

Women in Brown: a short history of the order of *sīladharā*, nuns of the English Forest Sangha, Part Two

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ABSTRACT: This history of the unique community of Theravāda nuns known as *sīladharā*, based at Amaravati and Chithurst Buddhist monasteries is presented in two parts. The history from its inception in the late 1970s until the years 2000 appeared in *Buddhist Studies Review* 23(1). This second part gives the most recent developments in the order, from 2000 to the present day, plus reflections on the future. The research is based on personal interview with founding members of the order as well as email, telephone and written communications with nuns past and present. It considers the implications of the revived *bhikkhunī* ordination for the *sīladharā* and addresses the possibilities for the future. It describes the founding of a parallel order of Theravāda nuns in Western Australia, with some significant differences to the UK nuns. It concludes that in attempting a form of monasticism for women, giving all the advantages of renunciation but at the same time negotiating the difficult synthesis of Western expectations, traditional Theravāda cultural norms and the monastic rule itself, it has largely succeeded.

2000 TO THE PRESENT DAY

Following a period when there were three communities of nuns, the *sīladharā* have, since 2000, again been largely concentrated in the two communities of Amaravati and Cittaviveka. Ajahn Sucitto has described Amaravati as being like the nerve centre of the organisation and Chithurst as a limb.¹ Whilst there have been no dramatic changes, the communities of nuns continue to develop, with small but significant changes in their roles and in their relationship with both the *bhikkhu saṅgha* and the lay communities.

Abhayagiri

For a brief period, there were *sīladharā* at Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, a sister monastery of Amaravati established in Redwood Valley, California, in 1995,

1. Interview of 3 November 2004.

following visits to the area by Ajahn Sumedho from the early 1980s onwards. Abhayagiri had never been envisioned as a community of both monks and nuns, but Ajahn Jitindriyā had been offered a place to undertake a solitary retreat there. She, Ajahn Sundarā and later one other nun, spent some time there from 2000 onwards. There was a great deal of interest and support from the lay community for the nuns, and they had a full programme of teaching, not only in California but at other meditation centres in America. However, confusion about the nuns' position gradually arose. The monastery was not designed physically to accommodate nuns, and therefore their presence, for example in the office where the accommodation was very limited, made some of the monks feel uncomfortable, as it sometimes entailed a compromise of their *vinaya* standards. It has also been noted that some of the senior monks were not completely supportive of the nuns' presence. This could be put down to a training in Thailand where there was little chance to adapt to the presence of women; or simply a very orthodox and traditional viewpoint. Whatever the motivation or reasoning behind it, the nuns began to feel increasingly ill at ease.

A couple of devoted lay supporters, who fell ill and died within a short time of each other, had left property adjacent to the monastery as a legacy for use of the *saṅgha*, with a suggestion that it be used for nuns. Ajahn Jitindriyā was keen to form the nucleus of a women's community there, but the ambiguity of feeling amongst the resident monks, coupled with the earlier problem of resources which had affected the nuns' community in Devon, (simply put, insufficient numbers of available nuns and *anaṅārikās*) meant that this project did not succeed. The nuns were advised that they would have to leave the monastery by a certain date in 2003. This was a somewhat unhappy interlude with misunderstandings and hurt on both sides. However, it typifies some of the problems that the *śīladharā* face – ingrained attitudes, discomfort, inadequate facilities and provisions, and an inability through circumstance to fulfil the desires for teaching of significant numbers of lay people. American women associated with Abhayagiri who wish to undertake monastic training have to travel to the UK to do so.²

A review of the vinaya

One important project that the *śīladharā* have undertaken was a thorough review of their *vinaya* (using the term in its widest sense to denote monastic discipline). This may well in part have been inspired by the approval of the Elders' Council, which in 1997 had convened and allowed the *garudhammas* to be informally laid

2. As of March 2005, a trust is being established in the USA, quite distinct from Abhayagiri, 'to support the nuns from Amaravati (and related sanghas) to come to America. We hope to offer a place for them to live and for nuns to ordain in America when the time is right and they are ready. In the meantime, the trust will help to arrange for them to be here more often – to sponsor their travels and teaching in America and to allow for them to be on retreat'. E-mail from Jill Boone.

aside for the purposes of facilitating the nuns' presence at Hartridge.³ At the time, the nuns were given leave 'to review the code of relationship between the orders of monks and nuns and possibly to come up with a new draft that would allow more room to move',⁴ and subsequently they undertook this more wide ranging review of their rules, at Hartridge in 1998.

The review made a number of recommendations which have remained confidential, as their implementation has not gone ahead. To proceed would have required a lengthy and perhaps difficult procedure of presenting the findings and recommendation to both the *bhikkhu saṅgha* and to the Elders' Council, for discussion and approval. In normal circumstances the nuns would have begun this process, although not all of the nuns agreed as to the degree of importance of the proposed changes. However, the possibility of a more fundamental change, that is *bhikkhunī* ordination, whilst slim, means that the nuns have been reluctant to take the trouble to implement something that might be rendered superfluous. The issue of *bhikkhunī* ordination, its possibility, desirability and relevance to the *sīladharā* is considered later.

Recent years have seen certain gradual changes in the public profile of the *sīladharā*. In the absence of Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Candasirī has occasionally been the preceptor for *anagārikā* ordinations, a role that in the early years would have seemed unthinkable. At Amaravati, the monks and nuns share equally the duty of leading the evening *pūjā*. However, a nun still would not do be asked to officiate at the chanting at the mealtime at a large weekend gathering at Amaravati, where many lay people and particularly members of the Thai community, are present. This may largely be due to a wish not to offend or alienate members of the Thai community for whom the position of women culturally is traditionally a subordinate one. It is however possible to discern a gradual change in the way that the nuns are perceived amongst the Asian lay community; their presence and participation is now normal and the respect and consideration shown to them is increasing.⁵

This is noticeable in the offerings made at the annual *Kaṭhina* ceremony organised by lay supporters, at which robe cloth and other requisites are offered. The balance of offerings is still very much weighted towards the *bhikkhu saṅgha*, but it is gradually changing. In the early years, the nuns would be barely considered but now the ceremony has evolved to allow them too to receive offerings, in a formal way.

