

# Women in Brown<sup>1</sup>: a short history of the order of *sīladharā*, nuns of the English Forest Sangha, Part One

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ABSTRACT: At Chithurst Buddhist Monastery, in the UK, in 1979, four women joined the newly formed community of Theravāda monks. They lived initially as novices, and their wish to engage more fully with the life of renunciation, combined with the support and commitment of the community leader Ajahn Sumedho and other monks, led to the formation of a unique order of Theravāda Buddhist nuns, who became known as *sīladharā*. This paper will appear in two parts. This first part begins with a brief contextual overview of Theravāda nuns, from the founding and decline of the order of *bhikkhunīs* to the various forms of ordination available for women in the Theravāda world today. It then gives a history of the order of *sīladharā* from its inception until approximately 2000, focusing on the development of their rule and ordination procedures, the way the order has changed over the years and issues and conflicts it has had to deal with, as well as a period when some nuns lived in a women-only community. My research was undertaken by personal interview with founding members of the order as well as by e-mail, telephone and written communications with nuns past and present and with a senior monk involved in the order's early days. The history until the present day and consideration of future developments will form the second part of the paper.

## INTRODUCTION

The order of *sīladharā* (upholders of virtue) is a unique monastic order for Theravādin Buddhist women that was created in 1983 at Chithurst Buddhist Monastery in West Sussex by Ajahn Sumedho, senior monk of the English Forest Sangha<sup>2</sup>.

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1. This paper and its concluding part originally formed a research dissertation as the final part of the MA in Buddhist Studies of the University of Sunderland which I completed in 2005.
  2. This community of monks was founded following the visit in 1977 from Thailand of Ajahn Chah. The English Sangha Trust (EST), founded in 1956, had been attempting to establish an indigenous *saṅgha* in England but had only been intermittently successful. Once Ajahn Chah had approved the request of the EST to help re-establish such a venture, he left Ajahn Sumedho and three other western-born monks who had trained in Thailand at the EST's Hampstead property. Inevitably,

This article (and a sequel to appear in a subsequent issue of BSR) attempts to tell the story of how a place was made for women in a tradition that, in the last ten centuries, has not had a fully ordained female *saṅgha*.

My research has focused on primary sources; that is, on some of the individuals who have been key to the order of *śīladharā*. Ajahn Candasiṛī, currently senior nun at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, and one of the first four women to be ordained, supported the idea of a history of the order. I undertook a series of interviews with her in which we recorded as comprehensively as possible her own memory of the order's history. This forms the skeleton of the historical part of the current study. I also interviewed Ajahn Sucitto (abbot of Cittaviveka Buddhist Monastery<sup>3</sup>), one of the earliest monks at Chithurst. It was he who Ajahn Sumedho asked to be the nuns' teacher and who oversaw the development of their training and rules, covered below.

I also communicated with the remaining original nuns: Ajahn Sundarā in a personal interview, Thānissarā, now a laywoman living and teaching in South Africa, by e-mail, and various other current and ex-*śīladharā*, including Ajahn Thāniyā and Jitindriyā. Information on the setting up of a similar order of nuns in Western Australia was received in response to my written requests from their abbot, Ajahn Vāyāmā, and Ajahn Brahmavamso, Abbot of Bodhinyāna monastery in Western Australia. This material will form part of the second article.

#### ORDAINED THERAVĀDA WOMEN WORLDWIDE – PAST AND PRESENT

There are many studies which give considerable detail on the current place of women and their opportunities for ordination in the Theravāda Buddhist world,<sup>4</sup> as well as many studies looking at the founding of the *bhikkhunī* order and its demise in the Theravāda world around the start of the second millennium. Much of this material is outside the scope of these articles but I shall give a short overview of current female monasticism in the Theravāda.

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women too were drawn to the teachings and the lifestyle of these monks who, living such an austere and apparently restrictive lifestyle, yet seemed radiantly happy. Ajahn Candasiṛī says of her first encounter with Ajahn Sumedho and other monks: 'I [was] very impressed ... knowing about their incredibly strict discipline and yet seeing how radiant and happy they were – somehow the two didn't seem to go together' (interview of 6 September 2004).

3. Cittaviveka Buddhist Monastery was created in the shell of a Victorian house, Chithurst House, in the village of Chithurst, West Sussex. It is sometimes referred to by its proper name as a Buddhist monastery, Cittaviveka, but commonly (by both *saṅgha* and laypeople) it is referred to as 'Chithurst'. I shall use the terms interchangeably here.
4. Of these, Tessa Bartholomeusz (1994) gives a comprehensive summary of the position of women in Sri Lanka; another excellent overview is Nancy Barnes (1996). More detailed studies on individual countries include Kawanami (1990) on the nuns of Burma and Kabil Singh (1991) on Thailand.

*Renunciant Theravāda women today*

What is available for Theravāda women who wish to pursue a renunciant spiritual life?<sup>5</sup> In Sri Lanka, so far, no evidence has been found of renunciant women in the period between the demise of the *bhikkhūnī* order and the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when women again began to seek to ‘go forth’. The order of women which began under the auspices of such figures as the Anagārika Dharmapāla and Catherine De Alwis (later Sudharmācārī) gradually became known as *dasa sil mātāvo*, literally mothers of the ten precepts<sup>6</sup>. In Thailand, there are the *mae-ji*, women who follow ten, or more usually eight, precepts (and have been around for several hundred years at least, probably far longer; Nancy Barnes states that seventeenth century travellers encountered and wrote of ‘shaven-headed women in white robes who lived within the compounds of some temples’ (Barnes, 1996: 267). In Burma, there are the *thila shin*, similarly following eight or ten precepts.<sup>7</sup>

Whilst the details of the lives of these nuns vary, they have much in common. First, they may be the main domestic support for the monks. Many (though not all) *mae-ji* prepare food for monks. This is less true of nuns in Sri Lanka, who often have a role more akin to social work. This stems in part from the late nineteenth century pioneers, who modelled their nunneries not on a world-renouncing model, but on providing education and social care, in much the way some Christian monastic orders have traditionally operated. Bartholomeusz<sup>8</sup> mentions some nuns who concentrate on meditation, including westerners who at the time of her research were in Sri Lanka<sup>9</sup>, but these were a small minority of the *dasa sil mātāvo*. Secondly, their material support is less assured than that of the *bhikkhu saṅgha*. Whilst some nuns’ *vihāras* are well-provided for by generous lay supporters, many experience extreme poverty. *Mae-ji*, *thila-shin* and *dasa sil mātāvo* are seen as less worthy of offerings and not in the same way a ‘field of merit’ as the *bhikkhu saṅgha*.

