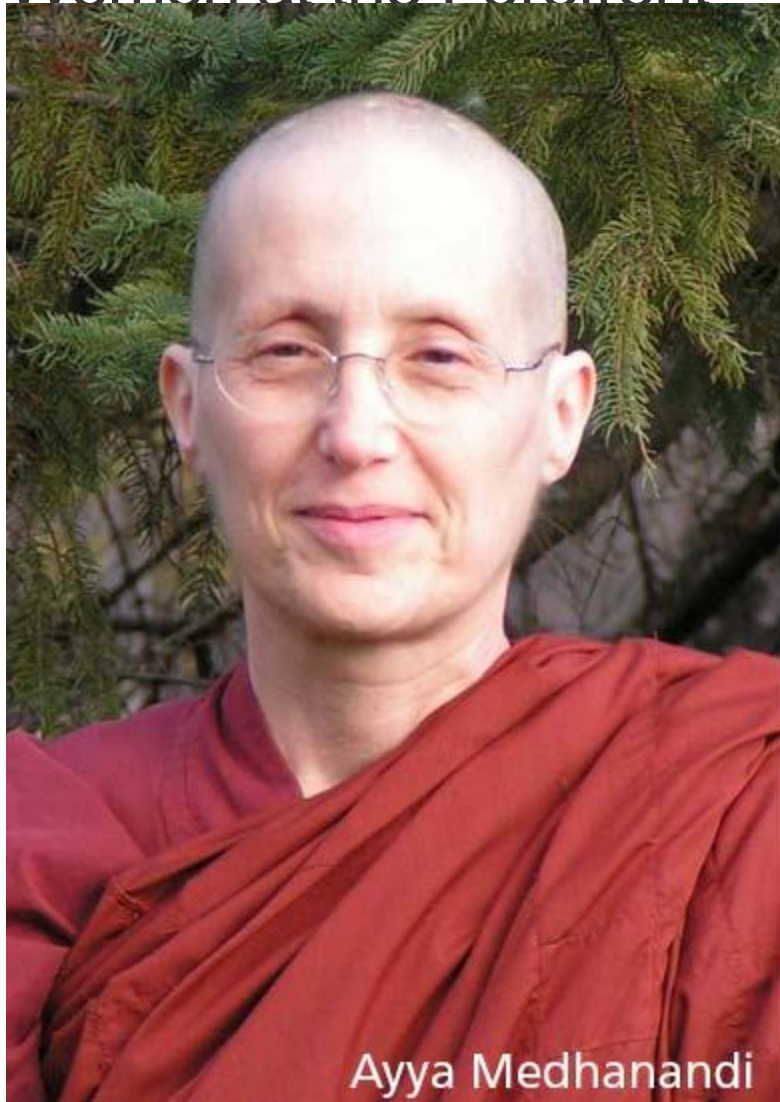


Women at the Forefront



Ayya Medhanandi

Pioneering and
Dhamma of Pe

Jayantā Shirley Johannesen interviews Ayya Medhanandi, founder of Sati Saraniya Hermitage in Canada

JAYANTĀ: Ayya, I first met you when I visited Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in England back in the 1990's when you were a siladhara, one of the 10-precept nuns in the Thai Forest Sangha. Since then, we have seen dramatic changes for nuns internationally, and for you personally. When we met, there were no Theravada ordination procedures for nuns or monasteries where fully ordained women (bhikkhunis) could train. Bhikkhuni ordinations now take place regularly, and there are bhikkhuni monasteries in many countries. As the founder and senior bhikkhuni of the first training monastery for Theravada women in Canada, you are at the forefront of this modern-day revival. How did this happen?

AYYA MEDHANANDI: We are truly on the cusp of a wonderful new era. I see the changes as historical for both Theravada Buddhist monasticism and the outreach of the Buddha's teachings in western society. The Buddha said that when a person native to the country in which the Dhamma teachings are introduced becomes a monastic, then the Dhamma will truly begin to take root there. That is now happening around the world, including here in Canada. So compared to how things were 25 years ago when I first ordained, the Theravada monastic landscape for women is remarkably transformed.

As you know, the bhikkhuni order in Theravada Buddhism disappeared in Sri Lanka during the 10th century. In the absence of other bhikkhunis, the required dual ordination from both monks (bhikkhus) and nuns could not be carried out and, as a result, a culture of omission developed over the centuries. In the past few decades, women have begun seeking higher ordination from the prevailing conservative patriarchy. When the Thai Forest Sangha under Ajahn Chah came to the west in the late 70's, four western women requested Ajahn Sumedho to train them with the 10 precepts, the equivalent of novice nun or samaneri ordination. This he agreed to do, with Ajahn Chah's blessing.

