

Where we are now

The following article concerns our ongoing efforts to balance the needs involved in living Sangha life in the West. As many of you know, sometimes this is easier, and sometimes more difficult. For many of us, both monastic and lay community members, this past year has been challenging. We hope you will recognize in the following account the sincerity of our attempts to be skilful; and that you can empathize with our aspirations to honour all the individuals involved. Months ago we knew we would want to share something in writing with those of our lay friends interested or concerned. This is an attempt to offer such an account, as well as some general context, in the hope it may help. Specifically, it addresses the recent process our Sangha has been engaged in, involving Luang Por Sumedho's wish to clarify the training aspect of the relationship between the bhikkhus and the siladhara nuns. At the Elders' Meeting at Chithurst on October 16 we realized the time was right and that we were ready enough to prepare something. However, the need to consult widely, and the travel plans of many, have meant this task has been even more time consuming than it would have been. The nuns have wished that this article be authored by the senior bhikkhus; accordingly it has been prepared by most of the abbots and theras on the Elders' Council, including the monasteries in Britain, Switzerland, Italy, New Zealand and California. It has been read and commented upon by the senior nuns at Amaravati and Cittaviveka.

19 November, 2009

Dear friends,

Over the past year or so our Sangha, particularly at Amaravati and Cittaviveka monasteries where there are dual communities of monks and nuns (*bhikkhus* and *siladhara*) living side by side, has been engaged in an attempt to clarify our understanding of the training forms we have, specifically the siladhara training for the nuns. While it has been good grist for the mill to practise with, the process has indeed been challenging, and often painful. This has proved especially so for the nuns, and there has been understandable concern amongst some of our friends in the lay community. It has been our intention for months, therefore, to write something to describe the unfolding of our discussions, for anyone interested, once the process had reached a place of sufficient resolution. Given the global spread of our communities, and our wish to provide a report that genuinely reflects our shared view, this has taken considerable time. As it is, of course, this account still only approximates the process and by no means fully describes it.

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It may be helpful to provide some context.

The Theravada tradition traces its origin to Gotama Buddha, whose teachings are recorded in the Pali Canon. One part of this canon is the *Vinaya Pitaka*, which outlines the regulations and procedures of the monastic community. Thus, for the ordination of a monastic to be recognized as authentic, it must conform to the standards laid down in the *Vinaya Pitaka*. Anyone who receives Theravada ordination also agrees to follow the guidelines of the *Vinaya*, rather than the changing social standards of the world.

Over the 2,500 years of the Buddhist monastic tradition, there has sometimes arisen uncertainty about procedures or interpretation of the texts. A range of scholarly commentaries, as well as personal opinion regarding what is the 'correct' practice of Vinaya has thus grown over the years. Together with this, there are also the prevailing views of senior and learned elders, who can be called upon to offer some experienced wisdom if uncertainty arises. The great strength of the Theravada tradition is that it preserves probably the oldest record of the Buddha's teachings, which can then be called upon as the authoritative reference.

Theravada Buddhism thus has at its heart the *Dhamma-Vinaya* (Teaching and Training) which the Buddha left as his legacy to future generations who wish to practise the path he taught. This compassionate teaching offers us a way to realize complete liberation from suffering. It is a path to freedom, which is supported by a body of rules and conventions that have remained largely unchanged throughout Buddhist history. Having a clearly defined training within which to reflect and cultivate the heart has provided not only support for individuals living the monastic life; it has provided the means for the many subsequent generations of the Buddha's disciples to stay together, to carry on the teachings for the past 2,500 years – and to keep this precious path available to us and to future generations.

Within Theravada there is, therefore, a great respect for the training as we have received it from our elders. The Theravada Sangha communities practising in the Buddhist world today all have the same code of discipline, or *Vinaya*, as did Buddha's direct disciples. Venerable Ajahn Chah was an extraordinary example of a monk who practised the Dhamma-Vinaya strictly, leading to profound wisdom. Through his guidance and example he offered much to support the Lord Buddha's dispensation. The communities he established during his time of teaching, and those that arose under his disciples during his time of sickness and since his death, have been particularly successful and resilient. A lot of this has to do with the way his Sangha have maintained harmony and practised together, with their commitment to the Teaching and the Training.