It can be seen that these models of female renunciation might not appeal to the Western women coming to Ajahn Sumedho to ‘go forth’<sup>10</sup>. In 1979, Bhikkhu

5. Whilst there are Theravāda nuns in Cambodia, Nepal and also Laos, for the purposes of this study I will concentrate on Thailand, Sri Lanka and Burma.

6. See Bartholomeusz (1994) for a full account of the Buddhist nuns of Sri Lanka.

7. For further general information on Theravāda renunciant women see Barnes (1996). On Burmese nuns see, Hiroko Kawanami (1990) and on Thai *mae-ji* see Kabilsingh (1991: 36–44).

8. Bartholomeusz uses the term ‘lay nuns’ throughout her 1994 book, but I find this an ambiguous term which, whilst going some way to explaining their in-between status, neither lay person nor fully ordained *saṅgha*, slightly muddies the issue that they have in fact renounced the attractions and the responsibilities of lay life.

9. These included Ayya Vāyāmā who is now Abbot of Dhammasara Nuns’ Monastery (as it is called) in Western Australia, a community similar to the *siladharā* but not identical. For more on this, see part two of this paper.

10. Ajahn Thāniyā has made some valid points about why taking robes in Thailand did not seem a viable option: ‘While I was there, I was treated as “special”, and having seen the result of that in others I wanted to be where I had the friction of a community (which I found!). Also the access

Khantipalo mentioned that the number of Western women choosing to take robes in Thailand was significantly lower than the number of Western men ordaining there. He put this down to the issue of financial support and to the differences between the women interested in renouncing; he described Asian women who took robes as generally of poor education, with little experience of the world, whereas Western women ordaining were usually well-educated and independent.<sup>11</sup>

In recent years in Asia, things have started to change. Since 1996, there has been a revival of an ordination for *bhikkhunīs* in Sri Lanka, with several hundred women now ordained as *bhikkhunīs*. There has also been in Sri Lanka the ordination of at least one Thai *bhikkhunī*, Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (now Bhikkhunī Dhammānandā), a well-respected Buddhist scholar and daughter of the late Voramai Kabilsingh, who for years lived as an unrecognized *bhikkhunī* and took an independent, dynamic and proactive role. The history of these developments in Sri Lanka is recounted in Rajani De Silva's paper 'Reclaiming the Robe: Reviving the Bhikkhunī Order in Sri Lanka' (2004). The wider Theravāda establishment however, has yet to accept these *bhikkhunī* ordinations as valid, despite many supporters.

#### NUNS AT CHITHURST: THE EARLY DAYS

In the United Kingdom in the late 1970s, women as well as men were becoming seriously interested in the meditation teachings that Ajahn Sumedho was offering, and in the example of the monastic life that they demonstrated.

The history of the arrival of the Western disciples of the Thai meditation master Luang Por Chah has been well documented elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> What is perhaps less well known is how the nuns' order came into being: the aim of the present study.

Even before the community moved from the Hampstead Vihāra to the derelict Chithurst House in 1979, women as well as men had been a part of the lay community gradually forming around the monks, and had been attending meditation retreats and other events led by Ajahn Sumedho.

#### *The nucleus of a nuns' community*

The arrival of the first women came about in various ways: they were women

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of the Thai nuns to teaching seemed limited to me – as opposed to that of the men – so I wanted to be where I had more access to live teaching' (Ajahn Thānīyā, letter of January 2005).

11. From *Banner of the Arahants. Chapter VII: 3*, [www.palikanon.com/english/arahats/arahants13.htm](http://www.palikanon.com/english/arahats/arahants13.htm) (April 2006).

12. See for example, the excellent Bell (2000). See also [www.amaravati.org/abm/english/hist3.html](http://www.amaravati.org/abm/english/hist3.html) (April 2006) and [www.amaravati.org/abm/english/hist4.html](http://www.amaravati.org/abm/english/hist4.html) (April 2006).

who had had contact with Ajahn Sumedho and other monks through attending the Hampstead Vihāra; or going on retreats or through an already existing commitment to Buddhism. By the end of September 1979, four women had arrived at Chithurst to stay. Ajahn Sumedho had agreed with the other monks that they were welcome and that they were to have a formal opportunity to lead the monastic life. They took eight precepts at a ceremony on the 28 October 1979, wearing white robes of their own design. They were given Pāli names and became Rocanā, Sundarā, Candasirī and Thānissarā. Their hair was closely cropped, not at first shaven.<sup>13</sup>

I remember that it was late afternoon on 28th October 1979. There was an autumnal chill in the air. The four of us were busily sewing white robes, while practising chanting, putting finishing touches in preparation for the unprecedented ceremony, (the first Theravadan [*sic*] 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.<sup>14</sup>

The eight-precept ordination is remembered by Ajahn Candasirī as a joyful occasion, with many lay supporters present as well and a tangible atmosphere of goodwill. There to oversee the occasion was a senior Sri Lankan *bhikkhu* from London, Bhante Vajiragnana, who had been Rocanā's teacher for a number of years.