This led to the creation of a new order of nuns in the western branch monasteries called siladhara: women upholding virtue. The siladhara form was intended to meet their aspiration for higher monastic training. At the same time, it created a greater sense of parity with the bhikkhus. It was not bhikkhuni ordination per se, which still is not recognized in Thailand (although a handful of flourishing Thai bhikkhuni monasteries now exist), but it was a radical and compassionate step.

J: Did you ever think about taking full ordination when you were a siladhara?

AM: I thought of it well before I joined the siladhara community. In 1988, while on retreat at the Mahasi Meditation Centre in Rangoon, Burma, I was ordained by Sayadaw U Pandita as a 10-precept nun. Most of the nuns in his monastery were tilashin, keeping eight precepts. I was eager to try out being a nun but I was drawn to a greater level of renunciation. There were no women bhikkhus to be seen (I did not yet know that the female monastic form had a special name), so I asked for the Going Forth ordination as a 10-precept nun. Sayadaw would not agree unless I took lifetime vows. "You've had enough of samsara" (the realms of cyclic existence), he counseled, and sent me back to my meditation cell to ponder this. After three weeks, he asked if I had decided. Filled with profound trust, I could answer only "Yes."

It was a year of major unrest in Burma that culminated in a military coup. There were violent scenes not far from the monastery gates and all foreigners were advised to leave the country. Hoping to find a peaceful situation for practice and training, and to be closer to my aging parents, I decided to return to the west. I stayed

at the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Massachusetts and a few small monks' monasteries in California. That is when I began to learn about the female arahants that existed during the Buddha's time. I wondered what had happened to the bhikkhuni lineage of our tradition, having never come across a bhikkhuni. Twice during those early years, I innocently asked to take higher ordination but it was not possible.

J: Please tell us about those two times. What did you experience?

AM: The first time was in 1989. Sayadaw U Pandita came from Burma to teach a two-month retreat at IMS while I was practicing there. Three American women on the retreat took temporary ordination. When the retreat ended, they offered me requisites and encouraged me to request bhikkhuni ordination from Sayadaw. I was hesitant at first because of my experience in Burma. Then it occurred to me that Sayadaw was my preceptor and Dhamma father; surely, he would have compassion for me! And as a highly respected Theravada elder, he might have enough influence to support my request. Plucking up my courage, I went to see him, bowed and asked if he could make me a bhikkhuni. He looked at me stone-faced and said, "I can't make you a bhikkhuni, but I can make you a bhikkhu."

This was not the answer I expected, yet it did not seem like a rebuff or a form of disparagement, but rather, a goad. I knew that the word, bhikkhu, meant one who is worthy of the robe, far from the defilements and dangers of samsara. Sayadaw seemed to be pointing me to a loftier goal than the convention of ordination itself, which he was not in a position to offer me.

His words reignited my wish for enlightenment. Again, reflecting on the 10 precepts I held, and the rare opportunity to live a life of purity with the Dhamma, I was able to nurture gratitude in my heart for my good karma. However, when I shared this response with the three laywomen, they spoke critically of the inequality of women in the Theravada tradition. Upon reflection, I surmised that Sayadaw may have been reluctant to promote bhikkhuni ordination in order to avoid a schism in the Burmese Sangha that could endanger the transmission of the Buddha's teachings worldwide.

A few months later, I was invited to spend time on personal retreat at the Taungpulu Kaba-Aye Monastery in California. The elderly abbot, Hlaing Thé Sayadaw, a revered meditation master, was exceedingly kind to me. He offered me teachings and provided my daily requisites. One day, an invitation came for me to take part in a bhikkhuni ordination in Los Angeles. When I requested Sayadaw's permission to go, he blithely echoed what I had been told before; there was no such thing as a bhikkhuni. Then, in his tender mentoring way, he exhorted me to continue my meditation practice.

The other monks there ridiculed the idea that such a ceremony was taking place. I don't believe their intentions were malicious; they had simply been brought up in a homogeneous monastic culture in which the bhikkhuni lineage had been defunct for more than 1000 years.

J: How did their attitude affect you?

