

HOW TO GROW A NUN

Bhikkhu Sujato

What do I know about growing nuns? Well, not much, actually, but I'm trying to learn. I use this metaphor because I want to emphasize the organic, complex, contextual nature of what this involves. It's like we're taking various stems and clippings and breeding a new hybrid in a special, untried environment, and no-one really knows how it's going to work. But we do know that it's worth having a go. As Santi grows and matures, we expect to proceed as the Buddha did: learning through experience. This little essay intends to make it more clear what we are doing, and to present my opinions on some matters of discussion within the community of those who are working together to support bhikkhuni ordination.

Anāgārikā

At Santi Forest Monastery, nuns practice in a manner that follows more or less the precedent that is generally used by the Ajahn Chah tradition monasteries, especially in the West. This means that the candidate will stay in the monastery for a time, then if they wish to seek ordination, they must request to take *anāgārikā* precepts. This just means they are keeping eight precepts, as all guests in the monastery do, but this is more formalized; in addition they must shave their heads and wear white.

Before taking *anāgārikā* precepts they must supply the Sangha with three things: a police record check (or if they can't get this, a statutory declaration that they have no criminal record); a blood test to check for HIV, hepatitis, etc., and a report on their psychological health from a qualified psychologist or counsellor. The Sangha considers these things, and discusses the conduct and attitudes of the candidate, before deciding whether to accept a candidate for *anāgārikā* precepts. This discussion involves all the resident monks and nuns and Santi, and only with the approval of all will this first stage proceed.

After acceptance as an *anāgārikā*, the candidate will have to wait for a year before taking ordination as a *sāmaṇerī* (novice). During this time, there will be regular teachings in the monastery. These teachings will vary from time to time, but will include regular Dhamma talks, meditation instructions, private meditation interviews, and classes in Suttas, Vinaya, and Pali. All our scriptural studies are done on a comparative, analytical basis, which means that we use text-critical methods to work out, as best we can, what the Buddha actually taught. I believe that Santi is the only, or one of the only, monasteries in the world to use such an approach, despite the Buddha's repeated exhortations to his disciples to not confuse those things that he himself taught with things he never taught. I expect that all candidates should have a sincere personal commitment to the Dhamma, a foundation in meditation, a good knowledge of Suttas and Vinaya, and at least some knowledge of Pali, Buddhist history and philosophy, and general background in such things as the various Buddhist traditions, comparative religions, and so on. In addition, they learn to live as part of our close and sometimes intense community, which also means dealing with long periods of time in solitude. During this year, in a small community such as ours, I am able to personally monitor each candidate, and to assess how they handle these different and sometimes demanding situations. We make it clear to the candidates that there are no guarantees: even up to the day of the ordination, the Sangha can decide to say no.

Sāmaṇerī

However, if all goes well and the candidates make it to the one year mark, we proceed with a *sāmaṇerī*

ordination. This means that they will take the 10 precepts, which includes not using money. From then on, they will be entirely dependant on the monastery for all their material needs. This is a crucial point: up until now, they have been staying in the monastery, but responsible for their own funds for things such as travel, visas, medicine, etc. But now, we have to bear all costs and responsibilities. That means we are very cautious about making sure the candidates are responsible and understand the step they are taking.

For ordination candidates in non-traditional countries, this is not usually such a problem. In traditional countries, it is not unusual for people to ordain to seek some kind of worldly end, such as an education, status, money, or the possibility of travel and having a nice lazy lifestyle. there's no way this can happen here. All the candidates have been through a lot before they get here, and are in almost all cases propelled by intense experiences of suffering to transgress their social expectations and seek fulfilment in a way of life that is so exceptional.

The *sāmaṇerīs* wear the same robes as the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, and are externally indistinguishable. In addition, their lifestyle becomes very similar to that of the fully ordained monks and nuns, except the details of some of the minor rules are more relaxed. It should, however, be noted that by not handling money, the *sāmaṇerīs* here are abiding by a stricter level of precepts than the vast majority of fully ordained monastics in all traditions. Generally speaking, however, this is the time when they will learn most of the basics of monastic life: how to wear the robes, how to do the chanting, how to behave in various situations, etc. In their year as a *sāmaṇerī*, then, they will have plenty of time to taste the sweetness of ordained life, and to learn of the peculiar stresses and challenges it imposes. These include, crucially, the pressure of expectation both from oneself and others. In terms of teaching, etc., the *sāmaṇerīs* will continue with the education as when they were *anāgārikās*, with the exception that they are expected to take a more serious interest in Vinaya. Our *sāmaṇerīs* have already done some highly advanced research in comparative Vinaya studies, as well as the more conventional practices such as starting to memorize the *pāṭimokkha* for recitation.

