britain as a novice in 1988 and as a siladhara in 1990. After leaving the monastic order, she earned a master's degree in Buddhist psychotherapy and now lives in New South Wales, Australia, where she has a clinical practice in Buddhist psychotherapy.

An international group of eight bhikkhunis conducted the ordination: Venerables Tathaaloka (preceptor), Sucinta and Sobhana (reciters of the formal act), Atapi, Satima, Santini, Silavati, and Dhammananda from Vietnam. Ajahn Brahmavamso and Ajahn Sujato were the reciters of the act of acceptance on the bhikkhus' side. The four nuns ordained as bhikkhunis were Venerables Vayama, Nirodha, Seri, and Hassapanna from the Dhammasara Nuns' Monastery near Perth.

The late Ajahn Chah was a visionary who trained many Western monks in the final decades of his life. He is the inspiration for more than two hundred branch monasteries, including about twenty across the Western world. Ajahn Brahmavamso, known as Ajahn Brahm, was one of Ajahn Chah's first Western disciples. Over the years he received Thailand's highest monastic honor, that of *Chaokun* (similar to a bishop in the Christian tradition), and several Australian secular awards. After research on the issue of bhikkhuni ordination, Ajahn

Brahm, his fellow scholar-monk Ajahn Sujato, and others, came to the conclusion that there was no good reason not to support women in taking full ordination.

Like a cork popped from a tight bottle, this initiative has added momentum to the painstaking work toward gender equality in this Buddhist community. However, in the process it has inadvertently challenged the core of Thai monastic authority, which refuses to accept the validity of Theravada bhikkhuni ordination. Almost immediately after the ordinations Ajahn Brahm was officially expelled from communion with the Ajahn Chah sangha. This was principally because he refused pressure both to denounce the bhikkhuni ordination as invalid, and to regard the new bhikkhunis as *mae chees*—practitioners junior to novice monks. That it was not within his power to denounce the ordination—it was ostensibly carried out by the bhikkhunis present—was not taken into account. Although Ajahn Brahm had the support of his Australian community to facilitate this ordination, his participation was not condoned by the sangha's wider international community. As a consequence, his monastery, Wat Bodhinyana, was also delisted as a branch of Wat Nong Pah Pong, which is the mothership of Ajahn Chah's branch monasteries. That Ajahn Brahm should be censured in this way is significant due to his large following and the respect he has internationally.

These events prompted a global outcry from concerned Buddhists, with thousands of people voicing through internet networks their shock and disbelief at the shabby treatment of women in Buddhist monasticism and the punitive response to Ajahn Brahm's support for equality in the order. Notably, many lay supporters of Buddhist monasteries have since concluded that they can no longer support monks or monasteries that oppose bhikkhuni ordination.

So what is this all about? At its core, this is about the place of women within Buddhism, which from the start, 2,500 years ago, has been a troubled one. In the cultural context of Siddhartha Gautama, women's roles were so gravely circumscribed by brahmanical intervention that their self-determination was barely conceivable. The Buddha nevertheless recognized women's inherent equality with men by facilitating their going forth into the renunciant life as bhikkhunis. In a culture that treated women as chattels in order to sustain its vertical power structure, this was indeed a radical move. The tension between Brahmanism and Buddhism is evident in the suttas, where we can clearly see two opposing images of women. One is of women as fully enlightened, respected leaders, teachers, and nuns running their own communities; the other is of women as blight, evil temptresses, snakes, poison, and rot.



The conventional narrative of the first nuns' ordination is that ordination was granted to women on condition that they accept the eight *garudhammas*, or weighty dhammas. These rules legislate women into a junior position, in perpetuity, in relation to monks. They forbid a nun to take a leadership position when monks are present; even if a nun had been ordained for a hundred years, a monk ordained just one day would take seniority. Recent scholarship identifies these rules as a later addition to the Buddhist canon, most likely introduced to appease the Brahman power base, which intended to enshrine its view of women in the new religion after the Buddha's death.

Regardless of the debate over scriptural authenticity, the eight *garudhammas* have rippled through time and space to affect the lives of Buddhist nuns to this day. They have a crushing effect on women's expression of spiritual power and have perniciously ensured the invisibility of nuns and female teachers throughout the long history of Buddhist transmission. The demise of the lineage of fully ordained nuns in the Theravada school more than a thousand years ago is usually attributed to unfavorable external forces such as wars and famine. However, the undermining effect of the eight rules

cannot be underestimated as a factor in extinguishing bhikkhuni sanghas.