At first they were accommodated in the attic of the main house but it 'was considered grossly inappropriate'<sup>15</sup> for the laywomen to be not only in the same building as the monks, but above them. Shortly before their ordination, a nearby cottage was rented and later purchased for their occupation. It had electricity, but this was only powered by an extremely noisy generator. Much of their life there (at first, precious little, as they spent most of their day at the main house

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13. In the following year, a Korean nun (a Frenchwoman, now in lay life again – Martine Batchelor) was visiting the nuns, and with Ajahn Sumedho's approval, shaved their heads. For the nuns, this was a further step into renunciation, giving them a greater sense of belonging. Martine Batchelor remembers the occasion thus: 'As is usual when visiting another monastic institution, I was freshly shaved. In Korea generally nuns will shave each other but one can also do it on one's own. The nuns saw me shaved [and] seeing me they thought – why could not they too be shaved like me ... it was an opportunity not to pass since I could do it for them. So they convinced whoever was in charge ... that it was time to let them be shaved. So I did it outside in the courtyard I think. They were happy though one or two a little tremulous at losing their hair possibly. For them it was the first time and exciting, for me I had done this many times before and I really could not see why they could not have shaved before. But I was very happy to contribute to this small step for them to become "real" nuns' (e-mail of 18 March 2005).

14. Thānissarā in the introduction to *Freeing the Heart* (Amaravati Publications, 2001: 20).

15. Ajahn Candasirī, interview of 6 September 2004.

from morning meditation and chanting at 5 am until the end of the evening *pūjā* at about 9 pm) was therefore lived by candlelight.

With the main house needing complete renovation, it was a time of extremely hard physical work for everyone. The eight-precept nuns were able to drive and cook and spent much time on domestic tasks. They had regularly to collect a 10 gallon container of milk from a local farm, a warm cup of which constituted the community's breakfast. The traditional ascetic practice of only one meal a day was then gradually replaced by a light breakfast of rice porridge (gruel) and tea, as the cold climate and hard manual work were taking their toll on the community.

At this stage, the nuns were receiving no formal training; they learned by observing the monks. Ajahn Sumedho gave *Dhamma* talks to the community as a whole. They adhered to the eight precepts, and were asked by Ajahn Sumedho to keep the 75 *sekhiya* rules.<sup>16</sup> These rules, covering general deportment and behaviour concerning food, robes, teaching etc. are found in both the *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni pāṭimokkhas*.

The enthusiasm of these early years and the welcome and support of the monks meant that this was a comparatively happy and peaceful period in the life of the nuns' community. Although there were tensions and differences of opinions on minor matters, there was nonetheless a feeling of mutual encouragement, support and a great commitment to the monastic life.

Accommodation at this time was limited to the original rooms of the small cottage itself, and it became evident when other women expressed an interest in joining the community that the space was simply too limited.

When one such woman asked for ordination, it was decided that she could ordain but would then train in Thailand with two Western *mae-jis*. She was ordained with the name Vimalā the night before travelling to Thailand with a party from Chithurst. On arrival at Ajahn Chah's monastery, they discovered that the two Western *mae-ji* had converted to Christianity. Vimalā was able to remain as planned when a female lay supporter who had travelled with the group agreed to ordain as a *mae-ji*.

Gradually the nuns began to convert some of the outbuildings in the cottage grounds.<sup>17</sup> Thus as the community gradually grew, with people coming for shorter or longer periods, they were able to accommodate more. When Vimalā, returned from Thailand suffering from a tropical illness, she was able to be welcomed into the Chithurst community and to be nursed there.

16. The *sekhiya* rules are 'basically "rules of etiquette" or basic monastic behavioural standards pertaining to things such as how to wear the robes properly, how to eat discretely and modestly, how to behave when in public, and while walking on almsround, and in what circumstances to refrain from teaching *Dhamma*, etc.' (communication from Jitindriyā, 16 February 2005). They can be found in their *bhikkhuni* form on Access to Insight: <http://accesstoinsight.org/canon/vinaya/bhikkhuni-pati.html> (April 2006).

17. They made some lodging space in the forest, and converted a pigsty to sleeping accommodation. They also converted the garage into a shrine room. Creating a formal ceremonial space in their own grounds was another small but significant step, allowing them to have their own observances without having to go to the main house.

*Ten precept ordination*

In 1981, Ajahn Sumedho asked a monk who was travelling to Thailand (Ajahn Brahmavamso, now Abbot of Bodhinyāna Monastery in Western Australia) to sound out the opinion of Thai elders about offering the Chithurst nuns a ten-precept ordination. He received an unequivocal response that such a step would be in contradiction to *Vinaya*. It is clear that Ajahn Sumedho was interested in offering the nuns more possibility for renunciation and was keen to find a way forward. The necessity of keeping in step with the senior Thai monastic community was not merely one of etiquette; the material well-being of the *saṅgha* in the UK had been greatly helped by the Thai people, both in Thailand and in the UK, with offering of food and other requisites by lay supporters.

Despite this initially negative response, Ajahn Sumedho persisted:

It seemed worthwhile, and necessary, to refine their training to accommodate their spiritual resolve. There is a ten-precept form of training still available that establishes mendicancy by forbidding the use of money. In most Theravāda countries it is used as a novitiate for men too young to become *bhikkhus*, and in Burma and Sri Lanka it is also used by women as a permanent monastic code. It is rare to see such nuns in Thailand, but Ajahn Sumedho received permission from the elders of the Thai *Saṅgha* to employ it and establish an order of Buddhist mendicant nuns ... in the West.<sup>18</sup>

Having received permission from the Thai senior monks during the winter retreat of 1983, on his return to Chithurst, Ajahn Sumedho announced that he would give ten-precept ordination to the original four nuns, that is Sisters Rocanā, Sundarā, Candasirī and Thānissarā.<sup>19</sup> This was an innovative step for Western women, allowing the nuns to experience the *pabbajjā*, the going forth. Someone observing eight precepts, whilst celibate like a *bhikkhu*, still has the freedom to handle money. The ten precepts mark the difference between lay and monastic life.<sup>20</sup> The ‘going forth’, or *pabbajjā*, is the step across the brink – from the world to renouncing the world. However much the nuns had been living the life of

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18. Sucitto & Amaro (1991:155).

19. Sister Vimalā (in approximately 1981, the nuns adopted Thānissarā’s suggestion that they use the title ‘sister’) was excluded from this proposed ordination, as was Sister Cintāmani, another nun who had by then taken eight precepts and joined the community. The strict interpretation of seniority naturally meant that the first four women to start as ‘novices’ should also be the first to take the next step, but Vimalā felt understandably unhappy. She came to the decision to leave the community and in summer 1983 went to Taiwan, to take *bhikkṣuṇī* ordination.

