

Diverse Strategies for Supporting the Revival of the Theravada *Bhikkhuni* Sangha

Susan Pembroke

As late as the mid-1980s, there were no Theravada *bhikkhunis* in the world. Beginning in 1988, women began ordaining. Today, there are approximately 900 to 1,000 *bhikkhunis* worldwide. The revival of the Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha remains fragile due to an absence of institutional acknowledgment and assistance from Bhikkhu Sanghas and government agencies. An additional hurdle Western women face is the reality that Buddhism is a relatively new religion in the West and makes up a tiny percentage of the population. It is estimated that less than a third of 1% of the U.S. population is Theravada. As a consequence, during this time of transition and expansion, it is essential that the laity and *bhikkhus* who are free to act supply needed aid if the Bhikkhuni Sangha is to prevail and flourish.

The objectives of this paper are to reveal what organizational and grassroots endeavors are providing accurate information about *bhikkhunis*, generating in-depth dialogue between and among monastics and lay people, educating the global Buddhist community about the essential role of ordained women, empowering *bhikkhunis* to assume leadership positions, and offering needed financial support. The ultimate aim of this paper is to encourage *bhikkhunis* and the laity to implement existing templates designed by their contemporaries, templates that are already producing measurable results on behalf of *bhikkhunis*.

International Organizations and Conferences

Sakyadhita: International Association of Buddhist Women, founded in 1987, is the best known and most respected organization for its work on behalf of Buddhist women. Their bi-annual conferences, publications, newsletter, and website forums advance research, encourage dialogue and sharing of information, and create an environment to brainstorm how to integrate and apply the Dhamma to current social and political challenges. In addition to the actual content that emerges

from these conferences, there is also no minimizing the effect of hundreds of committed women assembling at one time. In 2009 I interviewed over a dozen Thai women regarding their decision to ordain. Many found the inspiration to ordain after attending Sakyadhita's conferences. They said they not alone but were part of an international community.

Other women felt motivated to ordain after meeting accomplished *bhikkhunis* at the Outstanding Women in Buddhism Awards (OWBA), an annual awards ceremony which began in 2002 in Bangkok and continues to honor eminent Buddhist women.

Another international organization is the Alliance for Bhikkhunis (AfB), a fledgling, U.S.-based non-profit established in 2007 to provide financial support for ordained women. In attempting to raise funds for *bhikkhunis*, it rapidly became apparent how little the average Western practitioner knew about *bhikkhunis*. As a consequence, AfB shifted its first priority to educating lay people about *bhikkhunis* via its digital Library and online magazine *Present*. On September 17, 2011, AfB is launching the 1st Annual International Bhikkhuni Day, a day of awareness raising as well as fundraising through its meditation Pledge-A-Thon.

Conferences such as the 2007 Hamburg International Congress on Women's Role in the Sangha and the Bhikkhuni Seminar held at Australia's Santi Forest Monastery in 2008 also play a crucial role in correcting inaccuracies about female monastics found in the Pali Canon

Western Grassroots Organizations

In Buddhist countries such as Thailand and Sri Lanka, many laypeople have transitioned relatively effortlessly from offering alms to *bhikkhus* to now offering food and other requisites to *bhikkhunis*. Outside of Asia, there is not a tradition of supporting monks as part of one's overall Buddhist practice except in immigrant communities. This section of the paper is devoted to examining the strategies some Western organizations have used to generate support for *bhikkhunis*. The groups studied are a mix of exclusively lay groups which formed to support *bhikkhunis* as well

as *bhikkhuni viharas*.

Saranaloka Foundation, a California-based lay initiative, was established in 2004 to create a permanent monastery in the United States for *siladharas*, a 10-precept order of nuns created by monks in England in the Ajahn Chah Thai Forest tradition. In December 2009, sufficient money had been donated to establish Aloka Vihara in San Francisco, a temporary residence housing monastics until rural property is located for a women's training monastery. Saranaloka found its mission in jeopardy when the two *siladharas* at Aloka Vihara, the respected Ajahn Anandabodhi and Ajahn Santacitta, announced they were planning to take *bhikkhuni* ordination in the fall of 2011. After deliberation, the board of Saranaloka expanded its mission to include *bhikkhunis*.

Funds are raised through retreats and talks given by the nuns to predominantly Western lay groups and centers. Saranaloka also uses their website to disseminate information about current activities as well as post articles, audio Dhamma talks, and a monthly calendar of events. They employ Yahoo Groups and Facebook to stay connected with supporters.

Dhammadharini was founded in California in 2005 with the vision of creating a residential monastic community for *bhikkhunis*. Dhammadharini began with a circle of twenty friends and supporters of Bhikkhuni Tathaaloka Theri. These volunteers incorporated, developed a website, and located housing. I questioned Brenda Walsh, a board member from its inception, about the difficulties Dhammadharini faces. She identified four problems: a lack of supporters with diverse talents and skills to create and run their organization; an inability to find a volunteer webmaster and, as a result, having overlapping sites and other internet problems; too much work for only one monastic; and a lack of knowledge about how to operate a monastery as a lay support group.