It is remarkable how our Sangha in the UK and the West has developed as well as it has over the years. We reflect with deep gratitude on what we have all been given – both from Thailand and from the supporters here in the West. Without their extraordinary generosity we would not have these communities. Thirty years ago, when Ajahn Sumedho moved with a few Western monks from Ajahn Chah's forest monastery in Thailand to the house where they first lived in London, it was not clear that people in the West would be at all interested in such a foreign tradition and training. As it turned out, not only were people interested, many men wished to enter the training under Ajahn Sumedho's guidance as monks. And at the same time, there were women who also wished to do this. Ajahn Sumedho's response was to try to find a way within the tradition to allow women the same chance the monks had to live and practise the *samana* (renunciant) life.

At the time, as a Theravada monk and disciple of Ajahn Chah, the options Ajahn Sumedho could provide for the interested women were limited. He, along with all of the senior monks at the time, received much advice on how they must change to accommodate European ways (from the clothes we should wear, to the times we should eat, as well as on the inclusion of women). These views were listened to, and then a conscious decision was taken to 'go gradually': only to change things when it became clear the time was right and it was truly in keeping with Dhamma-Vinaya. The community learned to see that individual views and

opinions may be convincing in their appearance, but if the timing is not right or if there is not a consensus on a decision, it is likely to lead to more obstructions than progress. An essential aspect of Vinaya is the authority of consensus decision making. The authority given to elders who have practised for a long time is likewise most highly regarded; but the bottom line is that if there isn't consensus agreement then a decision cannot hold. Any attempt to bypass the often time-consuming task of reaching consensus is considered unwise, tempting as it may sometimes appear.

Another important aspect of Dhamma-Vinaya is not to abolish rules laid down by the Buddha and not to create new ones. Originally the Buddha set up a monks' order, the Bhikkhu Sangha, and later a nuns' order, the Bhikkhuni Sangha. The Bhikkhuni Sangha disappeared within the Theravada tradition about a thousand years ago, and it was not until very recently that there were many, in the East or the West, who gave any credibility to the suggestion that the Order of Bhikkhunis could be legitimately revived.

However, within a few years of our Sangha arriving in Britain, as more Western women requested the training it became apparent that the eight-precept ordination prevalent in Thailand, which was used by Ajahn Chah and initially by Ajahn Sumedho in the West, fell short of providing a fully adequate renunciant training. So Ajahn Sumedho looked for other examples in the Theravada world which could serve as a precedent for women to live as alms mendicants. The outcome was the Order of Siladhara, based in Vinaya on the Ten Precepts, which include the relinquishment of money and are what traditionally constitute *samaneri* (female novice) ordination. In addition to these Ten Precepts, a much more complete training was worked out over the years, based on the bhikkhu and bhikkhuni Vinayas, which the siladhara keep similarly to the way the bhikkhus do theirs. (These are not considered to be the creation of new Vinaya rules, but rather a detailed extra training which the siladhara resolve to keep just as diligently alongside the Ten Precepts. More information on how this training was put together can be found in Ajahn Sucitto's article in the Oct. 2007 *Forest Sangha Newsletter* here: <http://fsnewsletter.amaravati.org/html/81/order.htm>). While in letter their ordination rests technically on the Ten Precepts, in practice and in spirit the nuns are considered to be fully-fledged samanās. Their training has been thoroughly cultivated by the women who have put so much into developing it, and the Siladhara Sangha is now impressively well established.

Over the thirty years we've been living and practising in the West, the process of development for both the nuns' and monks' communities has had its difficulties yet, all things considered, it has worked well. It has involved discerning how we can best support each other as people, while living a samana life that is part of an ancient tradition here in modern Britain, one fit for the purpose for which we each enter the monastic life: the heart's liberation from ignorance. Ajahn Sumedho's encouragement all along has been to attempt to practise faithfully the tradition we have inherited and of which we are fortunate and grateful to be a part, rather than to break off on our own by changing the tradition to suit our own wishes or expectations. Separating ourselves from our lineage would mean losing countless spiritual and communal supports. For example, apart from many others which are not obvious or easy to articulate, the monks and nuns from our communities in the West would be unlikely to have similar opportunities to those our senior Sangha members have had, to visit and practise under the great teachers in our monasteries in Thailand. The siladhara training has been our sincere attempt to provide a way to balance the need for a mendicant form for women, that provides

equal access to the fundamental requirements of the renunciant life as the Buddha envisaged it, with the need to honour our inheritance.

