

**Message on the occasion of the upasampadā ordination
of Sisters Ānandabodhi, Santacittā, and Nimmalā**

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi

First I extend cordial greetings to all my Dhamma friends who have gathered to participate in this blessed event, both to the ordained monks and nuns and to members of the lay community. With deep appreciation, I congratulate the new bhikkhunīs, Ānandabodhi, Santacittā, and Nimmalā, and I welcome them as fully ordained members of the monastic Sangha. I also commend Ayyā Tathālokā for taking on the role of preceptor, and Ayyā Medhanandī for her role as teacher.

A year ago, when I learned from Sisters Ānandabodhi and Santacittā that they intended to take full ordination this month, I had made it a high priority to participate. However, because of a health impairment, I realized that long-distance travel would tax my physical strength. With deep regrets, I thus have to resign myself to sending this message.

In Pali there is a word that expresses what I'm feeling far better than the English word "congratulations." This is the word *anumodanā*. The word means "rejoicing in unison," that is, sharing the joy of those who directly experience joy. I know that today is a day of great joy for the three new bhikkhunis. It is also an occasion of *anumodanā* for me, and it must surely be a day of *anumodanā* for everyone present at their ordination.

The nuns have now fulfilled a dream that arose in their hearts from the days when they first encountered the Dhamma: the dream of becoming full-fledged members of the monastic Sangha. For Sisters Ānandabodhi and Santacittā, in particular, the road has been hard. When they tried to fulfill their dream, they must have found it strange to be told that the doors were locked and the key had long ago vanished, that we must wait for the next Buddha to bring it back thousands of years in the future.

For centuries, the belief has prevailed in Theravada Buddhist countries that bhikkhuni ordination is no longer feasible. This is a belief to which I myself subscribed years ago when I lived in Sri Lanka. In those days, when I asked elder monks whether bhikkhuni ordination is possible, invariably they would answer that it isn't possible. This

pronouncement clashed with my sense of social justice and human rights. However, since my informants were much more learned than I was, I felt obliged to accept their conclusion.

When I was invited to participate in the Hamburg Conference on Bhikkhuni Ordination in 2007, I realized that I had to resolve this issue for myself. By carefully studying the relevant texts, I discovered that the matter was ambiguous. It seemed to me that how one viewed the possibility of bhikkhuni ordination depended on one's framework for interpreting the texts, and that this framework often reflected attitudes and beliefs that were culturally determined rather than grounded in the texts themselves. To make my point, I used the analogy of geometry. If one thinks in the framework of Euclidean geometry, the sum of the angles of a triangle is always 180 degrees. But in the early 20th century, when spherical geometry was formulated, it was found that a triangle could even contain three right angles totaling 270 degrees—a conclusion that overturned the premises of the Euclidean system.

In a similar way, I came to regard Theravada traditionalism as the Buddhist counterpart of Euclidean geometry. Within the framework of Euclidean geometry, its conclusions are perfectly valid, and so it is with traditional Theravada. But I also realized that if we start with different premises from the traditionalists, we could reach a different conclusion. We could conclude that bhikkhuni ordination for Theravada women is valid, and given this fact, we could claim that there are no legal barriers against such ordinations. Beginning in the late 1990s, others had reached the same conclusion—without the analogy of geometry! Thus over the past fifteen years bhikkhuni ordinations for Theravada women have been taking place both in Asia and the West. Fortunately, in the Theravada world, these women have had the guidance of forward-thinking monks from Sri Lanka, who have been at the forefront in the revival of bhikkhuni ordination.

Sisters Anandabodhi and Santacittā come from a different lineage than the Sri Lankan one, a lineage that has strongly opposed the revival of bhikkhuni ordination. Thus for them to take this step, they had to face a critical choice: either remain in their lineage and decline the ordination, or receive full ordination and leave the lineage. I know that they loved their training and deeply respected their monastic teachers. The choice they faced was thus a tough one. Yet in the end they *had no choice*: they had to obey the call of their

hearts, which pointed them in a direction they could not refuse. The decision was painful to them, and it was also painful to members of their community and also to many of their lay supporters. They knew, however, that the call of conscience sometimes demands that we sever old ties and relinquish familiar territory. They heeded that call and began to act on it. The ordination being held today is the culmination of that decision.

Months of planning and preparation have led to this hall at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. The directors of Spirit Rock are to be commended for offering the center for this ordination: this is truly a meritorious gift whose reverberations will be felt for centuries. The decision has brought representatives of the Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni Sanghas from as far away as Australia, Germany, and Sri Lanka. It has also awakened great joy and hope in many lay Buddhists.

The ordination taking place today, like several that have preceded it, has a significance that goes beyond the immediate occasion. It opens the door to a broader and more egalitarian vision of monastic life. For the Dhamma to live and flourish, I feel, we have to be ready to adapt to the conditions of our own age and culture. The moral arc of our present age moves towards social justice: towards such values as reciprocity, mutual respect, and appreciation of diversity. This includes a greater awareness of the uniqueness of the feminine and a call for the contribution of feminine voices—voices which have been subdued if not entirely muted in traditional Buddhism. I personally believe that for Buddhism to thrive and unfold its potential, it has to be nourished, enriched, and renewed by feminine perspectives, especially on such crucial matters as social justice and care for the natural environment.

The values we need to tackle these problems resonate well with principles at the heart of the Dhamma and these are also values that are well expressed by the feminine point of view. Thus, I feel, these values should be clearly articulated and embodied in our Buddhist communities. Of course, tradition too has a strong claim on our allegiance and should not be discarded in haste. Without the strength and conserving force of tradition, much that is central to the Dhamma could be diluted or lost. What we have to do is to strike a healthy balance between preservation of ancient forms and adaptation to present realities; otherwise we might find ourselves left with merely a dried out shell of the Dhamma, not its

living essence.

I have discussed the issues surrounding bhikkhuni ordination with Sisters Ānandabodhi and Santacittā and I know they have not made their decision lightly. I trust their ability to fulfill their responsibilities with faith, wisdom, courage, and reverence. I am thus delighted to applaud today the ordination of all three of these women. I wish them much joy, happiness, and strength as they walk the challenging path that has just opened up beneath their feet.