For many years, members of the order of *sīladharā* have been leading retreats,

3. See Part I of this paper.

4. E-mail communication from Jitindriyā, 12 February 2005: 'It was extensively reviewed, and certain rules and observances were noted for re-writing/re-defining and/or re-categorising. ... consequently, (due to many duties and responsibilities of the nuns, and several senior nuns moving to other situations around the world) no-one actually had time to write up an official proposal for the Elders Council (both monks and nuns) to review and sanction'.

5. 'For me there has been a slow but significant change in how the Asian lay community relates to us, over the last decade or so. Now the elders of their communities will bring offerings for us, and refer to us ... All around, it's clear our "position" is something in evolution - largely a natural one'. Ajahn Thāniyā, letter January 2005.

with freedom to teach and lead unsupervised. This freedom of the teacher is something that we in the West might well take for granted. However, in the traditional Asian form which gave birth to the English Forest Sangha, the place of a woman as a teacher of both men and women in such circumstances is little short of revolutionary. This is one aspect of the freedom that the *sīladharā* have in contrast to the life of their sisters, the white-robed *mae-ji* of Thailand.

Softly, softly

Ajahn Candasirī maintains that the ‘softly, softly’ approach that the nuns have taken over the years has borne fruit:

I do very much have a sense of gratitude, appreciation, and I’m very unwilling to force things or to push things through in a way that might seem abusive ... I’m glad that Ajahn Sumedho has always resisted that kind of pressure. I feel that the things that we have been given have come because of a recognition that we were ready, that we’ve deserved it, we’ve earned it. That gives a ... good foundation. So it’s not that people have put their heads together and said, how can we make the monks and nuns equal, we must have equality, the nuns should be like this. It’s ... been quite a painstaking, quite a painful process sometimes, but very much a patient step by step clearing the way.⁶

And in Ajahn Thānīyā’s words:

Now we seem to be moving to the end of an adolescent process, able to stand in our own spaces as adults. I see this in myself and in the nuns’ community as a whole organism. It has been a case of readiness; there are all the ideals of us being independent, autonomous, etc but in reality we have needed time to mature into that.⁷

In the years since 2000, numbers of *sīladharā* have fluctuated and nuns have come and gone, as is normal in any group. At the turn of the century and the end of the time of Hartridge as a nuns’ *vihāra*, many of the more senior nuns were away practising in different ways, on solitary retreat or undertaking intensive meditation practice or teaching elsewhere. Their gradual return has led to a more balanced community in terms of seniority.

In the past, the community evolved a way of managing their affairs in which all members of the community were involved in decision making. Whilst this was inclusive, it also led to unnecessarily lengthy meetings. The nuns are currently therefore reorganising the way they run their affairs, and will be allocating more specific responsibilities, although this has not been finalised at the time of writing.

6. Ajahn Candasirī, interview of 24 November 2004.

7. Ajahn Thānīyā, letter of January 2005.

Over the years the monks and nuns have begun to learn from the different ways of relating that men and women have. The monks have learned to explore their feelings a little more, and practise conflict resolution and discussion. The nuns are learning to streamline their affairs, and be efficient whilst still manifesting the softness and gentleness that they value. In recent years both monks' and nuns' communities have benefited from psychotherapeutic work with the Karuna Institute (see part one of this article) and the nuns have introduced 'heart meetings'. These are a chance for *sīladharā* (*anaḡārikā*⁸ have their own meetings) to express any difficulties and problems in a supportive atmosphere, conducive to conflict resolution and open communication. One mark of the increased understanding between them is the fact that those members of the community who were at Hartridge in its last few months for nuns, and who had such difficulty in getting along, are now able to discuss much of what happened without bitterness and with an honest and open recognition of the problems.

*Dhammasara Nuns' Monastery*⁹

A useful sidelight on the community of *sīladharā* in the UK is given by examining the development of a nuns' community in Western Australia. A monastery for monks was founded in Western Australia in 1983, Bodhinyāna.¹⁰ It is supported by the Buddhist Society of Western Australia (BSWA). In the mid-1990s, its abbot and the BSWA began actively seeking to establish a centre for renunciant women. This has gradually emerged with the purchase in 1998 of a considerable acreage at Gidgegannup, some 100 kilometres from Bodhinyāna. Ajahn Brahmavamso, abbot of Bodhinyāna, invited an Australian nun, Ajahn Sister Vāyāmā, ordained and trained in Sri Lanka under Ayya Khema, to be the community's founding abbot. The monastery, now known as Dhammasara Nuns' Monastery,¹¹ is still small, with just three resident nuns as well as *anaḡārikā*. The community observes ten precepts but their situation differs from that of the *sīladharā*. Here is Ajahn Vāyāmā's description of the development and current state of the monastery:

The Sangha of nuns at Dhammasara keep the ten precepts and is completely dependent on lay supporters for the provision of their material needs of food, shelter, robes and medicines. The way these are acquired from the lay supporters follows the guidelines laid down by the Buddha in the Vinaya for bhikkhus and bhikkhunis.

8. The term is both singular and plural, as is *sīladhārā*.

9. These usually masculine terms (Monastery, Abbot) are consciously being used in relation to the nuns' community here, I presume to stress the similarities between those who have 'gone forth' rather than highlighting the difference in gender.

10. Like Cittaviveka and Amaravati, it is in the lineage of Ajahn Chah and a branch of Wat Pah Nana-chat, the International Forest Monastery in Thailand but is not directly related to Amaravati. Its website can be found at www.bswa.org/modules/articles/article.php?id=2

11. The nuns' monastery has web pages at www.bswa.org/modules/articles/article.php?id=5

The nuns' community here takes the eight defeat offences of the *bhikkhuni patimokkha* as the standard of behaviour that must not be done if one wishes to retain the status of a nun. The community also trains in the 75 *sekhiya* rules.