20. Some nuns in Burma and Sri Lanka, and a few in Thailand, if they have sufficient support from lay people, do observe ten precepts rather than eight, but their countrymen and -women do not generally regard them as fully ordained. Their status is something between lay and monastic. In addition, in Burma devout lay people also take the ten precepts, for example whilst on an intensive meditation retreat.

monastics, this chance to step formally 'from home into homelessness' marked a real shift. In a practical way, it released the nuns from the domesticity in which their eight precepts had still involved them. In keeping with *Vinaya*, they were no longer permitted to prepare food for themselves, nor for the monks.<sup>21</sup> Thus they were free to concentrate on spiritual matters to a greater degree.<sup>22</sup>

The ceremony for taking ten precepts was scheduled for August 1983, and the nuns prepared by learning Pāli chanting for the ceremony and sewing their robes. They had chosen brown as the colour for their robes,<sup>23</sup> based partly on the colour worn by the forest nuns of Burma, the *thila shin* (their town dwelling counterparts wear pink). For their white robes they had adopted an informal approach, and wore them differently to one another. Now they chose a form of sarong, under-blouse, jacket, upper robe and outer robe that all should wear.<sup>24</sup>

A further three women who had been living with the community for some time took white and became *anagārikās* a fortnight before the ten precept ceremony on the 14 August 1983. The cloth had been offered by lay supporters, as is traditional for monks. Towards the end of the ceremony, the nuns being given 10-precept ordination were (to their surprise) given alms bowls, symbolically marking their change of status to almswomen. They were initially known as 'sīlavanti', women who live by *sīla* or virtue. This was changed in approximately 1989–90 to 'sīladharā',<sup>25</sup> women who uphold virtue.

There gradually arose a feeling after this ten-precept ordination that the nuns needed some more formal guidance and structure, and some six months after their ordination, Ajahn Sucitto was asked if he would oversee this. Ajahn Candasirī recalls that there was a consensus that it was desirable to estab-

21. The *bhikkhunī* order was forbidden by their rule from preparing food for monks, nor were monks allowed to accept food prepared by them. Although some recently ordained nuns find this rule frustrating, especially when there is an obvious shortage of help in the kitchen, the older nuns point out that this echo of the *bhikkhunī* rule, whilst not formally in their own regulations, is a hard won privilege which frees them to concentrate on spiritual matters.

22. Ajahn Sucitto has spoken of the nuns in the early years seeing the male *anagārikas* leaving white robes and their kitchen chores behind, following ordination, whilst they made no progress (interview of 3 November 2004). *Anagārika* and its female form *anagārikā* (homeless one) is a 'two year postulant ordination' (Bell, 2000); it replaces the temporary ordination that many monks in Thailand undertake. It also enables monks and nuns to be supported by these intermediaries who can cook, store food, handle money, and interact with lay people where necessary. The development of the *anagārika* role is one that has proved crucial to the successful rooting of the Theravādin *saṅgha* in the UK.

23. See Harvey (2000: 395) for a brief summary of Theravādin nuns' robe colours and Tsomo (2002: 255) for a description of nuns' robe colours from all traditions.

24. The nuns' robes have changed somewhat over the years. Whilst remaining with the same basic format, the fabric of the skirt and upper robe have the traditional pattern of lines known as 'paddy fields', previously the hallmark only of *bhikkhus'* robes. In addition, when outside the monastery, the nuns roll the outer edge of the upper robe, rather than wearing it simply thrown over the shoulder. These small steps bring them closer in line with the ancient lineage of *bhikkhunīs* and on a more uniform footing with the monks.

25. Singular form also *sīladharā*.



lish ‘some kind of a form ... partly to help us so that there would be some kind of conformity around how we did things’.<sup>26</sup> Ajahn Sucitto began to meet weekly with the nuns and to formulate the skeleton of a set of rules for them. His role grew into a supervisory one too, and this came to the forefront after the move to Amaravati.

### *Expansion*

Inspired by a large Chinese-based Buddhist community in California,<sup>27</sup> which included facilities for lay people and training, Ajahn Sumedho was developing a vision for a centre with a broader remit. He instigated a search for premises that might be used for a Buddhist centre with retreat facilities. Furthermore, the nuns were overflowing their accommodation at Chithurst and he was aware of the need to accommodate their growing community. He envisioned a new monastery as a ‘training monastery for nuns’,<sup>28</sup> as well as a monastery for some of the community of *bhikkhus*, and a Buddhist centre with facilities for supporting lay people in their practice. Chithurst was to remain a monastery for the training of monks.

A former boarding school high on the Chiltern plateau outside Hemel Hempstead in the village of Great Gaddesden was found for sale. It was on a large site with extensive grounds and buildings and in 1984 Amaravati<sup>29</sup> Buddhist Monastery was established.

## THE MIDDLE YEARS: EXPANSION TO AMARAVATI AND BEYOND

Whilst the nuns appreciated the need to move to larger premises, it was a sad farewell to Chithurst. They had been establishing *kuṭīs* (basic dwellings for sleep and meditation) in the forest; they had begun their ordained lives there, and it was a very beautiful natural environment. The move to the windswept Amaravati was the beginning of a new era. They managed the transition by undertaking the move as a pilgrimage, on foot, in a practice known as *tudong*.<sup>30</sup> They arrived on the 2 August 1984 and circumnambulated the large field, chanting.

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26. Ajahn Candasiṛī, interview of 6 September 2004.

27. The City of 10,000 Buddhas.

28. Ajahn Candasiṛī, interview of 6 September 2004.

29. Named after the celebrated ancient monastery of Amarāvati in south-east India.

30. *Tudong* or *dhutāṅga* refers to a number of ascetic practices that the Buddha allowed but did not prescribe. They include sleeping at the foot of a tree and only eating one meal a day from food obtained on the almsround. The expression is often also used to refer to long journeys on foot, away from the comforts of the monastery.

