

Introduction

by Thanissara

Thanissara was one of the first four nuns. She spent twelve years living in community at Chithurst and Amaravati until her return to lay life in 1991.

This collection of Dhamma reflections offered by the Forest Sangha Nuns' community introduces us, as readers, to a unique perspective which, like a soothing balm, calms, uplifts and enlightens. It celebrates the ability of women to use an ancient monastic system and a timeless teaching in a way that is both graceful and also relevant to each one of us.

A full appreciation of both the historical and contemporary context of the nun's life gives a better understanding of the ground from which these talks have arisen, but this is an intricate and complex subject. However, even a small glimpse heightens a sense of respect for the dedication of each nun, and the somewhat less visible lineage of nuns dating right back to the time of the Buddha.

Although a tradition of women seekers goes far back into the mists of time it is rare to have access to their wisdom and their stories, so it is all the more heartening that this book is so generously made available to us. What I find especially valuable about these teachings

is that they draw on subtle and broad aspects of the Buddha's instruction in ways that are comprehensive, fresh, honest and open. We see the transcendent threaded with the humane. We hear the voice of inspiration, struggle and humour through women who have undertaken a focused and disciplined life of renunciation.

I remember that it was late afternoon on 28th October, 1979. There was an autumn chill in the air. The four of us were busily sewing white robes, while practising chanting, putting finishing touches in preparation for the unprecedented precept ceremony (the first Theravadan ordination of Western Women on British soil), due to take place that evening. There was good humour among us as we shared both the apprehension and enthusiasm that accompanied this move from each of our very different lives into the unknown terrain of monasticism. Over the following years there were also difficulties and conflicts; however, beneath such passing mind states there grew enormous camaraderie, mutual caring and deep affection.

We began our monastic life in a small cottage near the run-down Victorian house which was slowly being transformed into Chithurst Monastery. For several years the cottage had no electricity and very little heating. I remember it was very cold, and the discipline was rigorous. Fortunately, we had so much inspiration and good cheer that it more than compensated for those basic living conditions. For the first six months or so of our life in robes we hadn't the courage to completely

shave our heads, so instead reduced our hairstyles to a rather radical-looking stubble.

We had no elder nuns to follow and so slowly, as idealistic women, we came to the painful understanding that monastic life is never the perfect life that the mind projects. Rather, it is a carefully honed vehicle for the contemplation of *dukkha* (suffering) and the realization of its cessation — sometimes called ‘The Heart’s Release.’ While serving the individual, it also helps others, through maintaining a way of life within which the Buddha’s Path of Awakening is demonstrated and encouraged.

Ajahn Chah compared the code of monastic discipline (*vinaya*), which gives shape and form to the monastic life, to the peel of a fruit. As the peel preserves the fruit, so the *vinaya* discipline preserves and holds the teachings, the essence of the Dhamma. To just chew the peel is a bitter experience, while tasting the heart of the fruit reveals subtle and profound insights that can nourish our spiritual roots. To be lived well, monastic life requires a balance between impeccable adherence to the *vinaya* form and an inner transcendence of that form.

It soon became clear that the place of nuns within the form and tradition we had inherited was somewhat indistinct and ambiguous. In Thailand, many women become nuns to make merit — which leads them to take on duties of service to the monastery and the Sangha. They are rarely acknowledged as respected practitioners and teachers in their own right. Also, generally speaking,

very little of nuns' experience has been recorded or even talked about — compared with the reverence duly shown towards attained and respected monks. This invisibility of nuns within the historic movement of Buddhism is perhaps partly due to the loss of the Theravadan nuns' ordination lineage around the 11th century in Sri Lanka; it has also resulted in a lack of strong role models for present day women. Such a complex historical legacy initially placed a question mark over the authenticity and validity of our place within the Order.

When we first began our training it was a step in the dark for everyone. There was no model that could be followed easily. Ajahn Sumedho, our abbot and teacher, not only had no experience of training nuns, he also had had little contact with women during his previous ten years in Thailand. Yet following that first ordination in 1979, many women began requesting ordination and living for periods of time within the monastic discipline. Many more have lived closely to the nuns as lay followers.

Within the greater context of the Teaching and Way of Practice, which generate an equality and mutual respect, there is an on-going conversation around the place of women within the monastic hierarchy. In the midst of this, the nuns have often experienced an ironic mixture of profound gratitude at having the opportunity to live such a pure life, and yet also the pain and confusion arising from their ambivalent place within the Tradition. To negotiate this has never been comfort-

able or easy, as the nuns have often been caught between the conservatism of the Tradition's ancient roots and the more contemporary views of Western feminism.

Given the tensions and strength of views present at the time, it was a very courageous move when, in 1983, Ajahn Sumedho offered the first four nuns the Ten Precept Ordination (*pabbajja*). This gave us a clearer place within the monastic life and the beginnings of a comprehensive training. With brown robes and almsbowl (hallowed symbols of the *samana* life) we were instated as fully-fledged alms mendicants. This was significant, as it formally shifted our community into a more prominent role, and towards something that was beginning to resemble the original Nuns' Order at the time of the Buddha.

This on-going evolution and empowering of the nuns' situation has been made possible through the wise encouragement of Ajahn Sumedho. He has always maintained a strong focus on Dhamma in offering support for women practitioners, wary of any tendency for the nuns' position to be hijacked into a political arena.

Ajahn Sucitto also played a very significant part in the formation of the Nuns' Order. Over a period of many years he tirelessly worked alongside the nuns fashioning an extensive training, which drew on the early Bhikkhuni Vinaya, fleshing out the Ten Precepts to one hundred and twenty training rules and observances. This role, taken by a senior and respected monk, was priceless, and essential for furthering the validation of the

nuns' place within the lineage. Apparently, such a difficult task was allocated to Ajahn Sucitto by Ajahn Sumedho as he was considered to be a monk able to stay steady in the midst of nuns' tears!

There has been much water under the bridge since those early beginnings and the Nuns' Order continues to develop within a dynamic process, never settling for a static conclusion. Each stage of its growth has entailed tremendous effort and has required a willingness to bear with much struggle and uncertainty. The central practice of relinquishing personal desires and agendas has allowed the Order to emerge from a profound trust in the Way of Dhamma. This, in its turn, has given rise to one of the lovely hallmarks of monastic life — a wonderful deep joy and freedom that comes from a life of renunciation. That many women have had the precious opportunity to touch into this is entirely due to the *paramita* of the Buddha, and of the many generations of practitioners from Asia who have passed down their blessings to us.

It is now possible in the West for women to commit to a life of contemplation and mendicancy. This also brings tangible benefits for the greater society as nuns share their practice as teachers, counsellors and holders of sacred space.

After these years — in spite of some of the inevitable bitterness experienced from chewing on the peel of the monastic form — we can clearly see in these Dhamma reflections that at the heart of monasticism

there are hidden jewels which reflect much wisdom for our modern life.

Now as we begin our own journey through the pages of this book, we each have an opportunity to share in the struggles, insights and joys of the nuns. We also have an opportunity to receive the very special gift of hearing a voice that emerges from the mysterious, fiery and yet cool crucible that a nun's life offers.

~ Dharmagiri, South Africa, May 2001.