The training here is still evolving and has not reached its final form yet.

Women who wish to ordain as a ten precept nun must live in the monastery keeping eight precepts for two years before they can request ordination. The candidates or *anagarikas*, live in the monastery and train under my direction. Before being accepted for ordination their request has to be agreed to by the other resident nuns. At present two women so far have completed the two years training and have been ordained as ten precept nuns.

At the ordination ceremony the candidate requests the going forth from home into homelessness from Ajahn Brahmavamso. He is the spiritual director of the Buddhist Society of WA [Western Australia] under whose auspices Dhammasara Nuns' Monastery has been developed and is maintained. The candidate requests the ten precepts from me.

... Dhammasara is being developed in such a way that it functions autonomously and independently of the *Bhikkhu Sangha* at Bodhinyana Monastery. However, on meeting, our nuns accord respect to *bhikkhus* as seniors, and defer to them in seating arrangements and in order of standing in the almsround.

The project has been established for six years, but permanent accommodation was not completed till 2001. Our first nuns' ordination took place in 2003 and our second this year. Though much has been accomplished in a relatively short time, we are still a very young *Sangha* and the form and training is still evolving. What we have at the moment is conducive to practising for the attainment of *Nibbana*, the goal of the monastic life. What may develop in the future remains to be seen.¹²

It will be noted that there are significant differences between the *śīladharā* and the Western Australian nuns. Whilst there are differences of training and number of rules, the most significant difference is the fact of their independence from the *bhikkhu saṅgha*. This is an express wish on the part of Ajahn Brahmavamso to keep things as separate as possible. In the early days of *Bodhinyāna*, under its first abbot, there were several women who came to stay as white-robed eight-precept nuns. Ajahn Brahmavamso describes them as 'devoted Theravada Buddhists and gifted meditators'¹³ but their attempt to lead a renunciant life was not ultimately successful, and all the women left. Ajahn Brahmavamso puts this down to 'inability of the nuns to influence their lifestyle due to the hierarchy [and] their

12. Ajahn Vāyāmā: letter of 28 December 2004.

13. Ajahn Brahmavamso: letter of 28 November 2004.

loneliness due to the monastic separation of the genders'.¹⁴ The difficulties caused to both monks and nuns by these ambivalences led the monks to conclude that 'the presence of nuns in a male monastic community, was one problem too many at such an early stage of development'¹⁵. This is not to say that the community was anti-women – some may have been, but it is clear from Ajahn Brahmavamso that the leadership of the community was keen to find a way for women to pursue a monastic life. In the early days of the monastery, however, they recognised that they themselves were struggling to survive and therefore not ready to support such an undertaking.

It is these very difficulties in the early days that decided Ajahn Brahmavamso and the other monks so strongly in favour of independence for the nuns.

Once the male Sangha was seen to be viable, consideration could then be given to establishing opportunities for women. Because of past experiences, though, it was agreed to establish a nuns' monastery completely separate, both in location and in hierarchy, from the monks' monastery.

The idea of a nuns' monastery in Western Australia was proposed by me in an article in our society's July-Sept. 1995 newsletter. The article ended '... perhaps this (a nuns' monastery) is the way to go? Perhaps it is not? What do you think?' The response was so positive that we announced in our Jan-March 1996 newsletter that we had started a special fund and were accepting donations. The fund grew very slowly until an Australian father donated AUD 200,000 [currently about £80,000] in celebration of the birth of his first child, a daughter, in early 1998. With that donation in the bank, we searched for land in earnest and soon found the ideal site, a 583-acre block which we purchased at auction on 24th May 1998. When I announced the purchase at our regular gathering the following Friday evening, some 300 people meeting to hear a Dhamma talk erupted spontaneously in applause! Shortly after, in June 1998, we invited Sister Ajahn Vayama to take up residence in a caravan on the block as our new nuns' monastery's founding abbot.¹⁶

It is unusual to find such a willingness to grant women this degree of independence in support of their spiritual endeavours in such an otherwise orthodox tradition. There is no doubt that Ajahn Brahmavamso is a charismatic leader in his own right. The different (less traditionalist) cultural milieu in Australia may also have contributed to this quite striking innovation¹⁷. In addition, it might

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. According to Spuler (2002: 149), much Buddhism in Australia and New Zealand is demonstrating signs of 'adaptation to Western cultural values'. She states that this 'is making it [Buddhism] more acceptable to the mainstream'. I do not think that the innovative step the nuns of Western Australia have been able to take is symptomatic of such adaptation, for the form of training, whilst innovative in its freedom from supervision by monks, is in fact ultra-traditional.

be argued that Ajahn Brahmavamso is not limited in the same way that Ajahn Sumedho and the English Forest Sangha is sometimes perceived to be, by a need to avoid in any way offending the support of the Thai monastic leadership and the Thai community in the United Kingdom, despite also receiving support from the Thai and other Asian communities. He can rely on the already established seniority of the Western *Saṅgha* elsewhere. He was therefore free to insist on this separation:

From the very beginning, the time when the nuns' monastery was only an idea with little money in the bank, I resolved to keep the nuns' monastery in Western Australia totally independent of the monks' monastery. Some of my fellow monks and my lay supporters warned me that I would, inevitably, get involved. They were wrong. The nuns' monastery is effectively independent. It exists as a parallel community, not a subsidiary. All decisions in all matters are made by the nuns. I only give them advice when asked and that is very rare. I support them with encouragement, no more. It helps that this nuns' monastery is around 100km distance from our monks' monastery.¹⁸

Whilst the nuns' community at Gidgegannup is still very small and very young, and will no doubt suffer its own share of growing pains, so far it seems that they have found a way that women may concentrate on their own practice and live a fully-committed monastic life without any of the somewhat limiting and restrictive practices that the *śīladharā* are required to observe. They are fortunate to be well supported by lay people and receive ample requisites. Of course, the nuns of Western Australia will experience the same issues of identity and hierarchy in the wider Buddhist world that the *śīladharā* face, which we will look at below. For the moment, it is clear that their primary focus is on spiritual practice and such issues have not yet come to the forefront.