### *Ordinations*

Initially the ten-precept ordination ceremony ‘was just literally the ten precept ordination – *pabbajjā*, the “going forth”’.<sup>31</sup> After some time, it was decided to introduce questioning of the candidates in the way that happens for monks’ ordinations. According to the *bhikkhunī* tradition, this part of the original higher ordination or *upasampadā* took place privately, with only nuns present, due perhaps to the intimate nature of the questions as to fitness for ordination,<sup>32</sup> and the Chithurst nuns at first followed this tradition. However, as someone overheard this beautiful and uplifting chanting and wished it to be heard by a wider audience, the nuns agreed to chant the questioning in front of the lay people, with the monks waiting outside. Subsequently, the monks were invited to be present, outside the *sīmā*, or ordination boundary. Once the questioning is completed, the chanting *acarinīs* (nuns involved in conferring the ordination) invite the *bhikkhu saṅgha* to participate in the ceremony and both communities sit within the *sīmā* for the ordination.

### *Two communities of nuns*

Although it was initially foreseen that Chithurst would now remain as a monks-only monastery, there were practical concerns that the nuns’ cottage might suffer if untenanted during winter. The nuns therefore sought and received permission to return to Chithurst for the winter retreat. Subsequently, nuns began to spend more of the year at Chithurst, initially returning to Amaravati for the *Vassa* or Rains’ Retreat,<sup>33</sup> so that the whole community of nuns could observe it together. Since 1988, it has been the norm that nuns reside all year round in both places, and there are two separate nuns’ communities.<sup>34</sup> Nuns move between these communities as required, for both personal and ‘staffing’ reasons. Any prospective *anaḡārikā*<sup>35</sup> is required to spend some time living in each community and receive the approval of all members of both nuns’ communities in order to be accepted. This was not always the case; Ajahn Sucitto used to decide who was acceptable for ordinations, and we shall look further at his involvement below.

### *Ajahn Sucitto and the nuns’ training*

Although Ajahn Sucitto undertook the task of supervising training for the nuns at the request of Ajahn Sumedho, it is evident that he worked on this project

31. Ajahn Candasiṛī, interview of 6 November 2004

32. See Horner (1930: 138–58) for a thorough description of the *upasampadā* or higher ordination, and in particular pp. 145–52 for a description and discussion of the questioning.

33. Rains retreat; the (Indian) rainy season three month period (from the full moon of July) is a period that since the time of the Buddha monks and nuns are required by the monastic rule to spend in one residence.

34. At one stage there were three communities when the nuns ran the Devon *viḡāra* in Hartridge.

35. See note 22.

largely alone. He was determined to devise a form that would enable the nuns to step seamlessly from their current position into a revived Theravāda *bhikkhunī* ordination, should that ever become possible. He based the training on both the *bhikkhu* and the *bhikkhunī pāṭimokkha* as well as on the training for novice monks, *sāmaṇeras*. He included parts of the *bhikkhunī* rules because ‘the novice training was designed more for little boys than for mature women’.<sup>36</sup> He has also said that he ‘toned down some of the more peculiar bits’ of the *bhikkhunī pāṭimokkha*.<sup>37</sup> It was already expected that the nuns should keep the 75 *sekhiya* rules and these had been incorporated in the nuns *Uposatha*<sup>38</sup> recitation.

Ajahn Sucitto had been writing, in note form, a summary of the rules that were gradually being established. Sister Candasirī was keen to record this more formally and an opportunity to do this came while recovering from an injury. During her convalescence she helped to type the rule. After careful scrutiny by the monks’ community, this was made into a book, *Going Forth: A Training for Theravādin Nuns*. This has apparently subsequently been revised, although I do not know of any more current printed form.

Ajahn Sucitto’s role gradually developed into what has been described as that of a ‘mother superior’. In addition to evolving the training form and rules, he assumed responsibility for the nuns with regard to such things as allocating the various jobs (who was to be ‘store nun’, for example). He also allocated their lodgings, and was very involved with their day to day affairs. Whilst his assistance was appreciated, there was also a growing unease amongst the more senior nuns that seniority, traditionally important amongst *bhikkhus*, seemed to carry no weight for nuns; this was somewhat discouraging for some of them.

From my interview with Ajahn Sucitto,<sup>39</sup> it seems that, however some may have perceived his involvement, he was motivated by a strong sense of benevolence towards the nuns’ community. He wished them to flourish and to progress on the spiritual path. However, he also took, consciously or unconsciously, a protective role, one that he subsequently found hard to relinquish.

In 1990–91, Ajahn Sucitto went on pilgrimage to India and Nepal. In his absence, these feelings of restriction and discomfort with his role were more openly articulated and there was a discussion about the continuation of his role

36. Paraphrase; interview of 3 November 2004.

37. Ajahn Sucitto did not elaborate on which bits he found ‘peculiar’ or had tempered to suit modern living.

38. The fortnightly observances laid down by the *Vinaya*, at which the *saṅgha* recite the rules of the *pāṭimokkha*, acknowledge offences and generally keep the monastic discipline tightly observed. Observance of the *Uposatha* constitutes an important part of a properly operating monastic *saṅgha* and requires a quorum of *bhikkhus*, or in this case, nuns. A full discussion of the *Uposatha* as it relates to *bhikkhus* can be found in Thanissaro Bhikkhu’s comprehensive presentation of and explanation of the Monastic Code, in chapter 15 at <http://accesstoinight.org/lib/modern/thanissaro/bmc2/ch15.html> (April 2006). For a more general idea of the wider significance of the *Uposatha*, especially to the Western *saṅgha*, see Bell (2000).

39. Interview at Chithurst, 3 November, 2004.

vis-à-vis the nuns. Both the nuns' and monks' communities agreed that the time was right to give the nuns more autonomy, deciding for themselves, for example, who could be accepted as an *anagārikā*, and who could take higher ordination.<sup>40</sup> It was decided by senior monks and nuns to remove this role of oversight from Ajahn Sucitto, and he was informed so on his return. He has described the manner of communicating this decision as somewhat harsh; he was distressed by the news<sup>41</sup> which Ajahn Candasiṛī has said was 'very, very hard for him'.<sup>42</sup>

The nuns henceforth began to govern their own affairs to a greater extent and thus commenced a steep learning curve.

*Trial and error; estrangement and healing*

The unfamiliar situation, in the absence of any female role-models, was difficult for both monks and nuns.

