



*“More and more, the Path is just the  
simple being here and now, being with  
the way things are.”*

AJAHN SUMEDHO

# Foreword

by Ajahn Sumedho

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With the completion and dedication of the Temple and Cloister at Amaravati, I notice that I have been spending quite a bit of time during this past year looking back over the last twenty years or so; over these years of my own life and the life of the Sangha here in the West.

I remember as a young monk, living with Ajahn Chah at Wat Pah Pong in Thailand, having what felt like a fairly clear idea of what my life as a *bhikkhu* would be like, how it would evolve. Looking back now, I can only say how astonished I am at life's ability to astonish! I could never have imagined the way things have developed and are developing still.

Of all the many surprises, none perhaps is greater or richer than to have witnessed and participated in the inception, growth and maturation of the Order of Siladhara, the Nuns' Sangha. It would be tempting in writing this to be revisionist, to suggest that the Nuns' Community emerged as part of some grand and sober plan for the Western Sangha. To do so would not, however, do justice to the way things have really been in all their haphazard glory.

Having had no particular previous experience

of leading groups of people. I must, I think have, inherited aspects of my own 'leadership style' from Luang Por Chah. He would always point out how senseless it is to try to control events according to one's designs, since in fact things just take their natural course in accordance with causes and conditions. As participants in any process, our job is to respond suitably to conditions but, as much as possible, to stay 'out of the way.' This, in many ways, is how it has been in this case.

Except for the short space of time when we (the first monks) lived in London, the story of the Western Sangha is really about both the monks and the nuns. I remember not having been in residence in Chithurst Monastery for very long before the first women, the women who would be the pioneers — the 'Founding Mothers', if you like — of the Nuns' Order also arrived. It was Sister Rocana and Sister Candasiri who were the very first, soon joined by Sister Sundara and Sister Thanissara.

Now as I look back, I see that it is a tribute to the resilience and the faith of these first few that the Order of Nuns survived even its earliest step. Conditions at Chithurst were nothing if not basic, and practice was really little more than just surviving day to day.

I never had the slightest doubt as to the sincerity of these women but I never, for one moment, imagined that an Order of Nuns was what was coming into being. I was very happy to be in a position to provide them with a place to live and some basic instruction in the

*samana* life, but beyond that I had no real idea what was transpiring — I don't think any of us did. I sometimes wonder what would have happened, whether we would have gone ahead in the same way, if we had known what uncertainties lay ahead. When I consider all the various conditions that had a bearing on this process, I am amazed, truly, that it came about at all.

There we were, ourselves relatively new transplants from Thailand, trying to see whether it was possible to live the mendicant life at all in the West. Our heritage was itself extremely conservative and it offered absolutely no precedent or guidance in the matter of a training for women in the Holy Life. These, and my own native caution might well, in retrospect, have added up to a sort of fatal inertia. However, I finally saw that a much more definite form, a clearer training, was needed in order for these anagarikas to really make sense of and derive full benefit from living the monastic life. It was this that led, in August of 1983, to the ordination of the first four nuns — to the formation of the Order of Siladhara.

It was also around this time that I decided that the nuns, whose numbers were beginning to grow, should move from Chithurst to Amaravati. In fact one of the reasons for the establishing of Amaravati was to provide a place for the nuns to live and train. What was needed too was a more formal structure for training and this was where — much to his surprise, I imagine, but also to his eternal credit — Ajahn Sucitto stepped in.

Various aspects of that time are still very vivid in my memory. I remember well my own sense of upheaval and sorrow at leaving Chithurst. I remember Ajahn Sucitto's continuing mentoring of the nuns as, over a number of years, he helped them in establishing themselves within their own structures and training. I remember Sister Uppala's arrival — the demands she placed on the other women — and I remember her death. I remember often having no real idea of what I could or should do to support the Nuns' Community, and I remember also some quite strong feelings of resentment at the sense of uncertainty that seemed to accompany this slow, and often agonizing, evolution of a unified and organized Order of Nuns.

Although there are somewhat painful memories of this time of evolution, it is quite clear to me now that the result is good. It is also clear to me that everything that the nuns now have in terms of status, recognition and respect has, in a very real sense, been earned and hard earned at that

At the risk of sounding facile, I think that one of the key things that I did not appreciate at the time was that there are differences between men and women. It was not obvious to me that the training of nuns requires a very different mix of elements, different skills and a different emphasis, than the training of monks. Although the results that can come from this way of practice are similar in terms of insight and spaciousness of heart, the means necessarily varies.

Over the past years, the community of nuns has become increasingly stable and self-reliant. The presence of Elder Nuns — home-grown as it were — has, I am quite sure, been instrumental in this process. It is a great joy to me to witness this continuing unfolding and to see the fruits — an ever-increasing sense of autonomy and enjoyment. I have felt inspired and encouraged too by other signs of maturity, such as the steady increase in confidence in the way the nuns receive and train their novices and junior nuns and the development of links with other communities, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist.

Overall, I am very glad to have been involved with the development of the Order of Siladhara; it has been a rich source of reflection and learning. It is a great pleasure to write a foreword to this collection of talks and teachings — may it be an encouragement and blessing to all who read it.

*~ Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, June, 2000/2543*