AN EYE TO THE FUTURE

What of the future for the *śīladharā*? Inevitably, the main question on the horizon is that of *bhikkhunī* ordination. Even those whose minds are not unduly exercised by the issue recognise that it is taking an ever larger profile in the Theravāda world: 'as the wave grows larger globally I feel it would be hard for us not to be picked up by it'.¹⁹ As mentioned in the first part of this paper, when Ajahn Sucitto was formulating the nuns' training, he was guided by both the *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī Vinaya*, as well as by the novice monks' training. His use of the *Vinaya* for *bhikkhunīs* was partly simple common sense – a tried and tested (if ancient) nuns' framework was already in existence and it was only sensible to draw on it – but

18. Ajahn Brahmavamso, letter of 28 November 2004.

19. Ajahn Thānīyā, letter of January 2005.

partly it was a pragmatic decision taken with an eye on the future. Ajahn Sucitto has said that he wished to ensure that any transition to full *bhikkhunī* ordination should be 'as seamless as possible'.²⁰ It is noteworthy that this was more than 20 years ago, and yet he viewed such a possibility as both real and desirable.

The issue of *bhikkhunī* ordination and its validity continues to be hotly debated within the Theravāda community worldwide, although there is insufficient space here to fully consider the wider issues.²¹ There have been increasing numbers of Theravādin *bhikkhunīs* from 1996 onwards, of many nationalities, including Sri Lankan, Nepalese, Thai, and American amongst others. Whilst at first these ordinations did not take place in traditionally Theravādin countries, both *sāmaṇerī* (novice) and higher, *bhikkhunī*, ordinations have now occurred in Sri Lanka, and *sāmaṇerī* ordinations have taken place in Thailand, although few in number.²² The ordinations are often of indigenous candidates, supported by progressive *bhikkhus* of the countries concerned, to mixed reaction. Liz Williams has said that many scholars (including Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, D. Amarasiri Weeraratne, Patagama Gnanarama and Elizabeth Harris) consider that 'reinstatement of the *bhikkhunī* ordination line would be legitimate'.²³

Whilst Ajahn Sucitto foresaw in the early days both the possibility and the desirability of the *sīladharā* taking on full *bhikkhunī* ordination, this was in fact a contentious issue early on and the overlap between the evolving form of the nuns' observances and that of the *bhikkhunīs* was viewed with disfavour by some.²⁴ The *sīladharā* were asked to drop the use of the term *saṅgha* and refer to themselves instead as an 'order', and they were in addition required to cease reciting the 75 *sekhiya*²⁵ rules as part of their fortnightly observances.²⁶ However, with the increasingly high profile of a reinstated Theravādin *bhikkhunī saṅgha* worldwide, and as the nuns' community grows in maturity, the matter is now much more pressing, and serious consideration of whether or not to pursue it seems unavoidable.

The first notable public acknowledgment that it was desirable to formally address the issue came in 2001, when Ajahn Brahmavamso tabled it for discus-

20. Interview of 3 November 2004

21. See for example Williams (2005).

22. There is an official decree in force prohibiting *bhikkhus* from giving ordination to women in Thailand, and therefore those involved have to be discreet. Information from Varaporn Cham-sanit, e-mail of 26 April 2005.

23. Williams (2005: 123–4) referring to Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

24. Interview with Ajahn Candasiṛī, 6 September 2004.

25. See the first part of this paper for an explanation of the *sekhiya* rules.

26. Over the years these rules have been modified and included, along with rules of training governing requisites and respectful conduct, in the overall recitation which now comprises some 120 rules and observances, recited in English. Ajahn Candasiṛī has said that there was much discussion and rewording and re-presenting to the *bhikkhu saṅgha*, until it was in an acceptable form to the nuns and also to the monks. In addition, it is notable that the term *saṅgha* has for some time been used publicly to describe the nuns' community, both informally and formally; see for example Ajahn Sumedho's preface to *Freeing the Heart* (2001:13) where he refers to 'the Nuns' Sangha'.

sion, at Amaravati, at the Western Abbots Meeting (that is to say, all of the abbots of the branch monasteries of the lineage of Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho in the UK, Switzerland, Italy, America, Australia and New Zealand). Whilst this was significant in itself, not much developed from that meeting. In a paper prepared for a meeting in 2004 (but not presented) by Ajahn Jitindriyā, she writes:

The topic [was] lightly touched upon in the Elders' meeting the following day [referring to the 2001 western abbots' Meeting]. Nothing of much consequence has happened since that initial and partial venture into the territory, nevertheless, this issue has quietly percolated away over the last few years and it seems the time has come again to bring it more fully into the community consciousness.²⁷

Although it is true as quoted above, that 'nothing much of consequence has happened since', the nuns themselves have kept abreast of the issues and given some consideration to what taking such a step would mean. More than one of the nuns commented to me that they have, over the years, evolved a good form of monastic training for women, one that is serious and highly respected.²⁸ It cannot therefore lightly be given up. As one nun summarised it, 'it seems romantically that it might be wonderful to bring back [full *bhikkhunī* ordination] – but it wouldn't be easy to keep the rules, and would they be helpful or relevant?'²⁹ This nun also pointed out that whilst many of the *bhikkhus'* rules handed down over the century have become meaningless, the rules that the *sīladharā* keep are relevant, and kept alive by the fact of their recitation in English.

The *sīladharā* themselves are divided over the issue of whether or not it would be beneficial to be full *bhikkhunīs*; whilst some consider that the benefits would be considerable, by no means all think so. Leaving aside the issue of obtaining the backing of the *bhikkhu saṅgha*, there are potentially crucial issues to resolve on a practical level. The *bhikkhu saṅgha* lives within a form that that has arguably been continuously 'inhabited' for approximately 25 centuries. It has been continuously evolving and although the 'letter of the law' has not been changed, the actual interpretation and way it is lived out has developed in an organic

27. Jitindriyā: *Discussion document for ECM [Elders' Community Meeting] November 2004*. This document was not submitted due to its author leaving the order.