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.<sup>43</sup>

The nuns themselves were trying to model themselves on a monastic community whose style of doing things was 'not sweet and gentle and spacious...[the monks] had a very different style'.<sup>44</sup> There was also a desire amongst the senior nuns to show that the trust placed in them was not misplaced. Thus it was that they 'really began to make mistakes'.<sup>45</sup> Without specifying any such mistakes, Ajahn Candasiṛī describes this as a time when 'sometimes "principles" overrode simple kindness and friendliness'.<sup>46</sup>

Since the move to Amaravati, there had been a gradual estrangement between the *sīladharā* and Ajahn Sumedho. With the removal of Ajahn Sucitto as their

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40. I use the term 'higher ordination' here because, first, that is how Ajahn Candasiṛī referred to it in my interviews with her and, secondly, to distinguish it from the lower level of ordination, the taking of the eight precepts. Strictly speaking, 'higher ordination' refers to *upasampadā*, the ordination of a *bhikkhu* or a *bhikkhunī*. However, as this option is not currently available for the English Forest Sangha nuns, it seems appropriate to use it for the highest level of ordination that they can at present attain.

41. Ajahn Sucitto, interview of 3 November 2004.

42. Interview of 6 November 2004.

43. Ajahn Sumedho, in *Freeing the Heart* (Amaravati Publications, 2001: 16).

44. Ajahn Candasiṛī interview of 6 November 2004.

45. Ajahn Candasiṛī interview of 6 November 2004.

46. E-mail of 8 March 2005.

mentor and supervisor, as well as the increasing remoteness of Ajahn Sumedho, the nuns entered a period of isolation. Ajahn Candasiṛī's perception is that he 'didn't [at that time] have much time or much respect or much confidence' in the majority of the nuns.<sup>47</sup> In Ajahn Sumedho's words,

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.<sup>48</sup>

It was a time when Ajahn Sumedho was perhaps overstretched and surprised by the rapid expansion of the *saṅgha* (other branch monasteries were opening in Devon, Northumberland, Switzerland, Italy and even planned in California), the ambitious nature of the move to Amaravati and the first disrobings amongst monks. These factors combined to create a situation of some distance between Ajahn Sumedho and the nuns.

The situation was greatly eased when, taking the advice of a senior monk and one *sīladharā*, Ajahn Sumedho realised the extent of the problem and invited the nuns to spend part of the winter retreat in 1995 meditating with him and speaking honestly about their feelings and issues that had arisen. It has also been said<sup>49</sup> that Ajahn Sumedho was able to see that he had misperceived the nuns as always seeking to be taken care of. The nuns explained that they were not seeking his constant help or protection, but rather simply recognition of their aspiration and commitment, and so a major source of misunderstanding was clarified.

He really invited people to share how things were for them, and ... particularly in relation to him. He acknowledged his part and expressed regret about how difficult it had been for us over that time ... I felt that there was a very, very major shift in our relationship with him, because he had a chance to see how earnest, how committed we were.<sup>50</sup>

### *Hartridge*

In May 1997, for various reasons it was not felt appropriate to continue to try and run the small *vihāra* in Hartridge, Devon<sup>51</sup> with *bhikkhus* and so the nuns were invited to use it as a nuns-only community, an invitation they considered

47. Interview of 6 November 2004.

48. *Freeing the Heart* (Amaravati Publications, 2001: 16).

49. Source prefers to remain anonymous.

50. Ajahn Candasiṛī interview of 6 November 2004

51. The monks had opened it in 1985; having spent an initial eighteen months in a run down cottage near Axminster; it subsequently moved to Hartridge and remained a very small branch monastery for monks.

carefully before accepting. It was a small monastery, with limited physical and psychological space. As one monk wrote, 'because of limited space, relationships with people get quite personal. Some have described it as like being in a pressure cooker'.<sup>52</sup> The running of this *vihāra* was in any case fraught with existing problems, as it is in a damp and isolated site. On top of this, there was the situation regarding the *garudhammas*.

The eight *garudhammas*, the 'weighty rules' or 'chief rules' as I.B. Horner puts it, are said in the *Vinaya* to have been the conditions upon which Mahāpajāpati (the Buddha's foster mother and maternal aunt) was ordained. Her acceptance of them (according to the Pāli Canon, Vin II 257), constituted her ordination as the first nun.<sup>53</sup> I.B. Horner gives a comprehensive consideration of them in *Women under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen*.<sup>54</sup> In essence, the rules

... were designed to preserve and promote the integrity of the women's order as a body independent of its relations with the secular world ... [but] it was clear from the beginning that the almswomen were not to be independent of the almsmen, but dependent upon them for the proper performance of most of their ceremonies and for the authorisation of them all.<sup>55</sup>

These rules were not at first explicitly included in the nuns' ordination ceremony but were introduced at a later stage, in part because of Ajahn Sucitto's hope that the nuns would be moving towards *bhikkhunī* ordination. There is a possibility that they were also introduced as a counterweight to some strongly feminist voices. Ajahn Candasiṛī remembers that Ajahn Sumedho spoke strongly on the subject of willing conformity; he felt that if women wanted to practise in this tradition, they should make good use of the opportunities and not spend time trying to change them.<sup>56</sup>

Although many of the *garudhammas* were relevant to the proposed nuns' community at Hartridge – (for example, requiring monks to set the date for the fortnightly recitation and asking them to give the 'exhortation'; see Horner, 1930: 123–37) – a key one was the second one; an undertaking not to spend the *vassa* apart from monks. Some of the nuns interested in going to Devon were happy to interpret this rule flexibly, or had not taken the rules as part of their ordination. Others, having sworn these rules formally, could not be so easily set them aside.

A meeting was held at which it was decided that, as the *garudhammas* were

52. [www.fsnewsletter.net/9/limb.htm](http://www.fsnewsletter.net/9/limb.htm) (April 2006). For a broader description of the *vihāra* in the late 1980s from the viewpoint of lay supporters, see [www.fsnewsletter.net/9/devon.htm](http://www.fsnewsletter.net/9/devon.htm) (April 2006).