In addition to this training offered in the monastery itself, I fully support our *sāmaṇerīs* to seek extra training elsewhere. Examples of this so far include doing retreats with different meditation teachers, staying for a period in a different monastery, or doing formal education in Buddhism and Psychotherapy.

In some traditions, it is believed that those who are not fully ordained should not be taught Vinaya. As far as I understand, this belief stems ultimately from a rule that the candidates should not be taught the four requisites before ordination, as that might scare them off. But these days, the entire Vinaya is published and readily available; in fact we owe a great deal to the researches of lay people who have contributed greatly to our understanding of Vinaya. Nowhere in the Pali Vinaya is there a prohibition on teaching Vinaya as such. I strongly believe that such a prohibition is directly counter to the openness and inquiring nature of the Buddha's teaching, and that it is essential that all candidates receive a good grounding in Vinaya before they take ordination. I would go so far as to say that refusing to teach Vinaya to ordination candidates is a violation of the candidates' basic rights to be informed of what they are embarking upon.

Bhikkhuni

So, after a year of study and practice, of learning how to wear the robes and live as a monastic, the Sangha decides whether the candidate is ready to take full ordination. This is a serious step, given the controversial nature of bhikkhuni ordination. We must be sure that our candidates are mentally and spiritually ready for the pressures they will encounter. They must understand the various gender problems in Buddhism, and be able to articulate their reasons for seeking bhikkhuni ordination to those who will question this. If we are unsure of a candidate's readiness, we will ask them to wait. Nevertheless, despite the undeniable fact that this is a big step, in terms of practical implications it is less of a jump than the step between *anāgārikā* and *sāmaṇerī*; Ajahn Brahm notes that the Suttas say that one of the things you should always remember is the date of your *pabbajjā*, the ordination as *sāmaṇera* or *sāmaṇerī*, suggesting that this is more significant than the actual full ordination.

After the full ordination, the new nun must stay here at Santi Monastery for an absolute minimum of two years, during which time they may only stay elsewhere for a short period of time, for example, to do a retreat or to visit their family. After the two year period, they may request to go and stay at another monastery. I will grant that permission if the monastery is a good one, with a compatible standard of Vinaya, a supportive community, and a responsible teacher. However, that request must be driven by a genuine aspiration, not by mere restlessness. For example, they might be inspired by a particular teacher, or to practice within a certain meditation tradition. If the aspiration is genuinely positive and constructive, I will grant them permission to go.

After five years, they should have learnt the Vinaya and the spirit of the lifestyle to a sufficient degree. Normally the Vinaya allows that the bhikkhus should be able to be free from 'dependence' on a teacher after this time; however this does not apply if the candidate lacks maturity and is not competent. Typically, the monks will move about after five years, staying in different countries or with different teachers, or spending time in solitude. The nuns, of course, have far fewer options, and it may be the case that they will tend to travel less. But this remains to be seen.

Continuity & change

This, then, is the basic outline of the training for the nuns here at Santi. It follows the general outline of the education at most of the branch monasteries of the Ajahn Chah tradition, which has historically been the most successful tradition in establishing Western monasteries in the Theravada; in fact, it is just about the only tradition to successfully establish and maintain monasteries in many non-traditional Buddhist countries. The experience and methods that have worked thus far should not be discarded lightly, and while we should not blindly follow, we should be careful before changing those aspects that work.

The two things that, in my opinion, have not worked well in the Ajahn Chah tradition are how they have dealt with gender and with study. These aspects we change: obviously, by introducing bhikkhuni ordination, we are announcing very clearly that the existing gender models are not adequate, as they are not solidly grounded in the Buddhadhamma. The second thing, related to this, is the greater emphasis on scriptural study, the lack of which I believe to be a great weakness of the Forest Tradition in general.

What we do not emphasize is ritual and the minutiae of monastic etiquette. We do very few ceremonies, and the whole ritualistic aspect of monasticism is minimal compared with every other monastery I have stayed in. There is, of course, not the slightest bit of ritualism in the Suttas and Vinaya, and all the very many and complicated rituals that have accrued in Buddhism over the years are products of culture, of time and place. At Santi, we are exceedingly fortunate that there are many culturally-based monasteries in the area, who do all the funerals, seasonal ceremonies, chanting rituals, and so on, freeing us up for what we are really interested in: study and practice of the Buddha's teaching. In my experience, the area of ritual shades off into the preoccupation, which I believe to be excessive, that I have seen for details of monastic etiquette. Again, such things constitute only a minor part of the Buddha's teaching, but in some cases receive great attention in modern Buddhism. Often, the main motivation appears to be on how to present an attractive face for the lay people. For myself, I am quite happy to let people take me or leave me as I am, and I expect my students to have the same attitude.