As those of you who visit the monasteries know, our Sangha now includes established communities of both monks and nuns, living side by side, sharing teaching duties etc. Most of you will also be aware of how in certain ritual situations, such as who goes first in the food line, the monks lead and the nuns follow. This reflection of the siladhara community's status as 'junior' to the bhikkhu community is often jarring and causes a dissonance we all feel. The understanding of Dhamma-Vinaya as we have received it has always been such that this 'junior-senior' relationship requires the choreography and protocol in certain areas to be handled this way where the two communities meet.

It is a difficult arrangement to accept for many of us in the West, and it does carry risks. For the most part we try to minimize these areas as much as we feel we can without causing a break with our lineage, and to weather the tension this may create in our relationship with our Sangha peers in Thailand. It is important to remember, especially for those of us in the monasteries, that the junior-senior relationship between the two communities relates to the conventions only and is not meant to be taken personally. This is true within each community as well, in the relationships between junior and senior monks and between junior and senior nuns. We are committed to making every effort to relate to each other equally as human being to human being, especially in a situation where the conventional forms sometimes place one person first and another second. This is all very foreign to the Western conditioning most of us have received and we can easily get it wrong; part of our work as Western monks and nuns has involved finding our way with all this.

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There has always been a diversity of views in our communities regarding how to live as monks and nuns in the West. Some feel strongly that mixed-gender communities are unwise, going against Buddhist (and non-Buddhist) historical experience and are bound to lead to pain, particularly considering the unequal conventional structures we must work within. Others, both monks and nuns, believe strongly in the positive value of mixed communities and don't want much division. Throughout, we have resolved – as we continue to do – to make the tremendous effort required to cooperate, all seventy or so of us.

As the siladhara community has become better established, there have been efforts to provide separate nuns' monasteries. In the mid nineties the monks left Hartridge Vihara in Devon, and after discussion with the Sangha the nuns took the opportunity to develop their own separate monastery – though the timing proved premature and after a few years they decided to return to Amaravati and Cittaviveka. In the last few years, after a debate about whether or not to spend the substantial sum involved on obtaining a new property for a separate nuns' monastery, the decision was made to purchase Rocana Vihara, a larger cottage and property next to the existing nuns' residence at Cittaviveka, in order to provide more room and ability to conduct their own affairs for the nuns there. And just this month three of the siladhara, Ajahn Anandabodhi, Ajahn Metta and Ajahn Santacitta, along with Anagarika Santussika, have, after several years of preparation, left with the blessings of the monks' and nuns' Sanghas to establish a branch monastery of the siladhara community in California. Currently efforts are also being made by Ajahn Candasiri to find a suitable property for a nuns' community in Scotland.

Moving towards the establishment of separate monasteries in addition to the dual-community monasteries of Amaravati and Cittaviveka is seen by the monks and nuns to be a healthy thing. While Luang Por Sumedho has at all times wanted it to be clear that Amaravati and Cittaviveka will remain places that welcome both nuns and monks, most of us do recognize that, because of our conditioning and the nature of our society, real tensions often arise when living in dual communities where the limitations of the conventions are highlighted day after day. While not feeling able to alter the conventions beyond certain limits necessitated by our understanding of Vinaya, and no longer seeing unending efforts in that direction as being helpful, Luang Por has at the same time wanted to empower and encourage the Siladhara Sangha to start monasteries of their own. This will provide options for women who wish to train in this lineage, but who find it unhelpful to live in dual communities with the hierarchical conventions as we interpret them. In their own monasteries the nuns will not have to play second fiddle to the monks, but will have the chance to lead a monastic and lay community in just the same way as the bhikkhus do. Individual siladhara can then choose to live out their samana life that way if they wish, just as the bhikkhus can in the many monasteries for monks which already exist in our community.

