

The Nuns Initiative

Its Origins and Purpose

In response to changes unfolding in western Dharma, Cloud Mountain's emphasis has been undergoing a shift over the last several years. We have been quietly and steadily putting new effort and energy into inviting fully ordained nuns (bhikkhunis) and former female monastics to lead retreats at Cloud Mountain. This new direction springs from several primary goals:

- 1. To support momentum toward greater modern-day gender equality in the oldest Buddhist institution, Theravadin Buddhist monasticism.**
- 2. To ensure that our retreats continue to be led by highly qualified and realized teachers.**
- 3. To continue to offer retreats that are solidly rooted in Buddhadharma.**
- 4. To fulfill the Buddha's aspiration to maintain the Fourfold Sangha (nuns, monks, lay women and lay men).**

Starting this year, Cloud Mountain is offering quite a few retreats with bhikkhunis and ex-nuns in order to provide a forum for the extraordinary depth of realization and understanding that exists within the women's monastic and ex-monastic community. Many of the meditation teachings being offered in our culture, which supports lay teachers far more strongly than monastic teachers, are becoming untethered from the Buddha's foundational teachings, particularly in the areas of ethics/morality and generosity. While we see some benefits to these evolutionary shifts, there are serious downsides as well, including diluted teachings being offered that are well termed "McMindfulness." This is not the direction in which Cloud Mountain wishes to head. We wish to support teachings solidly grounded in the fullness of the Buddhadharma. So our response to these changes is to double down on what we truly believe in.

One way in which we are adapting our mission is to more strongly than ever before support and foster women's voices and roles in the Dharma world. It is an extraordinary gift to receive teachings from those whose lives have been unconditionally dedicated to Buddhist practice and who have attained deep understanding and realization. We honor the brave commitment of the women who have challenged the Theravadin Buddhist patriarchy to take full monastic vows, and are deeply grateful that they make the depth and breadth of their many years of practice, understanding and cultivation available to us. These women have been a woefully underutilized resource in modern Dharma in both the East and West, and it is our intention to help change that by bringing their voices to the forefront at Cloud Mountain.

If you are a long-time practitioner, I encourage you to take the time at a convenient moment to read this in full, since the more voices and views involved in these discussions, the more skillful our choices and activities will be. We cannot be passive participants in this area of our lives, or we risk letting the momentum of unhealthy and deluded attitudes continue to dominate how the Dharma manifests in our world.

#ME TOO

The #MeToo movement has reenergized many of us who have been disheartened, frustrated and infuriated by the ongoing misogyny and patriarchy on, well, a planetary level, really. As the Dharma is finding fertile ground in the west, it has been agonizing to watch western monks – who should know

better – perpetuate archaic patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes as they establish monasteries here in the west.

For many of us women, banging our heads against the wall and calling out the injustice we see has largely proved futile (and also hurts our heads). For many of us who practice Buddhism, we would much prefer to take actions motivated by positive, wholesome intentions than to keep getting caught in aversion or grasping. In the face of the continued opposition of Theravadin monks, the challenge for women seeking full ordination is enormous. Women who take full ordination do so in full awareness that they will lack the level of support that monks receive: no welcome within their lineage, thin financial and material support, limited recognition, respect and acceptance. To support their courageous choices, we wish to provide them with Cloud Mountain as a venue to share and demonstrate the power of their practices. Inviting bhikkhunis to come lead retreats supports them on their path and beautifully serves the community of practitioners.

Inviting ex-nuns serves a similar purpose. Many women have disrobed after years of trying to maintain their monastic practice despite the misogynistic and hostile attitudes they continually encountered from the monks and many of their students. Rather than allow the depth of their understanding and experience to be lost, Cloud Mountain wishes to also reach out to them and bring them out of the obscurity in which many find themselves once they have given back their robes (but not necessarily all their vows). In addition to fully ordained nuns, we are also inviting several former nuns who bring many decades of dedicated practice to their teaching, sharing with us the extraordinary fruits of their endeavors.

As support grows for these many remarkable women practitioners, the barriers set up by the male monastic orthodoxy will have far less impact. Rather than bursting through or blowing up barriers, these women and those of us who support them can instead calmly and gently step around them. Rather than banging our heads against the institutional wall, we can come together in a circle of support and respect, taking wholesome but firm action.

