

20 Women who make a difference



Sukhothai hotel chose to celebrate 20 years of their service to make an announcement of their selection of women from 20 fields. Ven.Dhammananda was one among them, she was selected to represent women in Religion

Thailand Tatler, one of the organizers, brought out a special issue of their magazine to celebrate the event. And below is an article Trin Napatsakorn wrote about Ven.Dhammananda.

Robe model

Chatsumarn Kabilsingh already had a successful career in Academia when she was ordained as Thailand's first Theravadin bhikkhuni, becoming the Venerable Dhammananda.

Women who want to live a Buddhist monastic life become nuns (mae chee with shaven head in white robes); but they are accorded a lower status than monks. Indeed, Thailand had no Theravada bhikkhuni—fully ordained women who are entitled to perform the same roles as monks—until 2003, when Buddhist scholar and activist Chatsumarn Kabilsingh was ordained. She opened the doors to female ordination in Thailand.

Appropriately enough, Chatsumarn is the daughter of Voramai Kabilsingh, Thailand's first ordained bhikkhuni under the Mahayana tradition, who entered monastic life in Taiwan in 1956. At that time, Chatsumarn was nearly 12 years old. Her Buddhist education began as she listened to religious discourse while she fanned her mother as she received her visitors. She went on to enjoy successful academic career, eventually spending three decades in Thammasat university's Department of Philosophy and Religion.

The turning point in Chatsumarn's life came at Harvard University in 1983, during a conference of leading women on women, religion and social changes, she realized two points, "We have to stand up for what is right, but not to the point of being angry. This forced me to understand what it means to be a Buddhist," she recalls. The second realization was even more personal, "Being the only academic in Thailand who knows the ins and outs of ordination of women, but not doing anything to bring

about social changes, is a real shame. Our society was closed to the idea of bhikkhunis. In 1984, I became an activist, writing books along side my academic career. Seeing many bhikkhunis ordained around the world motivated me to bring them to Thailand. If women are not agents for social change, society cannot change,” she says. However, Chatsumarn had to wait because she could not take her vows until she had discharged all her obligations, most importantly the raising of her three sons.

That time came when she was in her 50s. Unlike her mother, Chatsumarn chose not to pursue the Mahayana tradition. “It would have been difficult to learn Chinese at that age,” she says. At the time, Sri Lanka had recently revived the Theravada bhikkhuni tradition. As the lineage used language virtually identical to the Pali used in Thailand, she was ordained as a samaneri there in 2001 and two years later as fully ordained bhikkhuni. The Venerable Dhammananda bhikkhuni is now the abbess of Songdhammakalyani temple founded by her mother in Nakhonpathom province some 53 kms. West of Bangkok.

Of her early days, the bhikkhuni recalls the opposition from the clergy. But there were also positive responses, ‘Women would ask to touch my robe, to confirm that what they had only dreamt of could come true.’ She says. Encouraged by the fact that the police did not arrest her, other Thai women travelled to Sri Lanka for their ordination, Thailand’s 28 fully ordained bhikkhunis have become invaluable resources, especially in nearby countries with smaller numbers (Vietnam, for example has just four Theravada bhikkhunis) Today, her temple has given ordination to more than 220 short-term samaneris, so more women can experience monastic life. The next samaneri ordination session will be held on Dec.5, to make merit for

His Majesty the King. After 12 years as a bhikkhuni, Dhammananda will be qualified as a preceptor to confer bhikkhuni ordination, then they will no longer have to be ordained overseas.

What does Dhammananda see as the biggest obstacle to leading a monastic life? “Oneself, because we cannot let go of clinging to “self” she replies. “The more a person can let go of this aspect through practice, one will see that fewer matters are problems,” it is by sharing this lesson, applicable to everyone, that she reveals a way for bhikkhunis to benefit and be supported by society while deepening their own practice.