So it has been challenging for all of us to find a way to hold the conventional structure we've inherited in a way that honours our debt to our teachers, while at the same time caring for the human needs of the many individuals involved. One of the blessings of the Vinaya is that it is a historical inheritance not subject to alteration according to changing cultural perspectives. This can support the existence of communities of diverse people, committed to the Dhamma, who may have views that differ greatly on nearly every subject, yet who are able to live together in harmony because the training we all wish to follow is not the product of a current idea about how things should ideally be set up. And yet ... the disparity inherent in the formal relationship between the monks and the nuns points to a matter of ethical principle for many of us. To be clear, we do not see the arrangement itself of 'senior' to 'junior' and who leads or follows to be inherently harmful or wrong. If we could choose for ourselves how to set it all up, we would each probably have it otherwise. As it is it's workable. However, what is crucial, of course, is the way we all hold it.

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Mistakes in this area, of monks taking the conventions personally and of nuns taking them personally, have been made, even though we've all tried extremely hard with all this over the years. Towards the end of last year, however, Luang Por Sumedho recognized a level of confusion present regarding the training conventions that was causing people pain. He also came to understand that some siladhara felt the conventions were in themselves harmful, and had asked for ordination with an assumption the structures we have inherited were eventually to be abandoned or changed. This came as a surprise, and since he and many of the bhikkhus regard some of these areas as not open to change without causing a break from our lineage, he felt it unwise to continue offering siladhara *pabbajja* (meaning 'going forth' from home to homelessness, this is the word which we have used throughout the years to refer to the siladhara ordination) until he was sure all significant misunderstandings had been clarified – so the community could be more settled on these questions and that anyone requesting the training in future could make an informed choice. At the time Luang Por said he did not wish to cause anyone pain by providing an ordination form which they will experience as harmful, where his intention has always been for it to be a source of blessing and benefit for all those who request it and undertake to use it as a vehicle for Dhamma practice.

Around the same time he began looking to the future. Until now Ajahn Sumedho has himself alone provided the recognized connection for the Siladhara Sangha to our Sangha in Thailand. Having personally asked permission from, checked and received approval over the years from various elders of the Thai Sangha concerning the siladhara training, he has carried the responsibility for siladhara ordinations – as well as providing validation for their community in as far as relations with Thailand go. Feeling the time was right to ensure the continuity of this link so that the nuns could continue to be seen and supported as a legitimate part of our tradition after he passes away, Luang Por decided to ask the Bhikkhu Sangha if we would accept the role that up until now, he has held on his own.

Thus began a particularly challenging period in the community. Luang Por's loss of confidence that there was a shared perspective on what he considered to be basic elements of training led him to give many talks on the subject. Yet, though there were long discussions from time to time with various senior monks, many of the nuns felt there to be a painful absence of communication. Luang Por had not approached the nuns as a group; indeed, it was even unclear to them why the ordinations were not going ahead. And, although Luang Por was always clear that he would continue with siladhara ordinations once he was confident there was a shared understanding of the training, that message was at the time regrettably unclear to the nuns.

With the three-month winter retreat of 2009 coming up, Luang Por asked that the next Theras' Meeting¹, to be held in April of 2009, consider two questions: First, would the theras agree in principle to the Bhikkhu Sangha taking over his responsibility for the siladhara ordination, so the nuns would be able to continue when he's gone. We agreed to this, hearing that Ajahn Pasanno was prepared to be a preceptor for any women who wished to take ordination at the prospective nuns' monastery in California. Luang Por also was happy to continue to serve as preceptor. We agreed that the mechanism for fulfilling the role Ajahn Sumedho had held in confirming the siladhara candidates once they were accepted and put forward by the Siladhara Sangha, could be through the theras representing their communities on the Elders' Council².

¹ The Theras' Meeting is a meeting, held annually after the winter retreat, of all the monks in the greater community of our monasteries who have been bhikkhus for ten years or more (called *theras*). This time it included the European monastery abbots (absent Luang Por) as well as Ajahn Amaro from Abhayagiri and Ajahn Tiradhammo from Bodhinyanarama in New Zealand. There is a Theris' Meeting (all the siladhara of over ten years' standing) held concurrently.