The lost lineage of fully ordained nuns has been used by monks to argue that it's impossible to reinstate proper ordination. Overall, the cultural context that gave rise to these eight rules has created a wall that blocks nuns' access to adequate resources and education, to participation in decision-making bodies that affect their lives, and to a supportive context that would enable the growth of confidence, leadership, and an abiding presence within the Buddha's lineage.

The wall is cracking, though. It is true that Thailand, Cambodia, Burma, and Laos do not recognize full ordination for women, and neither do the Tibetan schools of Buddhism. Yet, in the last couple of decades, women have taken full ordination in Taiwan, where the lineage remains unbroken, and emerged as fully ordained nuns within the Tibetan and Theravada schools. Ven. Bhikkhuni Kusuma, one of the ►

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## THAT WAS THEN, THIS IS NOW

The eight heavy rules are the result of historical and social circumstances, explains Buddhist scholar Janet Gyatso—and times have changed. Equal status is critical, not only for those directly affected but also for the future of Buddhism in the West.

It is crucial to develop an intentional stance on the famous eight heavy rules, the provisions that institute patriarchy in Buddhist monasticism and upon which the Buddha supposedly insisted before granting women permission to take ordination. An explicit position on the status of these eight provisions today needs to be articulated publicly. Leaders of the Buddhist sangha—male and female alike—need to address and acknowledge them clearly, and specify how they are to be handled in the twenty-first century. The contingencies of our current world context require the formation of such an intentional position.

Some in the current Buddhist sangha, in Asia as well as the West, would like to disavow the eight heavy rules altogether. Recall, they require the unconditional deference by all nuns to all monks, regardless of merit or seniority; they call for the supervision of nuns' living arrangements and ritual procedures by monks; and they prohibit nuns from reviling or admonishing monks, while explicitly permitting monks to admonish nuns. The eight heavy rules provision is a key part in the defining story of women's original acceptance into the Buddhist monastic order.

While this enshrinement of patriarchy in the rules of bhikkhunis is unfortunate and damaging, it poses a recalcitrant problem. We cannot easily write it out of the Vinaya. Not only is the story included in all versions of the Vinaya, but all of the eight provisions save one have been incorporated into the *pratimoksha* governing the nuns' rules of behavior and punishments for their infractions. They are intricately woven into monastic ritual and tradition; simply to wipe them out would entail so many changes that it might be difficult to claim that the new female order was indeed the same as the bhikkhuni tradition known from historical Buddhism. A similar question has long been debated in other religions, and especially in Christianity: is there a way to accommodate and reinterpret elements of one's tradition that are patriarchal and/or androcentric, if not misogynist, or is it necessary to change the tradition radically, or even abandon it entirely? This complex debate is likely to develop among Buddhists too, unfolding gradually with different ramifications in different contexts. But

► first Sri Lankan nuns to take full ordination, has been a pioneer in helping to reestablish the Theravada Buddhist order for women in Sri Lanka, where there are more than eight hundred bhikkhunis.

In Thailand there are now fifty nuns, about twenty bhikkhunis and thirty *samaneris* (ten-precept nuns). Despite considerable resistance from many monks, these cracks have provided a clearer view to reinstating full ordination. As Ajahn Sujato says, "It is our duty as monks under Vinaya [monastic code of conduct] to give the Going Forth to any sincere applicant, whether male or female." This is a clear articulation of the Buddha's intention that there be an obligation to confer full ordination to anyone who sincerely requests it.

Since Buddhism's arrival on Western soil there has been a complex relationship between the religious forms that historically have enabled the transmission of dharma and the practice of dharma itself. The perpetuation of the eight rules, in particular, has fueled Western Buddhists' discontent. For many years this discontent has been subdued by the exhortation that graciously accepting the tradition as given is part of true spiritual practice. However, as Western nuns grow in seniority, the use of such tactics to perpetrate inequality becomes increasingly unacceptable, even ridiculous. A former nun of the Thai Forest tradition explains:

There was much hypocrisy in the way the monks would encourage the nuns to "work with" and "accept" their low status. It was painful for nuns to be placed below or behind the newest junior monk in seating arrangements or in collecting alms food, no matter how long she'd been in the order—even if she was a teacher to that community. While the monks' line grew and they each moved up in the hierarchical placement, the nuns would move down the line to accommodate the newest arrival. ►

it would be unfortunate to allow it to derail the quest by Buddhist women to reestablish the order in its traditional form. I would suggest that it be treated with restraint for now.