Expanding its email list, creating a new website, and being diligent about keeping supporters informed have been their most effective outreach efforts. In practice, Dhammadharini is utilizing social media in much the same manner as Saranaloka. Dhammadharini, however, is reaching out

more to ethnic communities and is persistent in their effort at “counter-education and re-education” with regard to misinformation about the validity of *bhikkhuni* ordination and the low opinion of women held by ethnic Theravada Buddhists and individuals trained by them.

Another example of a *bhikkhuni vihara* is the Carolina Buddhist Vihara, located in Greenville, NC, and headed by Bhikkhuni Sudhamma. The *vihara* was founded by Sri Lankan families in the region who met in each other’s homes for approximately 20 years. In 1999, they invited a Sri Lankan *bhikkhu* to reside in a house owned by one of the families and incorporated in 2000 as a church. Several monks came and went until Bhikkhuni Sudhamma arrived in 2003.

The *vihara*’s board remains all Sri Lankan except for Bhikkhuni Sudhamma. Donations come from talks and puja services, and from teachings given outside the *vihara* or when Bhikkhuni Sudhamma attends ceremonies. Volunteers help with yard work, maintenance, transportation, managing the website, and coordinating dana. Assistance with medical care remains inconsistent.

Awakening Truth is a relatively new religious nonprofit started in April 2009 by former *siladhara* Ajahn Thanasanti Bhikkhuni. She ended her formal 19-year affiliation with the Ajahn Chah-Ajahn Sumedho monasteries in 2009 after their Council of Elders rejected the “Statement of Intention.” She subsequently ordained as a *bhikkhuni* in August 2010. Like her former *siladhara* sisters, Ajahn Thanasanti Bhikkhuni raises money from extensive teaching tours to places such as the Harvard Divinity School, Boston University, and the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. She has also reached out to diverse populations, including the Dharma Punx, a *sangha* of practitioners ranging in age from 25 to 45, to people of color and people with disabilities.

Ajahn Thanasanti has cited as problems a lack of infrastructure to support a growing nonprofit and the need for more volunteers. Similar to Dhammadharini’s experience, she also remarks on the same issue of working with Westerners who have never experienced firsthand “the reciprocal relationship between monastic and lay communities that enables both to thrive.”

The Role of Social Media in Creating a *Virtual Community* to Support *Bhikkhunis*

Two separate but related events in 2009 rocked Theravada Buddhism: the repercussion from delisting Ajahn Brahmavamso's monastery as a branch of Thailand's Wat Pah Pong (WPP) Forest Sangha following his participation in *bhikkhuni* ordinations and the insistence of the U.K.-based "Forest Sangha," another branch of Wat Pah Pong, that *siladharas* agree to the 5 Points legislation. These events produced a blizzard of emails, blogs, press releases, articles on web sites, Facebook posts, and the emergence of new web sites.

When the Alliance for Bhikkhunis' online magazine Present was published on May 24, 2010, 23,907 people came to their site. From May 25 through June 10, 2010, another 52,635 individuals visited the site, creating a total of 76,542 unique visitors in a little over two weeks, such is the viral effect of social media and so hungry were people for information on the subject of *bhikkhunis*. Thousands continue to visit the site monthly to read library or magazine articles, discover the locations of *bhikkhuni* monasteries, or share news on AfB's Facebook page.

Another social media phenomenon was the launching of an online petition in November 2009, asking for reform within the Ajahn Chah lineage. By late December 2009, 2,900 people signed the petition, requesting the legitimacy of *bhikkhuni* ordination be acknowledged. In the midst of all of this, Bhante Sujato, the Australian abbot of Santi Monastery, was regularly weighing in via his Wordpress blog. From the inception of the blog in October 2009 through November date 2010, the blog drew 258,289 views from around the world. The busiest day was November 5, 2009 when 3,862 came to his Wordpress site, a day when three of the four blogs had to do with *bhikkhuni* ordination.

Social media created a forum to debate issues confronting contemporary Buddhism, mobilized lay practitioners to lobby for gender equality, and generated a global community.

Summary

Lay practitioners have a variety of ways to aid *bhikkhunis*. Donating money to local *viharas* as well as international organizations, organizing fundraisers, donating property, or bequeathing money are other possibilities. For those lacking funds but wishing to assist, volunteering specialized skills is a vital way to contribute, especially since *viharas* and lay groups are usually operating on shoe-string budgets. Other low-cost methods of helping include staying informed of *bhikkhuni* history and developments and posting comments on a Facebook page or blog, or writing a letter to an editor of a Buddhist publication. Offering a meal or transportation, manifestations of concern, are continually needed and are heartening as well.

Inviting *bhikkhunis* to speak at a center promotes the Dhamma and connects *bhikkhunis* with potential supporters. Meditation centers can also assist *bhikkhunis* by offering retreat scholarships. If there are no *bhikkhuni viharas* in an area, banding together with others to establish one is another strategy which has led to the formation of *bhikkhuni viharas*.

Participating in conferences and paying some or all of the transportation costs so that monastics can attend these conferences is equally key. Strikingly, most of the endeavors outlined involve individuals developing relationships with *bhikkhunis*. These intimate spiritual connections appear to be what the Buddha intended and urged, spiritual friendships that are mutually enriching and instructive.