AM: I felt somewhat buffeted but held to my faith in the Buddha's priceless teaching that promised full awakening for all. I also valued obedience as a vital aspect of my training, and wanted to refrain from doing anything that defied or showed disrespect for my elders and teachers. I decided it would be better to wait for my karma to ripen and conditions to unfold naturally, so I abandoned the prospect of becoming a bhikkhuni. I gained the strength to do this from the great loving-kindness of both Sayadaws, and especially by heeding Sayadaw U Pandita's advice to contemplate Dhamma and ultimate reality rather than getting upset, or hoping to gain rights through worldly conventions. I loved being a nun: wearing the robe, living the renunciate life of morality and simplicity, and being given the chance to practice in silence and investigate the state of my heart. These elder monks were brilliant meditation masters and guides.

Reflecting in this way, rather than being disappointed, I felt a deep sense of gratitude for my good fortune to receive teachings from them. All other issues fell quickly away. Also, being a young, untrained and solitary nun, I had to concentrate on practicalities; where would I find support, shelter, and a community with suitable conditions to practice in the 10-precept form I had been given.

Naturally, the longer I was in robes, I continued to question why the original system of training offered to men was accepted while the parallel system of training offered to women by the Buddha himself was not honoured. This became more apparent during my 10 years in the large community at Amaravati where monks and nun practiced side-by-side. The Buddha had established the complete Fourfold Assembly or Ubhato Sangha of bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, upasakas and upasikas (monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen). Why would the all-knowing Blessed One create the Bhikkhuni Vinaya, or code of discipline, 2595 years ago, if it was not of value to us?

J: Can you say more about how you and the other nuns felt during your years at Amaravati?

AM: As earnest and committed Dhamma practitioners, we appreciated our unique position. While we were aware that the Theravada bhikkhuni ordination and training had not been practiced in modern times, I don't think any of us imagined that we would not be able to pursue this path if we wished. We understood that the siladhara form in and of itself was already quite a radical achievement and that, perhaps one day, we would take the next step and become the first candidates for higher ordination.

For the time being we practiced great contentment, knowing that we did receive excellent training: the 10 precepts and more than 130 rules and observances culled from both the Bhikkhuni and Bhikkhu Vinayas established by the Buddha. Effectively, our life simulated that of a bhikkhuni as much as any other Buddhist monastic training available for women in the western world. We also had the collective support and friendship of like-minded spiritual companions, wonderful guides, teachers, and all the requisites and conditions needed for practice.

However, I continued to feel a quiet aspiration for, and strong kinship with, the ancient bhikkhuni lineage. In my mind, aspiring for greater renunciation did not preclude having gratitude. Indeed, in the Theravada monastic world of that time, Amaravati was the only place where Theravadan women could live as renunciates. What more did we need? There were both monks and nuns at that time who believed that the bhikkhuni rules were impractical and could not be properly kept in modern times. Ironically, there was no doubt about the practicality or viability of the monks' Vinaya.

J: What happened when you left the community to practice on your own?

AM: As time went on, it became more and more difficult for me to ignore the glaring disparity between male and female monastic training, especially when I stepped outside the siladhara world. I began to wonder how I could press beyond this boundary that circumscribed the monastic journey for myself, for my sisters in the robe, and for future generations of women drawn to Theravada Buddhist monasticism.

I reflected often on the Buddha's stepmother and first bhikkhuni, Mahapajapati Gotami, shaving her head and requesting ordination three times from the Buddha. When asked if women were capable of becoming enlightened, the Buddha confirmed that women were as capable of it as men. This was the premise for his consenting to Mahapajapati's ordination, thus establishing the Bhikkhuni Order.

I took these contemplations with me on a year's sabbatical from Amaravati in 1999 when I travelled to New Zealand for solitary retreat. I couldn't find just one place to retreat for that length of time and had to move quite often, staying briefly in a meditation hut in the bhikkhu monastery in Stokes Valley, house-sitting for lay supporters on vacation, and secluded in a riverside cabin in a Cistercian monastery where the monks cooked and filled my bowl daily with joy and kindness. At the end of the retreat, I was invited to stay on in New Zealand. It seemed a good opportunity to test my wings as a solitary nun and to benefit from conditions conducive to contemplative practice.

Soon, however, I felt the challenge of being the lone holder of the modern siladhara form far from its only enclave in the world, England, where it had been created. I was especially discomfited on occasions when I

came into contact with fully ordained Mahayana bhikshunis and was touched by their connection to an ancient lineage, networks of spiritual companions, and unfailing community support.