That is not to say that the eight heavy rules can be left in place without comment. They are a liability, not only to the success of the bhikshuni movement but also to Buddhism as a whole. They damage the reputation of Buddhism as a religion of egalitarianism and equanimity. The eight heavy rules imply that in Buddhism, renunciant women are lower in status than men and also not deemed capable of managing their own affairs. Both fly in the face of the broad-based call for sex and gender equality that has been percolating throughout the world for the last century at least.

The eight heavy rules need to be addressed both because of their detrimental impact on the aura of the new bhikshunis and for the harm they do to the reputation of Buddhism among civilized nations everywhere. To do this would not mean that the Buddhist leadership is acquiescing to popular trends and public opinion. Rather, it is essential to realize that image, respect, and prestige underlie the very nature of Buddhist monasticism from the start. The Buddhist sangha was designed precisely as an exemplar of the optimum religious lifestyle. Its survival depends on the generosity of the lay, whose support fluctuates in exact proportion to their conviction that the monastic community is maintaining its purity and the highest standards of behavior and wisdom. Indeed, the eight heavy rules themselves are cast in the story as necessary precisely in order to assuage the concerns of the Buddhist lay community.

The same is true now, except that lay expectations have shifted: There are different sets of concerns in the global lay community. We need to have a public pronouncement stating that in the Buddhist sangha of the twenty-first century, despite the technical inclusion of the eight heavy rules in the Vinaya texts, bhikshus and bhikshunis will be considered to have equal status and prestige, and be subject to the same rules of seniority; there shall be in practice no difference based on sex or gender alone. Buddhist leaders need to affirm that the eight heavy rules had their time and place but their conditions no longer remain. They need to do this to retain the respect and support of the lay Buddhist world.

But just as much, to work for gender equality is simply on the side of what is right. There can be no question that

Buddhist doctrine, throughout its history, agrees. The patriarchy and misogyny that we do find in Buddhist sources is to be attributed to historical and social circumstances rather than reasoned or ethical principle. There is never a principled argument for gender inequality in Buddhist literature.

The Buddhist sangha needs to lead its own communities in fostering the best path, the best values—indeed, as it has always endeavored to do. The best path and the best values in the world favor gender equality and the elimination of patriarchy and misogyny. What is more, it is critical to the success of the bhikshuni sangha that they have no shadows, no grounds to disparage their prestige and status; hence the necessity to confront and deal with the eight heavy rules.

One way to counteract the shadow cast by the eight heavy rules would be for the male sangha to deliberately and overtly show their respect for bhikshunis. Monks should go out of their way to display their respect for nuns at every opportunity, to put them on a high chair and to treat them as equals. Along these lines, it was extraordinary to hear the Dalai Lama proclaim in Hamburg that feminism is wonderful and important, celebrating the strong talents that women have for modeling Buddhist values. Hearing such an intentional statement of support from a figure like the Dalai Lama helps women to hold their heads high in the Buddhist world. Such support will help redress and reverse the prejudice that women have endured over the centuries in Buddhism. In particular, displays of such esteem toward bhikshunis by monks could be cast explicitly as a deliberate attempt on the part of the Buddhist sangha to show that it regards the eight heavy rules only as an archaic relic from a previous period in Buddhist history.

It is crucial to repeat again that prestige and status are essential to the success of the Buddhist sangha. It would be a grave mistake to conflate concerns about prestige and reputation with the kinds of problems of ego that Buddhism always warns us against. Regard and respect is at the bottom of the entire system of the Buddhist sangha; it is essential for the support of the laity, and that support is essential for the sangha to survive. It is a mistaken sense of the ascetic path to think that the bhikshuni sangha can operate without proper facilities and resources. Without such support the bhikshuni sangha will experience a second decline.

Those contemporary Buddhist women who have argued that the eight heavy rules should not be contested but rather regarded as providing a good opportunity for women to work on their egos are pursuing a mistaken strategy. Although it is certainly true that the situation is a good chance to work on one's ego—most situations are!—we should hardly welcome the disparagement of an order whose entire purpose is to provide models of dignity and discipline.

From *Dignity and Discipline*, edited by Thea Mohr and Jampa Tsedroen, published by Wisdom Publications in May, 2010.



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# THE FIVE POINTS

The following five-point agreement was drafted by Ajahn Sumedho and his senior monks last August and presented to the nuns at Amaravati and Cittaviveka monasteries in Britain. Agreement on the five points was a condition for future ordinations of women in the Forest Sangha community.