² The Elders' Council is a Sangha decision-making body representing monks' and nuns' communities in many of our monasteries in the UK, Europe, California and New Zealand. It consists of the abbots (on whom the bhikkhus in their monastery have taken dependence, or *nissaya*) as well as usually a second, elected representative senior monk from each monastery with four or more samanās, and five senior nuns, two each from Amaravati and Cittaviveka and one from Aloka Vihara, the new nuns' monastery in California. Currently this amounts to about 12 theras representing 50–60 bhikkhus, and 5 theris representing 15 siladhara. Members are expected to fully brief and report back to their communities. It meets twice a year, with the two monks and one nun from the monasteries outside of Europe usually attending once a year.

The second thing Luang Por had asked the theras, since it was something of which anyone requesting the training should be fully aware, was: Did the bhikkhus agree that our understanding of Dhamma-Vinaya is that the conventional relationship of the bhikkhus to the siladhara is one of seniority, such that the most senior siladhara is – on the level of the ritual conventions – ‘junior’ to the most junior bhikkhu, and that, as such, it is not something we can change. As this is an aspect of the monastic tradition of which those of us who enter it are generally aware, there was unanimous acknowledgement that this is the case – while at the same time emphasizing that these conventions are meant always to be held with compassion and equal respect for every individual involved. The theras confirmed their understanding of what this means, particularly in relation to how the choreography is handled concerning leadership in ritual situations where members of the two communities are present: the convention being that the senior monk leads, though he may invite another – whether one of the nuns or a more junior monk than he – to do so instead.

Before the Theras’ Meeting Luang Por had discussed with the senior nun at Amaravati and the visiting abbots some additional points he felt would help avoid future confusion around the conventions, and on which he was considering asking both bhikkhus and siladhara for agreement before moving forward. One of these was a confirmation that the *pavarana* ceremony our community performs at the end of the Rains Retreat (*Vassa*) every year would carry on according to the way it had been established. The theras spent many hours on all these matters, and ended with an expectation that Luang Por, who was about to travel, would receive a thorough response before meeting with the nuns as soon as he arrived back.

A partial synopsis was offered the next day to the nuns on the Elders’ Council, yet this was necessarily incomplete and quite general since nothing had yet been reported back to Luang Por in response to his questions. And while an open meeting of senior monks and nuns took place the day after that in order to share perspectives, it was an informal gathering with no direct influence on the situation. Therefore, most of the nuns still felt there to be a bewildering and painful lack of consultation with them on these matters which directly affected their lives.

When Ajahn Sumedho returned to meet with the Amaravati nuns in May, they were expecting to hear what he felt was necessary for him to continue with siladhara ordinations. For his part, Luang Por had somehow not yet heard a full report from the Theras’ Meeting, and did not quite know how to move forward. He did want to hear from the nuns though, and met with the intention to listen as well as talk about the whole matter.

Luang Por could hear that there was much pain around the issue. The question was, how to move forward?

At this point it might be helpful to summarize his perspective on this area. In attempting to create a supportive environment for women as well as for men to live as samanās in the West, he has made a great effort over the past thirty years to do what he feels he can. He truly respects the many women who have given themselves to a training so challenging in today’s society. And he does want to hear about and address any real harm that can result from the form. At this point he feels that it is very well set up for women to train as nuns with every opportunity the monks have regarding teaching, practice and requisites. While it will never feel right to our cultural conditioning that a junior monk cannot bow to a senior nun but instead she might bow to him, there are certain limits to what we understand it is possible to change in the tradition

without causing a split. From Ajahn Sumedho's perspective, the value of the liberation which is possible through letting go of our wish to be anything at all, is greater than making things feel better. The whole point of these forms as far as he is concerned is for the awakening of the heart that recognizes our own conditioning for what it is, and knows that the world will never be what we want it to be. He appreciates fully that this view will not be agreeable to everyone, but remains committed to offering these teachings in this form.

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In June Luang Por finally received a thorough report from the Theras' Meeting. He then wrote to the abbots on the Elders' Council formally asking if they would accept responsibility for giving siladhara pabbajja, and provide continued validation for the nuns within the wider tradition. He said that as long as there was shared understanding amongst the monks and nuns on the points about which he'd asked the theras, he would feel confident handing over his role. He recommended they then immediately consider the two postulant nun candidates who had long been waiting for ordination.