28. 'I find that if we were *bhikkhunī*, where we stand, what our form is would be much clearer in the world. On the conventional ... relative level, clarity is very helpful. At present, once you move out of this community, you are seen as some odd entities. Most people have no idea who we are, even though I know that over the last twenty five years our particular style of training based on renunciation and living on alms has drawn to us a lot of respect. The fact that we don't fit in any traditional model though, puts [us] in some interesting predicaments. At a conference you could be one of the speakers and find yourself placed in order of "seniority" [seated] next to a woman ordained a few weeks earlier. It's not that one minds where one sits but one becomes aware of the awkwardness of our form'. (Ajahn Sundarā, interview of 24 November 2004, subsequently amended by her, 22 April 2005).

29. Sister Brahmavarā; group interview of 17 December 2004.

way, from the inside out, through centuries of experience.³⁰ Since the Theravādin *bhikkhunī* order died out³¹ in the 11 century,³² there has been no such living evolution, merely the set of 311 rules. These rules and of course the *garudhammas* raise some major question marks for any women, especially 21st-century women. The practical restrictions on the lives of the women trying to live by these rules are significant.³³

As modern Western women, trying to live the life of a nun in an ancient tradition and code, our predicament is not an easy one. Nor is it an easy matter to articulate the complexities and often painful paradoxes we find ourselves grappling with at times as a consequence ... As I see it, the challenge here is not so much a matter of authenticating the lineage and/or the technicalities of an ordination procedure, as I feel that if we wish to go there, (with *saṅgha* consensus) there will be a way. There is already much sound evidence available these days to support such a move. The more pertinent questions are really to do with 'What?' we would be undertaking and 'Why?' The main area of concern circles around the limitations placed on nuns by the eight Garudhammas and of course, Sanghadisesa III – the rule which seems to require a *bhikkhuni* to be virtually yoked to another *bhikkhuni* for the rest of her life, even whilst sleeping (when away from the monastery).³⁴

There are precedents for dealing with some of the more restrictive issues, by either textual support or practical accommodation. The *bhikkhu saṅgha* of Korea have carefully considered the rule in their *bhikkhuni Vinaya* that forbids nuns to travel alone, having assessed the situation in modern day Korea (the feasibility, safety and implications of women travelling alone) and have decreed that it is, for now, acceptable. Should circumstance in Korea change, they would be prepared to reinstate the necessity of keeping that rule.³⁵ Textual support for flexible interpretation comes from a Lokuttaravāda *Vinaya* discovered in Nepal:³⁶

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30. The *bhikkhus* too would have to readjust as their rule contains restrictions on dealing with *bhikkhunis* that have not been used for centuries.
 31. Of course the Chinese *bhikṣuṇī* order, originally instituted by Sri Lanka *bhikkhunis*, has continued to the present day and it is from here (through the auspices of Taiwanese and Korean *bhikṣuṇīs*) that the lineage has been revived.)
 32. In Sri Lanka – it has been said that the *bhikkhuni saṅgha* continued in Burma for another two centuries (Visvapani, 2002), but I have not so far seen evidence to support this.
 33. It is notable that in her otherwise comprehensive PhD thesis, which persuasively argues for the validity of *bhikkhuni* ordination and thoroughly recounts the current status worldwide of the revived lineage, Liz Williams does not give consideration to the practical implications of actually living the *bhikkhuni Vinaya*.
 34. *The Question of Bhikkhuni ordination*: unpublished document written by Ajahn Jitindriyā whilst at Abhayagiri in 2001.
 35. Interview with Jitindriyā, 28 January 2005.
 36. Article by Sujato Bhikkhu (known as Bhante Sujato), 'Full Acceptance' (2004).

It is a serious offence for a *bhikkhunī* to travel without another *bhikkhunī* as companion. But at least one *vinaya* – that of the Lokuttaravāda school preserved in Sanskrit and recently discovered in Nepal – adds the crucial exemption: there is no offence if the *bhikkhunī* is without lust. These variations might be interpreted in various ways, but they clearly show that such issues were addressed in ancient India, and that a degree of flexibility in practice and interpretation was accepted.³⁷

Varaporn Chamsanit has also addressed this issue in her excellent discussion of *bhikkhunī* ordination with regard to the situation in Thailand: *Settling the Debate on Bhikkhuni Ordination in Thailand – why is it difficult?* She describes two contrasting attitudes to *Vinaya*, one being where:

the letter of the *vinaya* ... takes precedence over all other concerns. In this notion, the text takes the position of the sacred ... In this approach, the text is also taken as secluded from the ephemeral social contexts, both at the time of its conception and in the present days. One can only study and carry out one's practice according to the rules, but never to review, reinterpret or amend.

She describes the opposing approach as one which:

views the text in a pragmatic light. The *vinaya* is taken as codes of conduct necessary to maintain harmonious and peaceful living of members of the monastic community. Equally important is the role of the *vinaya* in facilitating the utmost Dhamma practice among monastic members. In other words, the text is a tool to achieve an enlightened livelihood ... It is the intention behind the rules, and not the letter of the rules, that should take precedence ... In this demystified view towards the *vinaya*, changing social contexts are put into consideration, and a discussion of re-reading, re-classification, and reinterpretation of the text is possible. (Chamsanit, 2004)

For many of the *śīladharā*, progress is not possible without this kind of pragmatic reinterpretation, but they face an uphill struggle. Even to agree amongst themselves what approach to take will be no easy task.³⁸ Some of those who have only recently entered the order (after a period as *anagārikā*) are quite specific that it was not the externals of the form to which they were attracted *per se*, but the chance to practise. 'It brings up things to work with; these are the trappings ... I

37. Sujato (2004, diacritics added). On this issue, however, as Peter Harvey has pointed out, 'While the principle, here, might seem a sensible one, Theravādin *Vinaya* experts are not likely to take a precedent from a Lokuttaravādin *Vinaya*'. Supervisor comment.