J: Was this your first time meeting bhikkhunis? And what impact did this have on you?

AM: In the early years, Mahayana bhikshunis occasionally visited the siladhara community including a few westerners who had ordained under Master Hua in California or with other teachers in Taiwan and Korea. In New Zealand, I also came to know a group of Taiwanese bhikshunis and visited their thriving community in Auckland. Their master, an impressive, confident and compassionate leader, chanted special blessings for my well-being.

In addition to feeling isolated from my siladhara community, I often experienced insecurity in terms of my daily requisites. Testing as they were, these conditions actually strengthened my resolve and my refuge in Dhamma. Having nothing and no one to turn to but myself and my practice demanded more intensive inner searching and purification. My meetings with Mahayana bhikkhunis made me keenly aware of the gap in female leadership in our own tradition. I felt a growing call to pave a new path, which would mean uncovering an old one.

J: Did that mean finding a way towards full ordination?

AM: Although I felt called to a larger work, I didn't know exactly what that would entail. Yet the wish for higher ordination still percolated in me. In 2006, I moved from New Zealand to Penang where I continued to meet Mahayana bhikshunis and learned about a monastic training program in Taiwan that was open to foreigners. That fired my enthusiasm, but I knew that I would need a mentor to introduce me to that Sangha and sponsor my candidacy.

Then, in 2007, a great ripening of karma took place. I met a remarkable and highly revered Chinese monk, Master Chi Chuan, the abbot of Triple Wisdom Temple. He leads a community of bhikshus and bhikshunis in the Dharmagupta lineage, which dates back to the 5th-century Sri Lankan Theravada Sangha. Having spent a year in Burma, he knew a lot about the Theravada tradition. Master Chi Chuan was curious why I wanted to take bhikkhuni ordination, having been a Theravada nun for 19 years. After thoroughly questioning me, he was satisfied with my resolve and sincerity, and after a period of several months, he offered to sponsor me.

J: After waiting for so many years, what was it like for you when you finally received bhikkhuni ordination?

AM: As you can imagine, after years and years of training in one tradition, it was quite daunting. With the help of compassionate translators, I had regular practice sessions for months in Penang and then persevered through four weeks of intensive training in Taiwan. I was the only westerner in a group of over 200 candidates.

The final ceremony took place in a 100-year-old monastery in Keelung. After reciting my vows and hearing the chants of 21 elder bhikshus and bhikshunis who conferred the higher ordination on me, I experienced an indescribable joy and uplift, as if Mahapajapati Gotami Theri herself had transmitted the lineage directly into my heart.

I was overcome by a vast stillness and a powerful sense of gratitude and awe. The other nuns were astonished at my tears of joy. They, too, were very happy to receive bhikshuni ordination but for them the process was so normal, so available. They couldn't comprehend the hurdles I had to surmount to take part in the ordination process with them.

Suddenly, I also experienced what it was like to have elders – the direct connection with two and a half millennia of ancestral spiritual mothers. I was aware of them within and around me, like a force of universal loving-kindness and compassion, silently witnessing my steps up to the altar. This, I realized, was the ancient lineage to which all female monastics of our tradition should have access.

J: After the ordination, did you have any idea where you would go or what would unfold?

AM: I had been invited back to Canada to teach but didn't know how to present myself. I even contemplated not telling anyone about my bhikkhuni ordination. This was a major dilemma for me. I finally confided in Ajahn Viradhammo, a kind Dhamma teacher and trusted friend for many years at Amaravati and in New Zealand who is now abbot of Tisarana monastery, near Ottawa. "You can't be a closet bhikkhuni!" he said. "You have to come out of the closet."

It was ironic. Finally, I had received the mantle of full ordination. However, in taking that step, I could no longer remain a member of the Amaravati community. This change heralded another growth spurt. During my teaching trip to Canada, Ajahn Viradhammo suggested I stay on for good. As I am Canadian-born, that felt right. I wasn't sure what would evolve from that decision but I felt a strong connection to the Buddhist communities in Ottawa and Toronto, and had complete faith that I would be well-cared for and supported. A group of women in Ontario gathered around me to form a committee, and we applied for charitable status to establish Sati Saraniya Hermitage. It was granted in September 2007.

J: So you have arrived in Canada, a registered organization has been established to support you and then what happens?

AM: Originally, the objectives of the Hermitage were focused on teaching meditation and serving in the community. Then Ayya Nimmala, who was still a laywoman, asked if I would train her. We had met the year

before at Tisarana monastery where she had served as a valued steward for more than a year. I could not refuse such a worthy candidate.

