Buddhist Studies Review 23(1) 2006, 93–112

ISSN (print): 0256-2897
ISSN (online): 1747-9681

Women in Brown[1]: 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 *bhikkhunī*s 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[2].

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 *sīladharā*. Ajahn Candasirī, 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[3]), 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-*sīladharā*, 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,[4] 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 Candasirī 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 Kabilsingh (1991) on Thailand.

Renunciant Theravāda women today

What is available for Theravāda women who wish to pursue a renunciant spiritual life?[5] In Sri Lanka, so far, no evidence has been found of renunciant women in the period between the demise of the *bhikkhunī* 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[6]. 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.[7]

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[8] mentions some nuns who concentrate on meditation, including westerners who at the time of her research were in Sri Lanka[9], but these were a small minority of the *dasa sil mātāvo.* Secondly, their material support is less assured that that of the *bhikkhu saṅgha.* Whilst some nuns' *vihāra*s 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'[10]. 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 *sīladharā* 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.[11]

In recent years in Asia, things have started to change. Since 1996, there has been a revival of an ordination for *bhikkhunī*s in Sri Lanka, with several hundred women now ordained as *bhikkhunī*s. 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.[12] 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

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 Thāniyā, letter of January 2005).

11. From *Banner of the Arahants. Chapter VII: 3,* 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 (April 2006) and 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.[13]

> 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.[14]

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'[15] 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

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.[16] These rules, covering general deportment and behaviour concerning food, robes, teaching etc. are found in both the *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī 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.[17] 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 *bhikkhunī* 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 *bhikkhu*s, 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 *Sangha* to employ it and establish an order of Buddhist mendicant nuns ... in the West.[18]

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.[19] 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.[20] 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

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 *bhikṣuṇī* 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.[21] Thus they were free to concentrate on spiritual matters to a greater degree.[22]

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,[23] 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, underblouse, jacket, upper robe and outer robe that all should wear.[24]

A further three women who had been living with the community for some time took white and became *anagārikā*s 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*',[25] 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 recollects 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 *bhikkhu*s' 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 *bhikkhunī*s 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'.[26] 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,[27] 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',[28] as well as a monastery for some of the community of *bhikkhu*s, 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[29] 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 *kuṭī*s (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.*[30] They arrived on the 2 August 1984 and circumnambulated the large field, chanting.

26. Ajahn Candasirī, interview of 6 September 2004.
27. The City of 10,000 Buddhas.
28. Ajahn Candasirī, interview of 6 September 2004.
29. Named after the celebrated ancient monastery of Amarāvatī in south-east India.
30. *Tudong* or *dhutaṅga* 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"'.[31] 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,[32] 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 *acarinī*s (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,[33] 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.[34] Nuns move between these communities as required, for both personal and 'staffing' reasons. Any prospective *anagārikā*[35] 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 Candasirī, 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 *vihāra* 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, *sāmaṇera*s. He included parts of the *bhikkhunī* rules because 'the novice training was designed more for little boys than for mature women'.[36] He has also said that he 'toned down some of the more peculiar bits' of the *bhikkhunī pāṭimokkha.*[37] It was already expected that the nuns should keep the 75 *sekhiya* rules and these had been incorporated in the nuns *Uposatha*[38] 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 *bhikkhu*s, seemed to carry no weight for nuns; this was somewhat discouraging for some of them.

From my interview with Ajahn Sucitto,[39] 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 *bhikkhu*s can be found in Thanissaro Bhikkhu's comprehensive presentation of and explanation of the Monastic Code, in chapter 15 at http://accesstoinsight.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.[40] 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[41] which Ajahn Candasirī has said was 'very, very hard for him'.[42]

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.[43]

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'.[44] 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'.[45] Without specifying any such mistakes, Ajahn Candasirī describes this as a time when 'sometimes "principles" overrode simple kindness and friendliness'.[46]

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

40. I use the term 'higher ordination' here because, first, that is how Ajahn Candasirī 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 Candasirī interview of 6 November 2004.
45. Ajahn Candasirī 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 Candasirī'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.[47] 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.[48]

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[49] 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.[50]

Hartridge

In May 1997, for various reasons it was not felt appropriate to continue to try and run the small *vihāra* in Hartridge, Devon[51] with *bhikkhu*s 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 Candasirī 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'.[52] 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 *garudhamma*s.