53. Though Liz Williams argues that *bhikkhunīs* existed before Mahāpajāpati; see Williams (2000, 2005: ch. 3).

54. Horner (1930: 118–61, pt II ch. II).

55. Horner (1930: 118–19). Note that Horner uses 'almswoman' for *bhikkhunī* and 'almsman' for *bhikkhu*.

56. Ajahn Candasiṛī's recollections, interview of 6 November 2004.

officially only for *bhikkhunīs*, which the *sīladharā* were not, they could without penalty temporarily be laid aside. This was not a universally welcomed decision, nor an easy one.

It was discussed in a meeting of the Elders' Council ... just after our moving into Hartridge (though it had obviously been on the agenda for a while ...). The Elders were in agreement ... to allow the *garudhammas* to be informally laid aside, and the *sīladharā* were given scope to review the code of relationship between the orders of monks and nuns and ... come up with a new draft that would allow more 'room to move' so to speak. If this were to be done then it was agreed that a more formal ceremony could be performed whereby the *garudhammas* were formally laid aside and the new arrangement acknowledged. Unfortunately ... the *sīladharā* were not in a position to focus much time all together on discussion about this yet ... so at this stage it was left at this kind of open-ended informal agreement – though the *garudhammas* were thenceforward removed from the *sīladharā* ordination ceremony (into which they had been inserted in 1990).<sup>57</sup>

The nuns journeyed to Devon on foot, as a traditional *tudong* practice. Jitindriyā was one of these first nuns and has written about the journey in a chapter of *Freeing the Heart*.<sup>58</sup> The nuns were warmly welcomed by the lay community, who were happy to have a monastic presence at the small *vihāra* again. The nuns were busy, with some structural redesigning overseen by Ajahn Siripaṅṅā, and learning to handle decision-making, leading and teaching roles. These were aspects of the practice that at Amaravati and Chithurst were always handled in conjunction with the monks. Despite the steep learning curve, they were initially very happy and appreciated the great freedoms that came with the responsibilities. No longer having to defer and consult the *bhikkhu saṅgha* on everything was greatly enjoyed.

At the end of the first year there, Ajahn Jitindriyā left the community at Hartridge as she had for some time wanted to go into solitary practice. Two nuns were due to go to Hartridge after the winter retreat, to replace Ajahn Jitindriyā. They had chosen to go there in part to practise with Ajahn Siripaṅṅā, a charismatic teacher. The winter retreat that year was a quiet and introspective time for the remaining two occupants, Ajahn Siripaṅṅā and Sister Uttamā, and by the end of it, they had both come to a decision to leave the order, which they finally did, Ajahn Siripaṅṅā in the spring of 1999 and Sister Uttama in the summer.

The community was thus thrown somewhat into crisis, and Ajahn Sundarā, recently returned from a spell of solitary practice in Thailand, agreed with great

57. Jitindriyā, e-mail communication 25 February 2005.

58. 'So these walks are a monastic practice, intended to help deepen mindfulness, to cultivate a heart of faith, and to develop qualities such as patient endurance, equanimity and gratitude. Having said that, it's true to say that they are also undertaken with great enthusiasm as an opportunity to get out of the monastery for a while and enjoy life in the open countryside!' (Ajahn Jitindriyā, in *Freeing the Heart*, (Amaravati Publications, 2001: 224).

reluctance to lead the community at Hartridge, in the absence of anyone else of appropriate seniority. The two nuns who had been looking forward to practising with Ajahn Siripaṇṇā had to face their own frustrated expectations. It became evident by the spring of 2000 that the nuns were finding it very difficult. Ajahn Sundarā has described this period of time as ‘sheer madness’<sup>59</sup> but, nonetheless, there was such a commitment to making a nuns-only community that there was a great deal of energy expended in an attempt to continue.

There were no more nuns free to be sent to Hartridge<sup>60</sup> to ease the situation. In a larger community, breakdowns of communication can usually be diluted, but in a small community like Hartridge, especially one that offered so little space for separate living, the situation became untenable. Liz Williams also says that the ‘pressure on them, explicit or implicit, to be seen as being equal to the task, may have placed unnecessary burdens on [the nuns]’.<sup>61</sup> Very reluctantly, the decision was taken for the community of *sīladharā* to leave, to the great disappointment of the lay community there.

One perception of the decision to withdraw the nuns from Hartridge was a conclusion that women are incapable of living in community without the oversight of men. Jitindriyā feels that this assessment needs to be counterbalanced. From her own time at Hartridge, she would challenge the view that it was a ‘failed attempt’ at an all female community. First, she points out that the monks who have lived at Hartridge have also found it difficult to maintain a community and have had problems. Secondly, she describes the experience of living and learning together at Hartridge as ‘a necessary learning curve ... It became apparent that we were working with a very male-centric model without understanding what we needed as women’.<sup>62</sup>

In subsequent years, the wider monastic community has done a great deal to assist in communication issues, to avoid similar breakdowns and perhaps some disrobings, by psychotherapeutic work done under the auspices of the Karuna Institute.<sup>63</sup> Those nuns to whom I spoke who had taken part in these therapeutic

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59. ‘When I look back, it was sheer madness to live together in such a small space and work in a little cottage on top of each other. It was difficult for everybody. We all bravely faced the challenges and did the best thing we could with the conditions at hand. And when I look back, I look back in a more positive way’ (Ajahn Sundarā, interview of 24 November 2004, subsequently amended by her, 22 April 2005).

60. In late 1999 and early 2000, several more experienced sisters went to spend time away practising in alternative situations; this is what precipitated Ajahn Candasirī’s return to Amaravati. This in part explains the inability of the nuns to give any further support to the situation at Hartridge. The wider nuns’ community was unable to assist with a change of personnel; Ajahn Thāṇiyā was needed at Chithurst and Ajahn Candasirī moved to Amaravati to support the community there (having recovered from a potentially fatal brain haemorrhage which she suffered in September 1998).

61. Williams (2005: 221).

62. Interview of 28 January 2005.

63. A postgraduate training centre in psychotherapy and other healing forms; [www.karuna-institute.co.uk](http://www.karuna-institute.co.uk) (April 2006).



workshops and counselling sessions described them without exception as hugely beneficial.<sup>64</sup>

Other changes were happening in this period, including gradual adjustments to the way the communities were run. One small but significant issue was in the shrine-room at Chithurst.