When they met, Luang Por had been concerned to hear from some of the nuns that a senior monk had acted in a way they felt was detrimental, and they had had no clear means to address it. While he said they could always come to him, he realized this was often not possible, when either he was away or busy. Of course, all of these conventions can only work well when there is an atmosphere of kindness and mutual respect. Normally this is present, as those of you who come to the monasteries know. Wanting to help ensure this is felt to be manifest, and reflecting on the arrangement described in the Vinaya between bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, Luang Por proposed that there always be one monk, other than the abbot, to act as a reference person for the nuns in each of the monasteries with dual communities, one who is liked and respected by the nuns in that community and whose appointment they would need to approve. The intention in establishing this role for a trusted senior monk would be to help with better communication between the monks and nuns, which was obviously needed, and to provide at least one clearly available and always accessible channel for the nuns to address concerns with the monks, particularly if they feel the expression of kindness and respect has been lost.

Aside from the change in responsibility for ordination, the points in question represented nothing new, as far as the theras were aware. As restatements of things we had assumed were mutually understood, we expected a somewhat similar acknowledgement by most of the nuns. Luang Por proposed that, once the theras in Europe, California and New Zealand who were taking responsibility for the pabbajja had confirmed they were in agreement themselves, we present the points on which we needed to feel confident there was shared understanding to the siladhara, and, once it was clear this was generally the case, to plan the next ordination as soon as we could.

Two of the senior monks met with the siladhara in early August. They offered the nuns an apology, recognizing the difficult position they had been in for so long, not knowing when their next ordination would be. With the transfer of the pabbajja responsibility from Ajahn Sumedho to the Bhikkhu Sangha it had been necessary for Luang Por and the theras to first know what we could offer. However, the lack of consultation and the nature of the whole process had continued to feel extremely unsatisfactory for most of the nuns. While for the monks it seemed like clarifying what the tradition and training already was, for many of the nuns it felt like a lack

of respect for what they had developed and the solution to a problem having been inappropriately examined.

Reiterating that, aside from the transfer of responsibility for the pabbajja, the bhikkhus regarded the points in question as restatements of what was there already rather than the introduction of anything new, the monks offered to be available to meet and discuss them at any time, with individuals or as a group. Luang Por was also available. They asked that each siladhara consider them and respond for herself, whether individually or through a group representative, verbally and in her own time. They would also ask all the monks at the two dual-community monasteries who had not yet been consulted. Once there was confidence that everyone had a shared understanding, we hoped to move ahead as soon as possible with the next ordination.

The intention in putting these points in writing rather than leaving them vague and presumed was mainly so that in future people who wish to request the training are able to make a fully-informed choice. To this end they would be included as part of the preparation for male and female candidates for ordination – so they would not be unfairly surprised somewhere down the road, and can choose a different tradition if they wish. We understand and respect the feelings of anyone who may not find this system of practice helpful. For now, this is what we feel we can offer. We discussed at length the wording of the points, which, of course, is not set in stone and could always be adjusted if unhelpful. While not everyone was entirely happy with the language, at the time it was felt that, although the legal-like bluntness could give the wrong impression, in the long term it was more likely to minimize misunderstandings. The hope was that, by making it clear from the beginning, the choice to undertake this particular training could be made as consciously as possible.

The points themselves are as follows:

- *The structural relationship, as indicated by the Vinaya, of the Bhikkhu Sangha to the Siladhara Sangha is one of seniority, such that the most junior bhikkhu is 'senior' to the most senior siladhara. As this relationship of seniority is defined by the Vinaya, it is not considered something we can change.*

Again, this is an aspect of the tradition we have always seen as required by the understanding of Vinaya in our lineage. It is not meant to be taken personally, but relates in a ceremonial way to the choreography of who bows and who leads. The Bhikkhu Sangha is considered 'senior to' the Siladhara Sangha in terms of ordination; while this follows the pattern of the bhikkhu/bhikkhuni relationship, the siladhara have their basis in the Vinaya on the Ten Precepts of the samaneri.