1. The structural relationship, as indicated by the Vinaya, of the Bhikkhu Sangha to the Siladhara Sangha is one of seniority, such that the most junior bhikkhu is “senior” to the most senior siladhara. As this relationship of seniority is defined by the Vinaya, it is not considered something we can change.

2. In line with this, leadership in ritual situations where there are both bhikkhus and siladhara—such as giving the *anumodana* [blessings to the lay community] or precepts, leading the chanting or giving a talk—is presumed to rest with the senior bhikkhu present. He may invite a siladhara to lead; if this becomes a regular invitation it does not imply a new standard of shared leadership.

3. The Bhikkhu Sangha will be responsible for the siladhara *pabbajja* [ordination] the way Luang Por Sumedho [Ajahn Sumedho] was in the past. The siladhara should look to the Bhikkhu Sangha for ordination and guidance rather than exclusively to Luang Por. A candidate for siladhara *pabbajja* should receive acceptance from the Siladhara Sangha, and should then receive approval by the Bhikkhu Sangha as represented by those bhikkhus who sit on the Elders’ Council.

4. The formal ritual of giving *pavarana* [invitation for feedback] by the Siladhara Sangha to the Bhikkhu Sangha should take place at the end of the Vassa as it has in our communities traditionally, in keeping with the structure of the Vinaya.

5. The siladhara training is considered to be a vehicle fully suitable for the realization of liberation, and is respected as such within our tradition. It is offered as a complete training as it stands, and not as a step in the evolution towards a different form, such as bhikkhuni ordination.

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From “Where We Are Now,” a letter written by the Elders’ Council of the Forest Sangha and posted on the Forest Sangha website ([forestsangha.org](http://forestsangha.org)).

► Living in a monastery in California, I tried to convey to the senior monk how painful this situation was for nuns. He responded by saying that placement didn’t matter, that it was “just a perception”—implying perception of self that should be let go of. Yes it is perception, I said. And how would you perceive me if I were to take up my place in the line according to how long I had been in the order and not according to gender? Then I would be sitting right next to you and the other senior monk, and all the other junior monks would sit after me. How would you relate to me and how would you perceive me then? How do you think the other monks would relate to me and perceive me then; how would the lay people relate to me and perceive me? And how do you think I would perceive myself then, having been given appropriate placement in the order and not constantly construed as “lower” and junior to the monks? I am sure it would be quite different—even though it would be “only a perception.”

This is the thing. They would use the level of “ultimate truth” to encourage you to accept the low status and discrimination of women in the order. “Woman” and “man” are perceptions, labels... Ultimately there are no “women” and “men.” How true! But why then are the “perceived” men so resistant to the “perceived” women having equal placement in the order?

Though full ordination for nuns would not single-handedly resolve this level of gender inequity in the monastic form, it is nevertheless an essential platform from which discussion about these pressing issues can proceed. The prevailing argument that full ordination for women is not possible for “legal” reasons continues to serve the existing power structure and undermine any possibility of progress. This situation is by no means limited to the Ajahn Chah lineage, or the Theravada tradition. In 2007, an international conference was initiated by the Dalai Lama to investigate bringing back full ordination in the Tibetan tradition. More than four hundred scholars, monastics, and lay practitioners gathered in Hamburg, Germany, to spend several days exploring the role of Buddhist women in the sangha. But after dozens of scholastic papers presented every legal, ethical, and compassionate angle as to why it was timely, appropriate, and respectful of the Buddha’s intention to offer full ordination to women across all traditions, the proposal to do so remained stalled. One scholar summed it up succinctly: “Of course we’re not dealing with anything particularly rational here.”

The rigorous work of the Hamburg conference made it clear that full ordination was possible and always had been. It also showed how the suttas and the Vinaya could be manipulated according to a particular agenda. New generations of Buddhists, with access to translated scriptures and text-critical scholarship, are able to see more clearly the blatant discrimination against women, and take steps to overturn it. Increasingly, ►



The Karmapa at his residence in northern India with members of the Dharmadatta Nuns' Community. The author is second from the right.

## “I WILL DO IT”

Llundup Damcho reports on the Seventeenth Karmapa's vow to reinstate full ordination for women in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

The Seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa stunned an international audience in Bodhgaya last winter by making an unprecedented declaration of commitment to ordaining women as bhikshunis in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Asked when there would be bhikshuni ordination in the Tibetan tradition, he leaned forward and said, in English, “I will do it.”