#### *A change to the seating at Chithurst*

The original design of the shrine room at Chithurst was based on the traditional Thai model of a raised platform for the monks. The lay people sat facing them in the lowered area in front, and the nuns had a place at the back behind the lay people. This was cramped and awkward, especially on busy days. The nuns were also concerned about the image presented to visitors.

Being in a form that can be seen as diminishing the place of women, was then understandably challenging. Living at Chithurst with the old form of seating for the sisters was particularly difficult. I would see school groups and would feel uncomfortable to be participating in the wrong message they would unconsciously be getting – the men at the front, raised up, talking; the nuns at the back, silent and almost invisible ... It is important to me that women/girls know that the Buddha said that we are equally capable of realising the truth.<sup>65</sup>

As it became clear that the nuns were quietly unhappy with this seating arrangement, the monks found an interim solution. When the *sīladharā* were away at one time, the monks arranged the construction of a number of individual raised platforms for the nuns to sit on. This partial acknowledgement of the problem was gratefully received by the nuns.

I remember ... returning from being at ABM [Amaravati Buddhist Monastery] and the monks hiding to see our faces when we walked into the shine room and saw the ‘seal’ boxes,<sup>[66]</sup> small raised *āsanas* that were a precursor to it [the filling in the lower area]. Walking in, seeing them and walking straight back out into the hall, where the monks laughed. Their sense of *muditā* [sympathetic joy and one of the four *brahma-vihāras*] and warmth was memorable.<sup>67</sup>

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64. Ajahn Tiradhammo (2002), currently abbot of Dhammapāla Monastery in Switzerland, has written about the development of the Forest Sangha’s way of dealing with issues in community, and how such issues have naturally been more prevalent in the West.

65. Ajahn Thānīyā, letter of January 2005.

66. The boxes were humorously known as seal boxes, both as a pun on the ‘*sīl*’ or virtue of the *sīladharā* and partly because the nuns felt like performing seals sitting up on the boxes!

67. Ajahn Thānīyā, letter of January 2005.

The nuns themselves were hoping that the seating arrangement would be more radically and permanently changed. The Thai traditional model was however very deeply ingrained both in the minds of the Thai lay supporters and in those monks who had done their training in Thailand. It is also a point of *Vinaya* that monks and nuns may not share a seat. It was difficult, naturally enough, for the monks to imagine how the nuns felt. ‘Sometimes it seems it [was] hard for them to recognise how it might feel from our side, what it might feel like not to seem to have a proper place, where there is a sense of welcome’.<sup>68</sup> In addition, the objection of cost was raised as another obstacle to changing the floor plan. However, eventually Ajahn Sucitto took the decision to fill in the lower area, and the monastic seating became level, with the monks to one side and the nuns to the other. However complex the inspiration for the change, it made the nuns feel recognised, valued, and gave them a strong sense of belonging. Ajahn Candasiṛī has described this change as:

very, very significant. Even though these things shouldn’t matter, ultimately speaking it’s ridiculous, but in the terms of the language of symbols and convention ... think of a stage set or a courtroom ... these things can be quite deliberately set out to give a particular impression ... in a way it did seem significant to me, it did seem important.<sup>69</sup>

*The question of address – Ajahn or not?*

Perhaps one of the most significant changes to occur in the 1990s was the issue of the form of address for the increasingly senior *sīladharā*. Within the Western Forest Sangha, once a *bhikkhu* has reached ten *vassas* he is commonly addressed with the title of Ajahn, meaning simply ‘teacher’, a traditional Thai term.<sup>70</sup> It is sometimes used of female lay Buddhist teachers in Thailand, but this is uncommon. Once the first nuns reached their ten years in robes in 1993, naturally enough the question of using this title arose among the lay people. The question was raised twice until finally being considered by the Elders’ Council,<sup>71</sup> which finally approved that senior *sīladharā* too should be known by the title of Ajahn. However, the process was so lengthy that it took some thirteen years of seniority before the remaining three original nuns<sup>72</sup> were addressed in this way. By the time the matter was resolved in 1997, other nuns too had reached their ten year mark, and there was a number of female Ajahns, to the delight of the lay community and possibly to the chagrin of some of the more traditional monks.

68. Ajahn Thānīyā, letter of January 2005.

69. Ajahn Candasiṛī, interview of 24 November 2004.

70. A term used loosely in Thailand for university lecturers and teachers as well as monks.

71. On Ajahn Sucitto’s recommendation.

72. In 1987, Sister Rocanā had gone for the third time to India on pilgrimage, and had died whilst there.

In my concluding article I will continue with the history of the nuns from 2000 to the present day, also considering a similar group of nuns in Australia and looking at the possibilities for the future.

My thanks to Ajahn Candasirī for her unstintingly generous help; and also (in alphabetical order) to Ian Angell, Martine Batchelor, Ajahn Brahmavamso, Sister Brahmavarā, Anagārikā Bryony, Varaporn Chamsanit, Sister Dhammadhirā, Professor Peter Harvey, Jitindriyā, Ajahn Thānīyā, Thānissarā, Ajahn Sucitto, Ven. Sujato, Ajahn Sundarā, Ajahn Vāyāmā, and Liz Williams.

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- Jitindriyā: ex-*sīladharā*, recently having left Amaravati Buddhist Monastery; e-mail correspondence from December 2004 to March 2005; telephone interview conducted 28 January 2005.
- Sucitto, Ajahn: Abbot of Cittaviveka Buddhist Monastery; interview conducted 3 November 2004.
- Sundarā, Ajahn: Amaravati Buddhist Monastery; interview conducted 24 November 2004.
- Thānissarā: *Dhamma* teacher and ex-*sīladharā* of Chithurst and Amaravati, now resident at a Buddhist Centre she helped to found in South Africa; e-mail correspondence.
- Thaniyā, Ajahn: senior nun of Cittaviveka Buddhist Monastery, currently on a sabbatical year in New Zealand; correspondence by letter December 2004 to January 2005.