Monastic training in the Vinaya

It is worth comparing this approach with that found in the Vinaya. It seems that the normal situation was that the candidates would be given full ordination straight away. There is no provision within the Vinaya for a period of training beforehand. Of course, this may well have happened informally; we hear, for example, of someone staying in the monastery expecting ordination, so it would seem likely that there was some education at least in this time. Nevertheless, this is clearly not mandated or formalized in any way. The concept of the '*anāgārikā*' is, it seems, a modern invention, developed by *anāgārikā* Dharmapala, though quite possibly based on traditional models.

The *sāmaṇera/sāmaṇerī* stage was not intended as a preliminary training period before ordination.

Rather, it was a lower ordination platform for boys and girls under twenty, who were not able to undertake the full rigour of the Vinaya rules. But the usual Pali idiom for ordination was *pabbajjāṃ upasampadam*, which in the normal Pali style is just a pair of synonyms. However, the two terms came to be distinguished and separated in time: *pabbajjā* is the novice ordination, and *upasampadā* is the bhikkhu ordination. This distinction, which creeps into the later strata of the Vinaya itself, is then backread into the basic passages as implying that the candidate takes a novice ordination before doing full ordination. Once this is accepted, it becomes possible to separate out the two stages in time. But the reality is that in the Buddha's day, the Buddha or the Sangha would give full ordination immediately, with no preliminary training.

This is not to suggest that the Vinaya does not support the notion of a serious training commitment for monastics. It does; however this is not done through the concept of levels of ordination. The training period is the five years' 'dependence' (*nissaya*), during which, as I have explained above, a newly ordained bhikkhu or bhikkhuni must stay with a teacher who can guide and support them. This period as a young monastic is itself the training period, when the basics are mastered and the holy life is embodied.

In addition, for the bhikkhunis there is a requirement that they follow their preceptor for two years, so that they can receive a proper education. We cannot follow this as it stands at Santi yet, as I am the teacher and we do not have a resident bhikkhuni preceptor. We do, however, remain in regular contact with various senior bhikkhunis, including the preceptor. It is my understanding that this rule should be read in conjunction with the normal procedure of the Vinaya, whereby the role of the preceptor (*upajjhāya* for the monks, *pavattinī* for the nuns) may be fulfilled by a teacher (*ācariya*), if they are able to offer similar levels of education and support. In addition, there is a non-offence clause for this rule in the case of an accident or misfortune; I would suggest that the current situation, with a severe paucity of opportunities for women's ordination, is just such an 'unfortunate' condition, which will be rectified as time goes on.

Sikkhamānā

The other ordination platform for women, unshared by men, is the 'trainee' (*sikkhamānā*). This is defined as 'training for two years in the six rules'. We have deeply researched this aspect of the bhikkhuni Vinaya, and my personal conclusion is that there are so many severe textual problems that it is not possible to work out with a reasonable degree of certainty how it may have been practised. It seems probable to me that the *sikkhamānā* training was originally intended for teenage girls, and only at a later date was it taken to be normative for all candidates. While some communities do practice the *sikkhamānā* training and find it to be beneficial, I believe that the level of uncertainty is such that the whole procedure cannot be regarded as normative.

It must also be said that the idea that women need to undergo a different and more rigorous training than men is by its very nature sexist. Discrimination has been shown by countless empirical studies to be inherently harmful. According to Buddhist ethics, what leads to harm is *akusala*, and in my view this is sufficient reason to conclude that such a training could not have been intended by the Buddha in this way. Buddhaghosa comments that the *sikkhamānā* training is required for all women 'because women are naturally wanton' (*mātuḡāmo nāma lolo hoti*), which proves that it was explicitly interpreted by the tradition in a sexist way. This does not mean that the *sikkhamānā* idea was sexist from its inception. There may be other reasons: for example, it could have been an 'affirmative action' provision for a time when women's education was unavailable in the society generally, enabling young women to benefit from a higher training at an earlier age. Or it could have been introduced in the bhikkhuni community simply because of the particular background and experience that the nuns brought, perhaps from the Jains, and the difference from the bhikkhu system is entirely accidental, with no particular gender significance.