38. 'This ambivalence still exists to some degree amongst the nuns, even though as a group they are much [better] informed these days about the international predicament of Theravādan Bhikkhunis, and an increase in positivity for full ordination has developed'. Jitindriyā, e-mail of 12 February 2005.

can use the tradition that I am in', one nun said.³⁹ Most are quite content – or at least have been to date – to stay with the current form, recognising the limitations but choosing to regard them as opportunities for practice. However, as Liz Williams has pointed out, 'when all their physical and material needs are catered for by a supportive lay community, Western nuns have no pressing need to urge for changes' (2005: 217). Nonetheless, as Jitindriyā has said, things which may not appear problematic at first can become so after a period of time:

In my personal experience, and from what I have observed in community, it is often the case that only after some years in the monastic order, (say, after the first 5–7 years of training), that the restrictions due to gender really start to chafe. It's not as if one hasn't been aware of them before, but I think it has something to do with a certain 'coming of age' – one's not 'a junior' anymore, but in many ways, due to the form, one is still treated as such.⁴⁰

Ajahn Candasirī has said that in the first phase of her life as a nun, she did not experience 'feminist' ideas herself and did not react strongly to any of the inequalities that she saw, regarding them as grist for the mill. She says that sometimes she took a fairly tough line with newer arrivals who voiced strongly feminist dissatisfactions. In an article following the Rains Retreat of 1992 in the *Forest Sangha Newsletter* (Candasirī, 1993), she wrote about experiencing growth in the face some of the very restrictive rules, regarding seniority.⁴¹ However, in subsequent years, and once some of these more stridently feminist voices of dissent had died down, whilst still preferring a gentle approach, she has come to realise that certain practices or roles within the community are not 'suitable' and need to be addressed.⁴²

Whilst the *sīladharā* have differing views amongst themselves about the urgency or relevance of these issues, I think all would agree that the matter of hierarchy is a significant one. In the monastic world outside Amaravati or Cittaviveka, there exists an ambivalence and confusion over seniority. Within institutional Theravāda Buddhism, seniority counts for a great deal and is the sole arbiter in some situa-

39. Sister Dhammadhirā, in group interview of 17 December 2004.

40. Jitindriyā; e-mail of 23 March 2005.

41. 'This, [the *garudhammas*, which subordinate a nun to a monk, whatever the seniority of the nun and however new the monk] outrageous as it may appear in the eyes of modern society, has actually presented one of the most insightful challenges for me in monastic life. For example: I could see a certain inner reaction when, on the morning after the bhikkhu ordination, another six bhikkhus along with other monks arriving to reside for the Vassa, took their places in front of me in the meal time queue; and I could barely endure the seemingly endless wait for the youngest monk to begin eating, before the nuns could start their meal. One can sense, and sometimes feel the dignity and grace of really not minding, but at times it can seem like a totally humiliating experience – how can one feel so outraged by something so trivial in ultimate terms?! ... But that's what we're here for; to see that rage, to understand those plaintive voices of "self" still hanging on in there, and then gently and patiently allow them to die away' (Candasirī, 1993).

42. As Ajahn Candasirī said after the quote from her on p. 224, 'My sense is it takes quite a while before one actually has the capacity to occupy a certain role, a certain position'. Interview, 24 November 2004.

tions, e.g. in a seating order or the order in which people collect a meal. But the *śīladharā* have only a ten precept ordination and this makes them, in the eyes of the wider Buddhist world, novices. They are clearly not novices in the sense of *beginners*, nor are they treated as such; in, for example, the situation where a senior nun has been asked to lead a retreat or give a speech at an international gathering, she is treated as a respected teacher. However, in this tricky matter of 'placement,' they can end up placed behind a recently ordained *bhikṣuṇī* of less than one *vassa*,⁴³ when they have over 20 themselves.⁴⁴

It is of course naïve to assume that problems of status and recognition would disappear automatically should the nuns become *bhikkhunīs*. Whilst the West is gradually recognising even deep-seated and hidden anti-female attitudes, centuries of tradition and cultural conditioning either in the West or elsewhere cannot be wiped out. A Sri Lankan nun, who in her position as an academic lectured to hundreds of monks, has found that since she took *bhikkhunī* ordination, she has lost the freedom of her previous position and become naturally and inevitably subordinate to monks, so that, when visiting a monastery of 'high monks ...we are not given a seat. We sit on the floor like laypeople while even the most junior monks are given a chair' (Kusuma, 2004). Of course this reflects the situation in Sri Lanka, but it is worthwhile noting that the consideration of status and recognition is far wider-reaching than simply that of the form of ordination.

It seems undeniable that, at least technically, the status of the *śīladharā* is hierarchically inferior, or perhaps better described as subordinate; the question is, does this matter? Many argue that the *garudhammas*, for example, were introduced simply to regulate issues of hierarchy. In any situation, someone has to take precedence. I do not think that such arguments stand up to the light of modern critical thinking, however.⁴⁵

How they deal with this issue, it is one of the biggest challenges that the nuns face. Although the *śīladharā* have received wholehearted support from the monks of the English Forest Sangha, especially its leadership, and although there has been no doubt that they have the same capacity to attain spiritual liberation, it is also true that theirs is not an equal ordination. In addition, many monks are somewhat unclear about the proper place for women or their involvement in an ordained form. One ex-nun has spoken about how conscious she felt of both 'the great privilege' that being a *śīladharā* brought, with freedom to live, research and teach as she wished, being fully supported by the lay community, alongside a very strong sense of a lack of full acceptance, of being 'on the edge', and of an 'insidious patriarchy'.⁴⁶

43. The number of years, measured in 'rainy seasons' or *vassas*, while ordained.

44. Interview with Ajahn Sundarā of 24 November 2004.

45. It is not possible in this short study to give this issue the consideration that it deserves. An excellent and scholarly refutation, however, of the traditional acceptance of the *garudhammas* is in Chapter VII of *The Mission Accomplished* by the Ven. Dr. Patagama Gnanarama at www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/mission-accomplished.pdf (accessed November 2006).