- *In line with this, leadership in ritual situations where there are both bhikkhus and siladhara – such as giving the anumodana or Precepts, leading the chanting or giving a talk – is presumed to rest with the senior bhikkhu present. He may invite a siladhara to lead; if this becomes a regular invitation it does not necessarily imply a new standard of shared leadership.*

This has also been an aspect of the way we conduct our choreography which we understand to be required, given that the siladhara community is defined in reference to the samaneri pabbajja. 'Shared leadership' here refers only to ceremonial situations. In community life both bhikkhus and siladhara lead in the various decision-making bodies on all levels. Stating it like

this is part of the attempt at clarity; it is not intended necessarily to change the way things have been done recently, but rather to avoid confusion as the two communities continue to grow in the future.

- *The Bhikkhu Sangha is responsible for the siladhara pabbajja, in the way Luang Por Sumedho was in the past. The siladhara should look to the Bhikkhu Sangha for ordination and guidance rather than exclusively to Luang Por. A candidate for siladhara pabbajja should receive acceptance from the Siladhara Sangha, and should then receive approval by the Bhikkhu Sangha as represented by those bhikkhus who sit on the Elders' Council.*

For the twenty-six years since Ajahn Sumedho sought permission from elders of the Thai Sangha to give the pabbajja and develop the siladhara training, he alone has taken responsibility for the ordination. By asking the Bhikkhu Sangha to carry this on in the future he hopes to ensure continued validation for the siladhara within our tradition once he passes away. The bhikkhus have agreed to offer the pabbajja and thereby validate and vouch for the nuns within our lineage. In the past Luang Por himself would approve the candidates put forward by the siladhara community and the Elders' Council would be informed. Now siladhara applicants will go through the same process as bhikkhu applicants: the proposal will be presented to the Elders' Council; if accepted the preceptor will be informed and the ceremony arranged. For the most part this is usually a formality.

- *The formal ritual of the giving of pavarana by the Siladhara Sangha to the Bhikkhu Sangha should take place at the end of the Vassa as it has in our communities traditionally, in keeping with the structure of the Vinaya.*

The ceremony of giving pavarana (ritual invitation to admonition) is performed each year to mark the end of the three-month Vassa. Along with each nun and monk formally inviting that admonishment from members of their own communities, it also involves the siladhara community that has spent the Vassa in that monastery giving pavarana to the bhikkhu community that did the same, by bowing and chanting a short verse. In keeping with our understanding of Vinaya, the Bhikkhu Sangha cannot reciprocate in the same ritual way by bowing to the siladhara. However, we treat the ritual as ceremonial only, and there is an understanding at all times that each community invites the other to let them know if there is anything they need to point out. If it is something to do with training, the monks or the nuns will do so through their seniors. The introduction of a monk to act as a reference person for the nuns is also meant to ease this process when necessary.

- *The siladhara training is considered to be a vehicle fully suitable for the realization of liberation, and is respected as such within our tradition. It is offered as a complete training as it stands, and not as a step in the evolution towards a different form such as bhikkhuni ordination.*

This refers to what the siladhara form can provide. It is what it is. We try to make it clear that as a community of diverse individuals from different backgrounds and with a variety of abilities, this is what we feel ready and able to offer. It should not be seen as a necessarily incomplete step towards something else. Luang Por's encouragement with both the monks' and the nuns' training has always been to work within the tradition we have. The siladhara training contains procedures for changes to be made to the discipline if a need arises, and these can always be followed (though this has rarely been necessary over the past 25 years). Clarifying what is offered, we trust that those

who choose to practise with it can settle into their training without the distraction of having to think about how to make it into something else.

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In asking the nuns and the monks to be clear on all this, Luang Por has hoped to help reduce, in the future, the kind of painful misunderstandings caused by conflicting assumptions. Having perceived increasing pain and confusion stemming from different views about significant aspects of our training, he had paused the giving of pabbajja until he was more confident that we were all on the same page. He said he wished to clarify what it is he can offer in a way that will be supportive for all of us in the long term, both bhikkhus and siladhara, out of compassion for everyone involved.