Our connection was pivotal in cultivating the seed from which Sati Saraniya has evolved into a training monastery for women during these last four-and-a-half extraordinary years. In fact, Ayya Nimmala's ease of ordination was the fruit of years of struggle experienced by many of us who came before, including two former siladharas, Ayyas Anandabodhi and Santacitta, with whom she was ordained.

Effectively, the Theravada Bhikkhuni lineage has now been restored and women need no longer be excluded from living the holy life as the Buddha first envisioned it. We now have a clear way of training, transmitted from the Buddha himself down through a long line of arahant bhikkhuni elders – our ancestral mothers and mentors in the robe – who inspire and guide us. We have a growing international retinue of contemporary female sangha role models, a supportive lay community and the conditions to keep going.

The road behind us has been tough, but that is the karma of pioneers, whether men or women. These spiritual tests help us to see the mind, to know the Four Noble Truths in life itself, and to steer ourselves towards liberation from suffering. By training ourselves to uphold the Dhamma, the Dhamma upholds us. That's been my experience. If I try to direct myself toward compassion rather than conflict, regardless of how I am treated, I can respond with respect and kindness. This is the heart of every true spiritual lineage.

J: What hurdles remain for you in establishing a training centre for bhikkhunis in Canada?

AM: My intentions originally seemed simple and straightforward. I came back to Canada to deepen my own practice and to share the teachings. Now that has expanded and includes helping to pave the way so that other women can pursue their spiritual aspirations and practice as Theravada bhikkhunis. However, no sooner did Sati Saraniya Hermitage appear on the monastic map than we found ourselves unwittingly involved in political controversy – highly-charged opinions about the first bhikkhuni ordinations in Australia, including objections to their validity from senior bhikkhus of the Thai Forest Sangha.

Fortunately, the remoteness of our community keeps the fray and polemic of public and ecclesiastical opinion at some distance. It is also dying down as the years pass, allowing us to devote ourselves more to the teachings and to grow in Dhamma, rather than in worldly ways. That can be a true gift to offer when people come to us upset by traditional opinions and controversy.

While carrying this enormous responsibility, I recognize that I am aging and less physically able to exert myself. Despite these limitations, I am gladdened by the rare privilege and opportunity to serve in this way, so I keep pushing the envelope. There is a lot of uncertainty, much physical work, and few hands on deck in a new

monastery. It is a challenge to balance the outer activity – maintaining infrastructure, communications, accounts, teaching commitments, constructing a website and building a temple – with finding time for seclusion.

Intuitively, I know that this is the practice – working with conditions however difficult they may seem. The learning curve as a senior monastic is breathtaking. Ajahn Chah’s reflections about this process in his own years as abbot have been a great boon for me. I am in a unique position on the frontline. I would not even call it the forefront, but an inner front, a frontier new, exalted and priceless. I have this high-voltage highway for insight into my own insecurities and weaknesses within the barbs of my own and others’ ignorance as they arise in the hot pot of community. When great spiritual tests face us, we have to grow taller.

J: What do you feel is the importance of the availability of bhikkhuni training?

AM: As I mentioned earlier, the Buddha intended the Sangha to be fourfold. I believe his wisdom in this, as in all his teachings, lies in achieving balance. We integrate the many threads of our humanity as we cultivate the spiritual path. Both men and women benefit from this full expression of Sangha, as we see with guests who visit the hermitage. In our bhikkhuni life, we undertake an important role as spiritual teachers and sisters. Part of our renunciation and purification is being willing to endure some discomfort. We remind and encourage ourselves that this work is for the benefit of women and men of all ages, for generations to come.

Though we live in a culture that may not understand or appreciate why or what we are doing, we know the power and breadth of these teachings. What is precious is often hard to do, and that is exactly why we need great fortitude, wisdom, patience and compassion. We need to work and move forward with respect and dignity. Though our responsibility is great, so will be the blessing of realizing our highest potential as human beings. In this spirit, we keep walking with deep dedication and gratitude.



Jayantā Shirley Johannesen, founder of Stretch Awareness, teaches yoga and meditation. For the last 45 years, she has studied and practiced with many senior yoga and meditation teachers. She is a founding member of numerous associations, including Sakyadhita Canada, of which she is the current president. She is also a member and lay minister in the Community of Abhayagiri Lay Ministers (CALM) at Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, California.