46. Jitindriyā, interview of 28 January 2005.

Whilst few members of the *sīladharā* community would perhaps express it this strongly, this is a very real barrier that they face. They recognise that they have been given an exceptional opportunity to practise, well above and beyond what is available to the majority of women in traditional Theravāda countries; they acknowledge that they have received full support and have an abundance of the four requisites⁴⁷ necessary to pursue the renunciant life. Yet at the same time, they have a need to move forward, to have the chance to be acknowledged in their own rights and on an equal or 'equivalent' footing with the *bhikkhu saṅgha*.

One major factor has of course been the strong spiritual and practical links that the English Forest Sangha has with Thailand. Ajahn Sumedho and some others have been at pains not to antagonise or challenge the Thai elders, who have provided so much support, including essential material support, which has made an enormous difference to the feasibility of the whole Western community. In addition, a significant proportion of the lay supporters of Amaravati and Cittaviveka, on whom the communities depend for the requisites, is from Thailand and other traditional Theravādin communities resident in the United Kingdom. It seems however, that with the passage of time and the gradual maturing of the English Forest Sangha, a natural independence is evolving.

It is important to keep in mind that the order of *sīladharā* has survived by its own diligent commitment to its rule and to the *Dhamma*, and by the comparative freedom and the unquestioned support that the English Sangha Trust has given them over the years. Western lay followers accept and respect them without question and are sometimes surprised at the existence of the issues of deference and subordination under discussion here. In addition, most Western Theravāda women would recognise that joining the *sīladharā* order is really the main option open to them to be renunciants.⁴⁸

The strongest force in the West in terms of Theravāda Buddhism is found in England. The ... monasteries there are under the guidance of Ajahn Sumedho. There women train for two years, wearing white and with shaven heads, observing the eight precepts as they get oriented to monastic life. They are called *anagārikās* (homeless ones) instead of *maechis* ... there is [an ordination] ceremony similar to that of the monk's going forth ... They observe the ten precepts, which means that they don't own or use money. Nowhere in Asia do women enjoy this degree of renunciation-support. The basic ten precepts [have] been expanded

47. Clothing, food, shelter and medicine are what are referred to as the four requisites. 'It seems that the original requisites were "basics" that wandering bhikkhus could conveniently carry around, for example, an alms bowl, three robes, a sitting cloth, a needle-case, and a waist band. However, extra allowances were gradually given as the need arose, for instance, a water filter, a razor and its sheath, the stone and strop for sharpening it and then articles such as an umbrella and sandals. Later the commentaries allowed other similar items' (Ariyesako, 1998).

48. Ajahn Candasiṛī has pointed out that in fact 'there are very few [Western] women who manage to live happily within traditional forms in Thailand, Sri Lanka or Burma'. Written communication 24 April 2005.

into a comprehensive Rule suitable for their situation and reminiscent of the *bhikkhuni* order. They observe fortnightly confession, they have alms bowls, and go on almsround. Since the demise of the *bhikkhuni* order these have been practised exclusively for monks. There nuns are regarded as almswomen in every way, short of reviving the order... That there is a need in the West for the order of almswomen cannot be doubted. The situation in England sets an impressive precedent. Equality in spirit is revived without offending the ones who hold that the old order cannot be reinstated. (Sumala, 1991: 117–18)

Change is of course a natural part of existence and although the situation regarding *bhikkhuni* ordination is at something of an impasse, the majority are happy to a greater or lesser degree to let things unfold as they will. There has been progress and gradual acknowledgements of small inequalities, and the possibility of joining the wider monastic community in the role ordained for renunciant women as part of the fourfold assembly by the Buddha, is for present but not immediately pressing.

However, in recent years, certain members of the community of nuns have given serious consideration to the issue. They have researched and collected relevant material, presented their findings in part to the Elders Council and to the Abbots meeting. Some would say that the time is ripe for a renewed focus. However, as Ajahn Candasiṛī has put it:

One of Ajahn Sumedho's favourite questions is, 'Do you want to be enlightened or to be a *bhikkhuni*?' Clearly the answer could be 'both', but I think for all of us liberation definitely takes precedence! Rather than pushing or trying to convince anyone that *bhikkhuni* ordination is the only way forward, it feels as though the important task is to protect and guard the mind from unwholesomeness – whether arising from within or outside. Maybe a little nudge will be useful from time to time, certainly keeping ourselves informed of current developments to a certain extent and, above all, trusting! It seems to me that this attitude is what will allow things to unfold in a way that will bring the greatest benefit and cause the fewest headaches for ourselves and others. If the time is right and our practice is solid, conditions will come together in support of what is beneficial – which may happen to be full *bhikkhuni* ordination – or not.

Luang Por Chah used to say 'If the soup's good, people will come'. Applied to our situation we could translate this as, if our practice is straight (in accordance with Dhamma) people will be inspired to practise just by our presence and demeanour, rather than because of our having a particular level of ordination.⁴⁹

49. Ajahn Candasiṛī, written communication following her reading of the draft of this paper, 24 April 2005.

The situation in the wider world will speak for itself over the next few years. It has been said that the reality of change will ultimately only come with the next generation of leaders of both monks and nuns, but for those living within the form in the here and now, patient endurance and hopeful persistence, in an attempt to find a unified view, must be their watchwords.