The eight *garudhamma*s, 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.[53] I.B. Horner gives a comprehensive consideration of them in *Women under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen.*[54] 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.[55]

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 Candasirī 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.[56]

Although many of the *garudhamma*s 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 *garudhamma*s were

52. 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 (April 2006).
53. Though Liz Williams argues that *bhikkhunī*s 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 Candasirī's recollections, interview of 6 November 2004.

officially only for *bhikkhunī*s, 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).[57]

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.*[58] 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 Siripañña, 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 Siripañña, a charismatic teacher. The winter retreat that year was a quiet and introspective time for the remaining two occupants, Ajahn Siripañña 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 Siripañña 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 Siripaññā 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'[59] 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[60] 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]'.[61] 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'.[62]

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.[63] Those nuns to whom I spoke who had taken part in these therapeutic

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 Thāniyā 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 (April 2006).

workshops and counselling sessions described them without exception as hugely beneficial.[64]

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.[65]

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,[66] small raised *āsana*s 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-vihāra*s] and warmth was memorable.[67]

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 Thāniyā, 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 Thāniyā, 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'.[68] 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 Candasirī 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.[69]

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 *vassa*s he is commonly addressed with the title of Ajahn, meaning simply 'teacher', a traditional Thai term.[70] 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,[71] 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[72] 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 Thāniyā, letter of January 2005.
69. Ajahn Candasirī, 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 Thāniyā, Thānissarā, Ajahn Sucitto, Ven. Sujato, Ajahn Sundarā, Ajahn Vāyāmā, and Liz Williams.

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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.
Thanīyā, Ajahn: senior nun of Cittaviveka Buddhist Monastery, currently on a sabbatical year in New Zealand; correspondence by letter December 2004 to January 2005.

Buddhist Studies Review 23(2) 2006, 221–40
doi: 10.1558/bsrv.2006.23.2.221

ISSN (print): 0256-2897
ISSN (online): 1747-9681

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.

Published online 2007
equinox

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 *anagārikā*s) 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 *sīladharā* 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 *sīladharā* 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 *garudhamma*s 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.

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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.

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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 Thāniyā'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 Thāniyā, letter of January 2005.

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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* (*anagārikā*[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 *anagārikā*. 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 Nanachat, 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

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> 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 *sīladharā* 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.

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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 innovation[17]. 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.

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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 *sīladharā* 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 *sīladharā* 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 *sīladharā*? 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 *bhikkhunī*s 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 Thāniyā, letter of January 2005.

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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 *bhikkhunī*s 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 *bhikkhu*s 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 *bhikkhunī*s 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 *bhikkhu*s from giving ordination to women in Thailand, and therefore those involved have to be discreet. Information from Varaporn Chamsanit, 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 Candasirī, 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 Candasirī 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 an formally; see for example Ajahn Sumedho's preface to *Freeing the Heart* (2001:13) where he refers to 'the Nuns' Sangha'.

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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 *bhikkhu*s' 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 *bhikkhunī*s; 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.

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way, from the inside out, through centuries of experience.[30] Since the Theravādin *bhikkhunī* order died out[31] in the 11 century,[32] there has been no such living evolution, merely the set of 311 rules. These rules and of course the *garudhamma*s 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 *bhikkhuṇī 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]

30. The *bhikkhu*s too would have to readjust as their rule contains restrictions on dealing with *bhikkhunī*s that have not been used for centuries.
31. Of course the Chinese *bhikṣuṇī* order, originally instituted by Sri Lanka *bhikkhunī*s, has continued to the present day and it is from here (through the auspices of Taiwanese and Korean *bhikṣuṇī*s) that the lineage has been revived.)
32. In Sri Lanka – it has been said that the *bhikkhunī 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 *bhikkhunī* 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 *bhikkhunī Vinaya.*
34. *The Question of Bhikkhunī 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).

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> 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 *sīladharā*, 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 Theravadan Bhikkhunis, and an increase in positivity for full ordination has developed'. Jitindriyā, e-mail of 12 February 2005.

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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 *garudhamma*s, 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.

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tions, e.g. in a seating order or the order in which people collect a meal. But the *sīladharā* 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 then 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 *bhikkhunī*s. 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 *sīladharā* is hierarchically inferior, or perhaps better described as subordinate; the question is, does this matter? Many argue that the *garudhamma*s, 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 if the biggest challenges that the nuns face. Although the *sīladharā* 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 *sīladharā* 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 *vassa*s, 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 *garudhamma*s 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.

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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 requisites[47] 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 *anagārikā*s (homeless ones) instead of *mae chi*s ... 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 Candasirī 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.

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> into a comprehensive Rule suitable for their situation and reminiscent of the *bhikkhunī* order. They observe fortnightly confession, they have alms bowls, and go on almsround. Since the demise of the *bhikkhunī* 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 *bhikkhunī* 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 Candasirī has put it:

> One of Ajahn Sumedho's favourite questions is, 'Do you want to be enlightened or to be a *bhikkhunī*?' 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 *bhikkhunī* 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 *bhikkhunī* 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 Candasirī, written communication following her reading of the draft of this paper, 24 April 2005.

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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 Thāniyā, letter of January 2005.
51. *Ibid*.

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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 *sīladharā*, but could be strengthened through greater connections with senior *mae-ji* in Thailand, for example.

The future is currently looking bright for the *sīladharā*, 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*.

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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 *bhikkhunī*s.

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.

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 Thāniyā, Thānissarā, Ajahn Sucitto, Ven. Sujato, Ajahn Sundarā, Ajahn Vāyāmā and Liz Williams.

53. Ajahn Thāniyā, letter of January 2005.

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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.

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