Contemporary practice

So much for the Vinaya. In the present day ordination is done in diverse ways, and is pursued very

differently in different places. In most Theravada traditions, bhikkhu ordination is done quickly, with little or no preliminary training. The candidate will do the ceremonies of taking the eight precepts as an *anāgārikā*, and then the ten precepts as a novice, and on the same day or shortly afterwards, will proceed to take full ordination. After their ordination, there is some expectation that the new monk will take some education in Buddhism, but this is far from guaranteed, and many monks have, in fact, little or no serious knowledge of Buddhism. If they ordain in a good tradition, however, there will be teaching, support for meditation, and so on. This situation contrasts greatly with the conditions in many of the East Asian traditions, where new monastics are expected to pursue several years of intense study after their ordination, or even before they are accepted for full ordination.

In the case of bhikkhunis, there is no agreement as to whether the *sikkhamānā* period is mandatory; some monasteries will do it, others will not. Some of the traditions require instead a two year period as a *sāmaṇerī*. This seems to be derived from a particular interpretation of the *sikkhamānā* training: apparently, some of the Sri Lankan elders have argued that, since the *sikkhamānā* has only six precepts, while the *sāmaṇerī* has ten, the *sāmaṇerī* stage is a higher ordination platform and two years as a *sāmaṇerī* supersedes the two years as a *sikkhamānā*. I disagree with this interpretation. It is clear from many contexts in the Pali and other Vinayas that the *sikkhamānā* was a higher ordination platform than the *sāmaṇerī*. Why then does the *sikkhamānā* have fewer precepts? The conventional explanation is that they are expected to hold them without breaking for their entire two year period. Thus the precepts are less, but the degree of strictness is higher. I must admit to a degree of scepticism as to this explanation; it sounds suspiciously *post hoc*. Von Hinuber has suggested that the *sikkhamānā* training was introduced into the Buddhist world by ex-Jain nuns, and was an import from the Jain Vinaya that simply does not mesh all that well with the Buddhist system. I find this explanation more convincing, as it is simple, historically plausible, and explains a whole host of problems. In the light of this hypothesis, we may be simply wasting our time in trying to find complete harmony between the *sikkhamānā* training and the rest of the Vinaya. It is quite plausible, and in view of the disparities between the Vinayas, even probable that there never was one universally accepted system of ordination, and that the discrepancies in the existing Vinayas simply reflect the diversity that was ancient Indian Buddhism.

In any case, I am certain that the *sāmaṇerī* stage was not in any sense intended as a replacement for the two year *sikkhamānā* training. If monasteries decide to do this as a matter of policy, this is simply a part of the natural variation in approaches to training which always has, and always will be, a part of Buddhism. In the Saccavibhaṅga Sutta (MN 141), the Buddha states:

Cultivate the friendship of Sāriputta and Moggallāna, monks, associate with Sāriputta and Moggallāna. They are wise and helpful to their companions in the holy life. Sāriputta is like a mother; Moggallāna is like a nurse. Sāriputta trains others in the fruit of stream-entry; Moggallāna for the supreme goal.

We should praise and encourage a healthy level of diversity, for it is a simple fact that the world we live in is diverse, that people are diverse, and that situations are diverse. If different monasteries choose to emphasize different qualities, and make different requirements, as long as these are within the spirit and letter of the Vinaya this should be supported, just as the Buddha praised both Sāriputta and Moggallāna, without insisting that one way was the right one. This diversity is explicitly acknowledged in the Vinaya when, for example, the Buddha readily made special allowances for monks living in the ‘outlying border districts’, including relaxing the requirements for ordination. When things are difficult and the Sangha is young, as is the case in Australia, we should follow this example and go out of our way to enable the young Sangha to flourish and grow in its own good time, and in its own way.

Ordaining in the West

Another consideration that is of primary importance is the nature of the people who come to Buddhism. This is something I have considerable experience in, as I have ordained and trained almost exclusively in

monasteries that were set up by and for English-speaking monastics. Since coming to Santi, there has been a steady stream of applicants for ordination, and we have successfully ordained and trained several bhikkhus. In the past three years or so, there have been around 15 applications or serious expressions of interest in bhikkhuni ordination.

Our candidates are of varying ages, typically have a high level University education (unlike myself!), are motivated, independent-minded, and like to think for themselves. They are Westerners, or have lived in Western countries for many years. They are highly aware of the painful nature of gender discrimination in Buddhism, and yet retain faith in the holy life: this itself is, for me, always a remarkable thing. Western monastic candidates – and I include myself – will not tolerate the more regimented and constrained environment that is often found in training monasteries, especially in East Asia. This is, I believe, one of the reasons why the Thai forest tradition in particular has been a successful model for the West, as it is characterized by a relaxed ease and simplicity in externals, focussing on the inner qualities.