The issue of whether or not to embrace a revived *bhikkhunī* ordination is not the be all and end all for the nuns and their future, of course. Whilst many things will gradually develop, often in unforeseen ways as they have in the past, it seems to me that the other major consideration for them is that of expansion. They are frequently asked if they will consider establishing nuns' communities in various places, both in the United Kingdom and overseas. The experiences of both Hartridge and Abhayagiri have taught them that any such venture needs a plentiful pool of well-established nuns at the home base, both in maturity and in numbers, as well as the unequivocal support of the environment where they are going and necessary resources. They are therefore at the moment reluctant to take any such steps, despite frequent requests:

Our limiting factor is the demography of our group – unless we leave either Amaravati or Cittaviveka which we are loath to do. For a separate community the members, or at least the core members, need an ability to work together and hopefully enjoy each other. I imagine one day it may happen; slowly forming and strengthening around one of us as we establish a small separate place. Certainly for my part I would not want to do something that tore at the existing community fabric.⁵⁰

This necessity for a mature *saṅgha* is I think the one essential building block for the future. A solid foundation of future success will be the presence of spiritually advanced elder nuns, which will benefit both the nuns themselves and the wider community. And ironically the very successes that have been gained may well be the cause of problems in the future:

the ethos of practice seems to be changing and [this may not be] supportive in the long run ... physical conditions [used to be] harsher, the community thing harsher and less sympathetic to the needs of the individual; survival was dependent on endurance and letting-go. As requisites become more bountiful and there is more space and free time, more attention to the individual, the level of renunciation of personal 'needs' and views can change. We do need to support the individual sisters, and it is good that each person gets what they really need but finding the truth of that is challenging. Sometimes listening to things, it seems we've lost the shared understanding of the Path being one of abandonment rather than getting.⁵¹

50. Ajahn Thāṇiyā, letter of January 2005.

51. *Ibid.*

Whilst this was the expressed opinion of only one nun, it is a matter that the nuns' community will have to take into account, like any organisation moving through phases of development. Success can breed complacency, but a mature nuns' community will be a good way to guard against any weakening of the spiritual focus.

This maturing process is gradually taking place: 'Now we seem to be moving to the end of an adolescent process, able to stand in our own spaces as adults. I see this in myself and in the nuns' community as a whole organism. It has been a case of readiness; there are all the ideals of us being independent, autonomous etc but in reality we have needed time to mature into that'.⁵² The nuns perhaps lack a wider sense of community and support, due to their very uniqueness. The monks can travel to other monasteries and find men of like mind and experience, and many men of seniority and wisdom to support them. The emphasis on friendship in the holy life, the *kalyāṇa-mittatā*, is as yet perhaps comparatively under-developed with the *śīladharā*, but could be strengthened through greater connections with senior *mae-ji* in Thailand, for example.

The future is currently looking bright for the *śīladharā*, materially and spiritually. They experience an unprecedented level of support and the *bhikkhu saṅgha* is keen for them to develop in their own right, whatever problems I may have highlighted here. Their training and their commitment to living the holy life, and to the blessings of renunciation, will be their safeguards for the future.

CONCLUSION

This history has attempted to give an account of the founding and growth of the nuns' order of the English Forest Sangha. I have shown how, since the successful establishment of an indigenous *saṅgha* of Theravādin monks in the United Kingdom in 1977, women too wished to pursue the monastic life and teachings modelled for them by Ajahn Sumedho and the other disciples of Ajahn Chah resident at the Hampstead Vihāra and subsequently Chithurst. I have recounted the gradual development of a form for these Western aspirants to the homeless life, from the beginning as eight-precept nuns, living much as the *mae-ji* of Thailand to taking on ten precepts and a fully renunciant life. This ten-precept order has, since the first ordinations in 1983, evolved gradually into an order with its own *pāṭimokkha* comprising 120 rules. The nuns, though a small community, are respected internationally for the high standards of their training and for their teaching.

This development has not been without difficulties, despite its smooth beginning when the first four women took eight precepts amidst apparently universal goodwill. The recognition that the women needed more than an eight precept form to match their commitment to the monastic life was a significant step. The establishment of this ground-breaking ten-precept order inevitably brought more complex issues into play.

52. *Ibid.*

Much of the rest of the development of the order has inevitably been of an exploratory nature. The relatively quick establishment of a rule under Ajahn Sucitto, drawing on those for *sāmaṇera*, *sāmaṇerī*, *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī*, has of course had its problems. Some of these tensions were the inevitable result of attempting to find space for something so different to the established norms within such a traditionalist school as the Theravāda. Some difficulties were more specifically born of the lineage itself; the Thai tradition, with which the English Forest Sangha identifies itself, holds women in an undeniably subordinate position. And some of the tension arose from the inevitable awkwardness of establishing a thoroughly Asian form in a country where expectations for and from women were so radically different. The resulting growing pains were therefore inevitable and in some sense a valuable crucible in which to test out the fledgling nuns' order. The painful losses and the disillusion of some have been as much a natural part of this as the successes.

What I hope I have been able to demonstrate is that, for many, this process has been a fruitful one. The order of *sīladharā* has, in the midst of all its painful process of birth and adolescence, remained steadfastly committed to its roots, both textual and traditional. Despite the innovatory nature of the order, the nuns lead lives that would be instantly recognisable to their early sisters, the *bhikkhunīs*.

We saw that the nuns will have to resolve the issue of whether or not they take on the revived *bhikkhunī* ordination. We noted that this is no easy decision; they have a high standard of training to which they already adhere; they have slowly and carefully evolved a community that manifests their commitment to living out the truth, which takes precedence over issues of form. We also examined issues of hierarchy and some of the other questions that the nuns have to face in the future. Whatever decisions they make in the future, what is certain is that the *sīladharā* have already had a powerful and beneficial effect both on the laypeople with whom they come into contact and on the *bhikkhu saṅgha*. Despite setbacks and disappointments, the *sīladharā* have modelled the holy life for women for over twenty years in such a way as to make evident the truth that 'to live the Holy life is a fortunate thing ... the blessing of morality, renunciation, living in accordance with the "Way Things Are"',⁵³ which is a beacon of light to so many. Long may they continue to flourish.

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53. Ajahn Thāniyā, letter of January 2005.

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