

# Against the odds

A devoted lady opened a new chapter in Thai Buddhism, yet as **Aree Chaisatien** reports, she was initially regarded as a fraud

**W**hen she first wore a saffron robe, the venerable Dhammananda Bhikkhuni was labelled as an impostor. Not just the men, the women also called her a heretic and an egoist.

Her talk on Buddhism was censored during a national television appearance, as many believed she was acting against the law of the Thai Sangha Supreme Council and the devout beliefs of orthodox Buddhists.

A female monk in Thailand was still a distant dream. That in a country where more than 90 per cent of people are Theravada Buddhists and an estimated 300,000 male monks (*bhikkhus*) and around 10,000 nuns (*mae chi*, women of religious faith dressing in white), offer prayers at 25,000 temples.

Traditionally, a Vinaya regulation states that any woman wanting to become a nun can only be ordained by a mixed Sangha, comprising *bhikkhus* (male monks) and *bhikkhuni* (female nuns). However, a *bhikkhuni* Sangha never existed in the Thai Theravada order, as women were never allowed to be ordained. In 1928, Thailand's highest ranking monk, the Supreme Patriarch, issued an order forbidding any monk from ordaining women, after the case of Narin Kleung, who supported women's ordination and had his two daughters ordained. They were disrobed and thrown in jail. However there are many countries following the Mahayana path that offer



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full *bhikkhuni* ordination, such as Taiwan (since 1988), and Tibet, where ordination is available at the novice level only, although some women have received higher ordination through the Chinese tradition.

The *bhikkhuni* Sangha disappeared from the Theravada tradition around 700 years back until Sri Lanka restored it in 1996, and the first ordination had to be

conducted with the help of Korean and Taiwanese *bhikkhunis*.

While many Thai women and *mae chi* hope to be reborn as men in their next life in order to be ordained and attain enlightenment, Dhammananda Bhikkhuni stands out – she flew to Sri Lanka to be ordained.

In February 2001, Dhammananda Bhikkhuni was the first

Thai woman to be fully ordained as a female novice in Sri Lanka according to the Theravada tradition. She went on to become a female Buddhist monk (*bhikkhuni*) two years later.

Female monks may seem a new phenomenon in Thai society but she argues that it's nothing new to Buddhism. The Buddha said that the health of Buddhism depended on the existence of four pillars: *bhikkhu* (male monks), *bhikkhuni* (female monks), *upasaka* (male devotees), and *upasika* (female devotees). She said that her decision to become a *bhikkhuni* was only to carry on the Buddha's historical spiritual heritage. "We're struggling to maintain the status that was given to us by the Buddha," Dhammananda said.

Her trail-blazing uplifts women's spirituality, and empowers women to access spiritual wisdom. "I believe that enlightenment is a quality of mind, and the mind has no gender. It transcends the male and the female. When we reach that supreme state, gender ceases to exist," she said.

Following in her footsteps, there are now four other Theravada *bhikkhunis* and 20 female novices (*samaneri*) across the country, either by ordination in Sri Lanka or in Thailand.

Officially, the Thai clergy still does not recognise her *bhikkhuni* status but many revered male monks have suggested that only time will let her prove herself.

Born in 1945, Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, formerly known as Dr Chatsuman Kabil Singh, studied philosophy in India, completed her master's degree at the McMaster University, Canada, before obtaining her

doctorate in Buddhism at Magadh University in India. Married with two sons, she has been a professor of religion and philosophy at Thammasat University.

She has written more than 60 books, some of which have been translated into English, including "Thai Women in Buddhism" (1991). Her most recent books include "Bhikkhuni: The Reflection of Gender in Thai Society" (2004) in Thai, and "Happiness in the Making" (bilingual).

Her thoughts have touched many contemporary Buddhists, particularly her radical opinion that social activism is an integral component of spiritual life. She is persistent in her argument about the close link between prostitution and female ordination. In Thai society, where destitute or unemployed boys or men can stay at a temple and serve monks as temple children (*dek wat*) in exchange for shelter and food, or can be ordained as monks, girls and women in the same situation may end up in prostitution.

"Why is the door for women to be ordained locked but the door for women to go into prostitution so wide open? If we open the door for women to be ordained, wouldn't it help uplift women's status?" she asks.

Venerable Dhammananda was among 1,000 women who were nominated for the 2005 Noble Peace Prize. She is presently a councillor at the International Committee for Peace Council. She edits *Yasodhara*, a quarterly newsletter on international Buddhist women's activities.

Luang Mae, or Mother Monk as many followers call her, lives at Wat Songdhammakalayani, in a southwest suburb of Bangkok. ■