The teacher

That's me. I've been ordained as a bhikkhu since 1994, and trained originally at Wat Pa Nanachat, the forest monastery in Thailand for English-speaking monks. There I received a good grounding in monastic lifestyle and decorum, and the basics of Dhamma, from my teachers at the time, Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Jayasaro. My main meditation teacher has been Ajahn Maha Chatchai in Bangkok. I had a short but lovely visit to him recently, and we were visited by a *sāmaṇerī*; I was surprised and delighted when Ajahn Maha Chatchai, commenting on my support for nuns, said: 'That's because Sujato is so even-minded and has no discrimination.' But my main teacher for the past ten years or more has been Ajahn Brahm. I stayed with him for three years, and continue to maintain a close relationship. I have taken the role of senior monk leading a community of monks, and sometimes nuns, for the past seven vassas.

The two mainstays of my own practice have always been meditation and study of the Suttas. So these are the primary emphases at Santi FM, although I strongly believe that individual differences should be respected, and that there is no point in trying to force everyone into the same Procrustean bed. I am quite confident in my ability to lead the community in these matters. I have a strong personal commitment to this monastery, and limit my travel to around one month per year so that I can spend time here. I saw at Wat Pa Nanachat the unfortunate situation where the abbot simply didn't really want to be there. So I have made it my first priority to develop and run Santi FM in a way that I am happy with, so that I can live here and develop in my own practice.

The experience of being an abbot has been difficult, but genuinely rewarding, and it continues to be so. It forces me to go into areas I would not go by myself, and gives me the gratification of being able to help many people along the path. Since going down the path of supporting bhikkhuni ordination, I have been alternately inspired and disappointed by the attitudes and emotions this arouses; but for me it has become an intrinsic part of my journey. Even in the past vassa, I felt a substantial shift in my attitudes, an increased capacity both for empathy and for boundaries. I am looking forward to continued growth together with my wonderful sisters in the Dhamma.

The place

Santi Forest Monastery has been a viable entity for the past five years. It has not been easy, we have had to build up a support community from scratch. But the place is extraordinary, and plays no small part in encouraging people to stay here and enjoy solitude, especially the young.

We have both monks and nuns living here. This was an experiment, as I have not lived in a mixed community before. But I have found it to be extremely beneficial and rewarding, and I think both communities have grown because of it. At Santi, the bhikkhu community entirely lacks the sometimes juvenile attitudes towards women that prevail all too easily in all-male communities. Heartfelt respect and appreciation are the norm. As time goes on and the bhikkhuni community finds its feet, we will develop the monastery so that the two communities will have more autonomy, and will be able to make decisions

independently. But we hope to never lose the connection, or to go back to a world where friendship is determined by gender.

I have made it clear to all that the bhikkhuni community is the first priority, and we will make land and buildings here available for the nuns' use as they need it. Eventually, we plan to assign at least half of our plot of land for the bhikkhunis to live and practice. But I will always be here to offer help when it is needed.

A word of caution

It is absolutely crucial that we do not make excessive demands or place unrealistic expectations on the bhikkhuni candidates. This is, apart from anything else, sexist, as there is no shortage of monks with little or no genuine spiritual aspiration at all who manage to remain in robes. If we make criteria for bhikkhunis that are in excess of those that have been practised for monks, the candidates will, quite rightly, see this as just more discrimination. It also increases the pressure on the nuns, both inner and outer, and does not respect their own sense of judgement and maturity. Young nuns are young nuns, and like young monks they need their time to grow into the robes, to make their own mistakes, to find their own path. We must learn to see them as normal, as people who just want to practice Dhamma.

It is not the case that stricter is better. Appropriate is better. And that is a constantly changing dynamic, not a fixed formula. Western candidates are often relatively weak in faith; or rather, their faith must come through constant nurturing and inquiry, rather than being simply assumed. Again, the Vinaya precedent applied by the Buddha in his wisdom was that if a monastic is weak in faith, newly ordained, then the Sangha should be gentle and not harsh on them, encouraging their good qualities, not being quick to reprimand them for their faults. For Western monastics, growth in faith comes from providing a container for them to inquire, to study, and to meditate. It is a demanding job, but an extremely rewarding one, for a teacher to summon up the courage to allow challenges and questions, to support a diversity of views, and to encourage shared responsibility and decision making.

Things are strong at Santi. We have good teachings, good support, a suitable environment, and highly intelligent, talented, and motivated candidates for bhikkhuni ordination. The standard of the candidates we have been seeing is, quite frankly, far better than any group of monk candidates I have ever seen. With tenderness, time, and encouragement the bhikkhuni Sangha of Santi Monastery will become a thing of rare beauty.