As applause broke out, he cautioned against expecting quick results. “Be patient,” he said. “Be patient.”

This proclamation by Ogyen Trinley Dorje, the Seventeenth Karmapa, was groundbreaking, for it was the first time that a Tibetan Buddhist leader of this stature had publicly committed to personally making bhikshuni ordination available. His declaration came after intensive research into the feasibility of establishing full ordination for women according to the monastic code that regulates Tibetan Buddhism. More broadly, it reflected the Karmapa's dedication to addressing women's issues, especially regarding nuns.

At present, women in Tibetan Buddhism may take

ordination as novice nuns (Tibetan: *getsulmas*), but they do not have the opportunity to take the highest level of ordination that the Buddha created for women: bhikshuni, or *gelongma*, ordination. While full ordination for women is available in Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese traditions, and has recently been reestablished for nuns in the Sri Lanka Theravada tradition, Tibetan Buddhism lags behind in the movement toward providing equal spiritual opportunities to women.

For several decades, the Dalai Lama has consistently spoken out in favor of bhikshuni ordination, but progress toward that goal has been incremental, consisting mainly of conferences and discussions. The Karmapa's acceptance of a personal role in extending the opportunity of full ordination to women is a decisive step forward on a path that the Dalai Lama first asked Tibetan Buddhists to traverse.

The Karmapa traces his involvement with the bhikshuni issue to the time when he instituted new discipline rules for monastics attending the Kagyu Monlam Chenmo. “We were



deciding how to organize the *gelongs* and *getsuls*, and there were some *gelongmas* from the Chinese tradition. Then we needed to think: Where do they sit? How do we make arrangements for them?” Since that time, bhikshunis have been given a prominent place at the annual Kagyu Monlam events in Bodhgaya, with special invitations issued to bhikshunis.

As well, the Karmapa has taken on the task of translating a volume of biographies of Chinese nuns from Chinese into Tibetan. While that project is ongoing, he also has plans to translate a collection of narratives of the lives of Buddha’s direct female disciples from the classical literary language of the Tibetan canon into colloquial Tibetan so the examples of these early nuns’ lives are more accessible to modern Tibetan readers.

### NOT JUST A WOMEN’S ISSUE

The Karmapa explained during an interview in Sarnath, India, that the ordination issue was not only a concern to women. “It affects the whole teachings,” he said. “There are two types of people who practice the teachings, women and men. There are two types of holders of the teachings, male and female. So what affects women automatically affects the teachings, and impacts the flourishing of the dharma.”

Just before his public statement in Bodhgaya, the Karmapa presided over a five-day Vinaya conference he had convened during the Kagyu Winter Debates. He spoke at length to the gathering of Kagyu khenpos, monks, and nuns about the importance of establishing bhikshuni ordination in Tibetan Buddhism. He pointed out that the Buddha himself offered bhikshuni ordination to women as a means to bring about their liberation from samsara. The need to offer women all the conditions to achieve liberation, he said, is particularly clear from the Mahayana perspective of compassion and sense of responsibility for the well-being of others. Nowadays, he noted, the majority of those seeking teachings in dharma centers outside India and Tibet are women.

The Karmapa went on to explain that bhikshuni ordination was needed to enable the teachings to spread and become fully accessible to everyone. He said the four circles of disciples that the Buddha created—bhikshus, bhikshunis, female holders of lay precepts, and male holders of lay precepts—were like four pillars in a house. And since the bhikshuni order was one of those four pillars, the Tibetan house of Buddha’s teachings was missing an important condition needed to remain stable.

He suggested that although there were procedural issues to be resolved, any obstacles needed to be weighed against the great need to offer bhikshuni ordination to qualified female candidates. As such, he stressed, research into the surrounding issues ought to take place with an appreciation of the need to offer women the opportunity to follow the complete path to liberation that the Buddha created for them.

### GRAPPLING WITH PROCEDURAL ISSUES

Earlier in 2009, the Karmapa summoned khenpos from the major Karma Kagyu monasteries for several months of study and research under Vinaya experts at his residence in Dharamsala, and was directly engaged in exploring the various options for conferring valid full ordination of women. According to the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* Vinaya followed by Tibetan Buddhism, standard ordination practices stipulate that a sangha of bhikshus as well as a sangha of bhikshunis be present at the ritual ceremony to fully ordain women. Yet a bhikshuni order does not appear to have been brought to Tibet from India. This absence of bhikshunis in Tibetan Buddhism has been a stumbling block for those seeking to establish full ordination for women.