TEACHER QUALIFICATIONS:

Perhaps the most important service and greatest challenge we face as a Dharma organization is finding qualified teachers to offer the Dharma. This has never been a simple task, and has become more difficult now than ever before. There are a growing number of avenues by which almost anyone can earn a credential or certificate of some kind as a meditation “teacher.” But even the most reputable teacher training programs are no longer wholly reliable in graduating people who are truly ready to teach the Dharma. (As just one example – what we used to consider a reputable and reliable teacher training program accepted and graduated an individual who had never sat more than a two-week retreat and whose grounding in Dhamma was demonstrably thin. Obviously, discovering this left our confidence in this avenue for finding qualified teachers significantly diminished.)

Additionally, even well-known Dharma teachers muddy the waters by offering teacher trainings that are open to individuals with extremely limited practice experience and grasp of the Dhamma. Programs like these serve no objectively valuable purpose for the Dharma and can even be harmful. These programs offer thin training but appear to be lucrative sources of income judging by the tuition. In this environment of “teacher trainings” of ambiguous and inconsistent quality and value, finding ways to ensure that we invite only highly qualified lay Dharma teachers has become difficult.

The bhikkhunis and ex-nuns we are inviting have decades and decades (and perhaps lifetimes) of practice behind them. Their lives are 100% committed to the renunciate path of the monastic. If ever there were well trained and practiced teachers, these women are they; they are precious examplars of well-rounded, long-tested, and consistent Dhamma training. These nuns define one end of the spectrum of meditation teachings being offered today. Where secularism, psychologization and politicization are subsuming much of what is termed Dharma these days, these nuns offer traditional teachings solidly rooted in the breadth of teachings offered by the Buddha.

THE FOURFOLD SANGHA

In the suttas, the Buddha fostered and promoted the Fourfold Sangha, which refers to the community of practitioners made up of monks, nuns, lay women and lay men. (In their arguments as to why women should not receive full ordination, monks tend to forget -- or willfully ignore -- this wish of the Buddha.)

Here in the US, the emphasis in Dharma is largely on lay teachers and the lay community. There feels to be an imbalance in access to monastic teachers (of all genders) relative to lay teachers. Again, the secularization, psychologization and politicization of the Dharma has taken it in directions within which it is sometimes difficult to find the Dharma. The monastic order, as keepers of the traditions, plays an important role in maintaining balance within the teachings. Every culture that has ever encountered Buddhism has shaped and molded it to greater or lesser degrees to its own cultural values. For us in the west, that adaptation includes a heavier emphasis on householder practice than on monasticism. Having a healthy, strong monastic presence and influence acts as a counterbalance to the excesses to which our culture is capable of taking the Dharma, including but by no means limited to consumerism, commodification, pseudo-professionalism, or mindfulness-based-just-about-everything. It is not that monasticism is better than lay Buddhism; it has its own deficiencies. But both are needed. This the Buddha himself clearly taught and modeled.

Western Dharma has placed such strong emphasis on lay practice that monastics have been relegated to a token place on retreat center schedules. This generates an imbalance, with prominence decidedly tilting toward lay teachers. We seek to re-establish a better balance of the traditional and modern perspectives on practicing the Buddhadharmā.

THE “ASK”

As part of this new direction, Cloud Mountain has established a donation fund and is accepting contributions. This fund will allow us to offer extra financial support to the nuns and ex-nuns who come to teach at Cloud Mountain and their myriad Dharma activities. What we need right now is for women – and their male and gender non-conforming allies -- to come together in a sustained and committed way to offer ongoing financial and energetic support to help make this happen. This is what your donation will support:

- 1) Offering robust dana directly from Cloud Mountain to the nuns and ex-nuns who come lead retreats to sustain their ongoing Dharma activities. All of these women are working to support their centers, so your contributions will support their lives, those of their sister nuns and the stability and wellbeing of their nunneries.
- 2) Subsidizing retreats we offer on an all-dana basis (i.e., to both teachers and retreat center) when we

encounter significant revenue shortfalls. (Several of the nuns we've invited prefer to honor tradition and offer all-dana retreats.)

3) If enough money is raised, offering funds outside of Cloud Mountain's own retreat activities to support important projects organized by nuns and nunneries that will strengthen the foundations being laid internationally by nuns of many nationalities, ethnicities, races and colors for future generations.

4) For those with limited funds but the ability to offer time and life energy instead, you can act as "stewards" for the nuns and nunneries to help them in ways their vows restrict them from helping themselves. These offerings are priceless!

If this is a project you feel deserves your support, we invite you to consider becoming an ongoing monthly donor to this fund. There a lot of great reasons to donate monthly, but I'll give you just two really good ones.

1) You can give much more than you believe possible when you spread it over time.

2) When you give regularly to something you really believe in, the people doing the work you're supporting can put more of their time and energy into that work and not give up precious time and energy to fundraise.

Thank you very much for your time and attention in learning about the Nuns Initiative!