While a lot of well-meaning effort on the part of the theras went into the whole process, on the whole it had not felt at all sensitive to many of the nuns – for whom there seemed to have been an extraordinary lack of consultation with them throughout. For some, the lack of a communal forum in which to discuss the process as it unfolded had been particularly painful. And the legalistic presentation of some of the points, which they had understood to be in place but flexible, made it hard to know what they implied. Wishing to move forward with ordination for their candidates, yet with some of the siladhara not knowing how to respond, or what would happen if no consensus could be reached, there was a feeling of great pressure in the nuns' community during this time.

By the end of the Vassa of 2009 we had reached the point where everyone had stated they felt confident to move ahead. The next ordination was arranged and the transfer of Ajahn Sumedho's responsibility for the pabbajja took place formally in mid November.

It has been a challenging period for the whole community. We trust that we all have the integrity and care for each other to support each person in his or her practice, to learn from our mistakes, see what works and what doesn't, and investigate and address the causes of pain that arise in the future.

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Whatever the conventions involved in our system of training, first of all we are each a human being – and one who has chosen to live as a samana. In this we are all equal, and to remember this is crucial when committed to living within conventional structures which are not. While the conventions are as they are, the essential requisites and supports for the practice leading to liberation are there for both siladhara as well as bhikkhus, and in that respect they are entirely equal. Therefore it seems unnecessary and unhelpful to the spiritual welfare of the women and men who choose to undertake them to force changes to the conventions that would break the connection to our parent community in Thailand. Being too slow to adapt, likewise will not work. We respect the fact that some may not find this particular training to be helpful, or even inspiring. And we have been aware throughout that living within a tradition so conservative and foreign appears to some as unreasonable in the eyes of modern society. We have been, and remain, committed to finding our way to integrate at a pace that honours the aspirations of women to live the Holy Life, and at the same time honours the huge debt we owe to the tradition of which we are a part.

So we see the conventions we've inherited, the vehicle, as one aspect; and the kindness, respect, support and dignity we give to each other as another aspect of our lives. While the conventions come with our tradition and we have little choice over them, they provide a clearly defined container for all of us who freely choose to live by them, one which simplifies our lives as samanas and can be used as a mirror to help us see our views and feelings for what they are. Such clarity in knowing what the conventions are can also support trust and mutual understanding, to which we are dedicated.

Our communities in the West, with all that they balance, have their own pace of integration; we expect that, over time, they will adapt organically. Nevertheless, the challenges this tradition now presents to many of us are real, and not easy to overcome. Accordingly, as the nuns' community brings to maturity the prospect of independent nuns' monasteries – in California and soon, in Scotland – it will provide places for siladhara who wish to live within the tradition, without having their conventional relationship to the bhikkhu community constantly highlighted. And within the two dual-community monasteries, the recent effort to clarify things has included an encouragement towards more separation and autonomy for the monks' and nuns' communities, as well as looking at how decisions are made in areas where the communities intersect.

This has caused some confusion, and it's worth mentioning here that for matters that affect the whole community, there are committees of monks and nuns who decide together relevant monastery affairs. At Amaravati and Cittaviveka it's always been the case that if there is a matter on which the two communities wish for outcomes that are incompatible, the abbot generally decides the issue. Effectively this may sometimes mean that the bhikkhus have final say in certain areas where the communities intersect – but we would expect this to be the case only after discussion and consultation.

The important question of how best to provide a full opportunity for women to live the monastic life in our tradition is one the monks and nuns have spent many years considering. We have spent countless hours discussing these painful issues and have done so since we started, back in the early '80s. These discussions have included a great diversity of people, from energetic reformers with egalitarian values, to resolute conservatives who do not want anything to change. The siladhara training has been seen so far as the best we can do within our limitations. And the women, who through relentlessly patient and prodigious effort have made it work so well over all these years, have been remarkable in what they have achieved, and deserve, and have, our full respect and support.

For the one purpose that brings each of us, woman or man, bhikkhu or siladhara, into the Holy Life is the heart's liberation in Dhamma. For this, we all have equal access. Luang Por Sumedho has often said that this is all he is interested in. That the house is on fire, and we each have all we need to find release.