Although it did not result in the formation of a bhikshuni order in Tibet, a number of great Tibetan masters of the past did fully ordain some of their female disciples. Such masters include no less authoritative a figure than the Eighth Karmapa, Je Mikyö Dorje, one of Tibet’s greatest Vinaya scholars. “We rediscovered an old text on rituals in the collected works of Mikyö Dorje,” the Seventeenth Karmapa said. “In that text, Mikyö Dorje said that in Tibet there was no bhikshuni lineage, but that we can give bhikshuni vows using the bhikshu rituals. I thought, ‘Oh! This is news!’ I thought, okay, maybe... This was a sort of small beginning.”

These days, two major options have been considered in Tibetan monastic circles. One is ordination by a bhikshu sangha alone, which would consist of monks from the Tibetan *Mūlasarvāstivāda* tradition. Another is what is known as “dual sangha ordination,” in which the sangha of Tibetan bhikshus conferring the ordination would be joined by a bhikshuni sangha from a separate Vinaya tradition, the *Dharmagupta* lineage that has been preserved in Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese Buddhism.

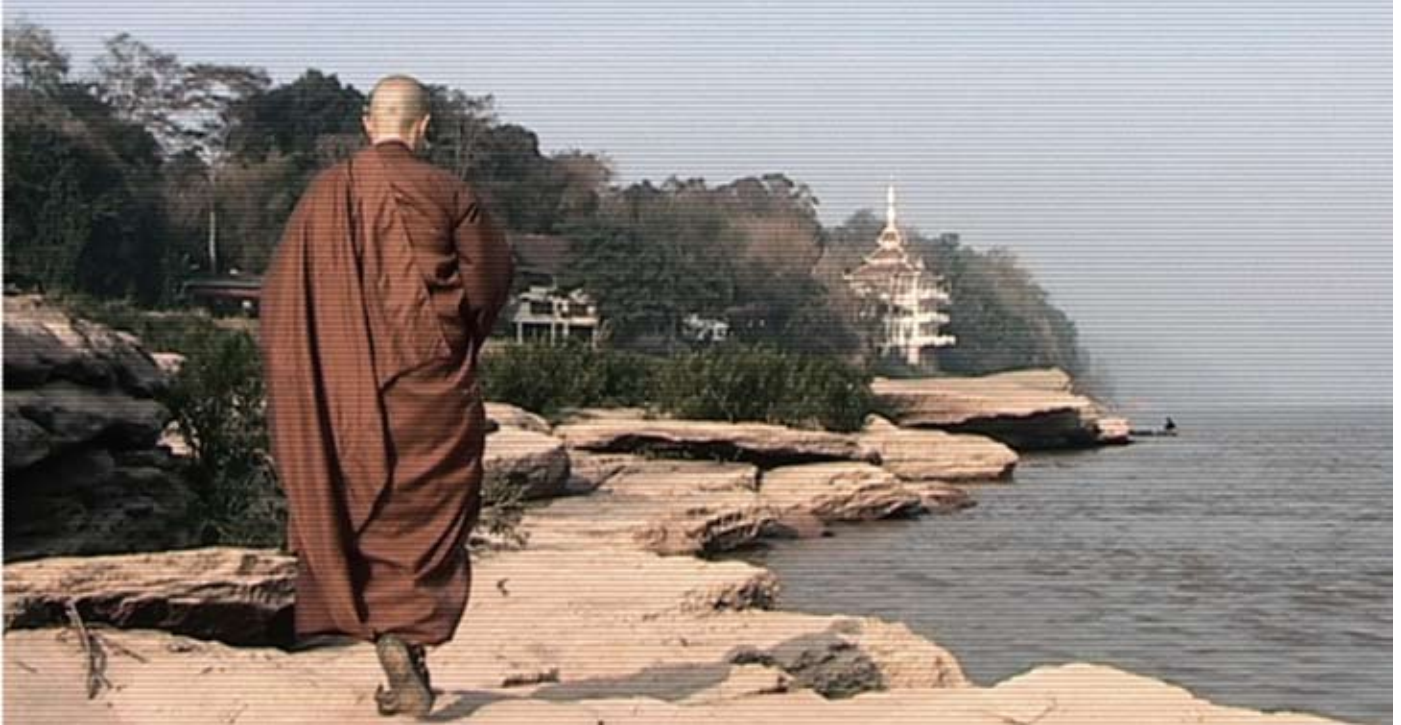
“I do not think there are major obstacles or challenges,” the Karmapa said. “But we do need to develop our views on the matter. There are some old views and old ways of thinking, and

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TASHI PALJOR



people who hold them are not prepared to accept bhikshuni ordination. But I do not think this is a big obstacle. The main need is for some leader to take a step, to move beyond conferences and discussions. What is needed is to take full steps.”

Many Tibetan Buddhists have looked to the Dalai Lama to take the initiative in organizing bhikshuni ordinations. When the Karmapa was asked why he was now willing to accept the responsibility for doing so, he said: “His Holiness the Dalai Lama always takes responsibility. But he has lots of activities and is very busy, so he cannot devote a great deal of his attention to this issue and try to find sources and join every conference himself. He cannot simply focus on this issue. Maybe I have more time, and so more opportunities to find some sources and hold conferences. And I also have some sort of personal interest in it myself.”

The Karmapa articulated his personal connection and commitment at the conclusion of a series of teachings at Tilokpur Nunnery in India in 2007 by stating: “My body is male, but my mind has lots of feminine qualities, so I find myself a little bit both male and female. Although I have high aspirations to be of benefit to all sentient beings, I especially have a commitment to work for the welfare of women and especially of nuns. As long as I have this life, I would like to work one-pointedly and diligently for their cause. I have this responsibility as the head of this school of Buddhism, and from that point of view also, I promise that I will do my very best to see that the nuns’ sangha will progress.”

► sexism within Buddhist tradition sits jarringly within Western culture where the sociopolitical norm—at least in public discourse and legislation—is gender parity.

### FIVE WEIGHTY RULES IN BRITAIN

Around the same time as the Perth ordinations there was a contrasting movement within the monasteries of the same lineage in Britain. In August 2009, Ajahn Sumedho—a peer of Ajahn Brahm and also one of Ajahn Chah’s first Western disciples—and a few of his senior monks imposed a “five-point agreement” on the nuns’ community of Amaravati and Cittaviveka monasteries. Fashioned on the eight garudhammas, these points assert the seniority of monks to nuns, and additionally block the nuns from taking, or seeking to take, full ordination within that lineage. Because bhikkhuni ordination has been banned in Thailand (in a royal edict in 1928), the nuns in the branch monasteries in Britain have a lesser ordination of *siladhara*. The ordination is barely recognized in Thailand and is not congruent with the larger movement of Buddhism. Sectarian arguments by some monks about loyalty to Thai elders and the roots of the Forest tradition have so far prevailed over a sense of loyalty to their sisters with whom they share the Buddhist monastic life.

Nevertheless, over the thirty years since the beginning of the nuns’ order in Britain there has been a slow evolution toward a more equitable status with monks. This has been in step with the broader ► *continued page 88*

social developments in Britain. However, the presentation of the five points seems to have abruptly stopped all sense of open dialogue and evolution. Moreover, the nuns in Britain were issued an ultimatum that further siladhara ordinations would cease—the siladhara do not as yet conduct their own ordinations—and their presence in the community would be unwelcome if they did not accept the points. The nuns were directed by the monks to keep this so-called negotiation confidential until the agreement had been signed off. As a consequence, the lay supporters of that community had no idea what they were supporting, and the nuns were denied access to external perspectives during the process. For the women involved, it suddenly seemed as rigid as the requirements imposed recently by the Vatican on Catholic nuns in the U.S., which those nuns characterized as a crackdown.

As one siladhara nun anonymously wrote, “This situation brings many questions to mind and heart. How can I still use a monastic vehicle that is so structurally unfriendly and prejudiced toward women as my path to liberation. How can I open up to my full potential of human birth and cultivate the heart based on the Brahmavihara in conditions that are constantly undermining me as a person just because of my gender? How can I live with integrity if I love being a monastic but find the ancient structure unresponsive to our modern times? Ever since I had the great blessing to meet the buddhadharma many years ago, the compassionate aspect of the Buddha’s teaching has deeply resonated with my whole being. However, the domination of one group of people by another is out of alignment with the wisdom and compassion of the teaching of the Buddha.”

Just as the first nuns of the Buddha’s dispensation were constrained to do, so the nuns in the monasteries in Britain signed on the dotted line, metaphorically, so they could stay as nuns in the

communities they helped build. Moreover, at the end of a recent ordination ceremony at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, Ajahn Sumedho, the ordaining preceptor, recited the five points and asked the new nuns whether they agreed to them. After they consented, the ordination was then finalized and the proceedings wrapped up. As such, the five points now appear to be a formal part of the ordination procedure.

The fine print in such contracts, however, carries a deadly sting. Many women are put off from ordaining—or disrobe after a period of time—as a direct result of the disdain they experience within monastic Buddhism. This is expressed clearly by a former monastic, her experience echoed by many:

Regarding the five points, I feel a lot of sadness. I disrobed after I was persuaded that insisting on democracy, transparency, equality, and mutual respect (between men and women as well as between juniors and seniors in the community) made me unfit to be a nun. I’m glad I held onto my values even though leaving was very painful for me. It pains me to think of how many good people the community has lost by not supporting them and nurturing their aspiration.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Bringing back full ordination is a crucial step for women’s full participation within Buddhism as it is practiced today. However, it is only one step toward achieving gender equality within Buddhism. With due inquiry, there can remain no doubt that the impulse to resist women’s full participation in the Buddhist tradition comes not from the teachings of the Buddha, but from ignorance. The roots of the problem lie with sexism and it is there that the work needs to be located. The growing discontent expressed by women and by men who wish to practice in the West reveals a shift in the zeitgeist that we would do well to acknowledge, lest the monastic inheritance slip through our collective fingers.

No one owns the house of Buddhist

monasticism. The renunciant path is our collective inheritance. It does not belong to the monks, and it is not theirs to confer or withhold at whim. How long will we allow women to be driven out of their monastic home rather than challenge the abuse of their freedom to practice fully within Buddhist monasticism? The persistence of gender inequality—within a broader cultural context that tolerates it less and less—threatens to bring the house down around us.

So we ask: *What would it look like to relocate the “problem” of bhikkhuni ordination and gender equity within Buddhism to where it really belongs?* The problem doesn’t belong with women who want to ordain, but with those who fear women’s full participation.

Developing insight into this fear is crucial; it has the potential to release any standoff over this issue. Such development requires robust personal inquiry, honest reflection, and the humility to recognize one’s own error. It is a struggle, no doubt. It risks bringing us into contact with each other in all our complexity, our strengths, and our vulnerabilities. But the honest effort by both women and men to inquire within for the roots of fear of the feminine can constitute an opening of the heart that makes dialogue possible. However painful, overwhelming, and challenging such a dialogue may be, surely it is a process we must have. The alternative is far worse: secrecy; nuns displaced or disrobed; monks who feel cut off from a more authentic engagement; ill-informed and sycophantic lay followers.

The mounting discussions about these issues among concerned Buddhists globally since November 2009 signifies a distinct shift in the relationship of lay supporters to the monastic sangha. Many supporters are informing themselves through dialogue with others, in order to ensure accountability and transparency within a tradition they treasure and wish to see flourish in the West. To that end thousands of people signed a petition urging monks within the Thai Forest tradition to acknowledge and support gender equality, to support

bhikkhuni ordination, to revoke the five points imposed upon the siladhara order of nuns, to undo the expulsion of Ajahn Brahm, and to open up a dialogue with them.

The petition was presented to a meeting of the male abbots of the Wat Nong Pah Pong communities held in Thailand in December 2009—the same group whose members had participated in drafting the five points and the expulsion of Ajahn Brahm. Presented alongside the petition were comments from thousands of concerned Buddhists, commentary from scholars and from the bhikkhunis involved in the Perth ordinations, and letters in support of bhikkhunis.

The abbots did not issue a response to the thousands of petitioners. Instead a formulaic restatement of the position against Ajahn Brahm and the Perth ordinations, and a defence of the five points imposed on the siladhara order, was circulated among senior monastics of the tradition and posted on their website. There was no opening for a dialogue on these issues.

The express focus of many Buddhists involved in online discussions is now on marshaling energy to support the reestablishment of full ordination for women and on the dawning of gender equality within a tradition that speaks to the hearts of many Buddhist practitioners around the world.

Many committed people have worked hard to reestablish the bhikkhuni sangha in various parts of the world and fend off the attacks by those who oppose such change. It is one important step along the path to gender equity and the consequent good health of the sangha. To them we owe thanks. To those who persist in their antagonism toward the feminine, we are owed an honest explanation and the willingness to engage in dialogue. Right at the place of fissure is the opportunity for us to move together as a fourfold sangha. Collectively we can dispel the culture of fear, enter into dialogue and co-create a vital, inspired vision for our times. Let the choice be ours rather than that of a few who hide in the shadow of their saffron wall. 