



Cloud Mountain's Nuns Initiative

Its Origins and Purposes

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

Cloud Mountain is annually offering numerous 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. 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.

One way in which we are adapting our mission is to more strongly than ever before support and foster female and non-binary 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. It is our intention to help change that by bringing their voices to the forefront at Cloud Mountain.

TEACHER QUALIFICATIONS & UNDILUTED TEACHINGS

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 or mindfulness "teacher." But even the most reputable teacher training programs are no longer wholly reliable in graduating people who are truly qualified to teach the

Dharma. 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 exemplars 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 sutras, the Buddha fostered and promoted the Fourfold Sangha, which refers to the community of practitioners made up of nuns, monks (*bhikkhus*), lay women and lay men. (In their arguments as to why bhikkhunis ordination is not legitimate, monks tend to forget -- or willfully ignore -- this wish of the Buddha.) We should honor and respect this inclusive model.

Here in the US, the emphasis in Dharma is largely on lay teachers and the lay community. This fosters 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 lay culture is capable of taking the Dharma, including but by no means limited to the influences of consumerism, commodification, 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.

Through inviting bhikkhunis (and monks who affirm the legitimacy of the bhikkhunis order and full ordination for women), we seek to offer a better balance of the traditional and modern perspectives on practicing the Buddhadharma. The Fourfold Sangha offers an inclusive perspective that aligns well with contemporary views rejecting misogyny and patriarchy.

SYSTEMIC MYSOGYNY & PATRIARCHY

As the Dharma is finding fertile ground in the west, it has been agonizing to watch too many western monks – who should know better – not just perpetuate archaic patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes but double down on them as they establish monasteries here in the west.

For many of us, banging our heads against the wall and calling out the injustice we see has largely proved futile (and also hurts our heads). As Buddhist practitioners, we can choose to take actions motivated by positive, wholesome intentions rather than to get caught in aversion or grasping. In the face of the continued opposition of the vast majority of Theravadin monks, the challenge for women seeking full ordination is enormous. Women who take full bhikkhunis 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. (In some Asian countries, a woman can even be jailed for taking full ordination.) 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 renunciate path and beautifully serves the community of practitioners.

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 non-binary practitioners and those of us who support them can instead calmly and gently step around them. Rather than banging our heads against the wall of systemic sexism that permeates male Theravadin monasticism, we can come together in a circle of support and respect, taking wholesome but firm action.

HOW YOU CAN HELP SUPPORT THE BHIKKHUNIS

- 1) Come practice with the nuns. See for yourself the depth and quality of their Dhamma teachings and what truly extraordinary women choose the monastic path.
- 2) Contribute to the Nuns Initiative. Our Nuns Fund provides extra dana to the nuns who come to teach at Cloud Mountain and to their communities. The funds you offer are divided among the different nuns who come to teach here. Your contributions support their lives, those of their sister nuns and the stability and wellbeing of their nunneries.
- 3) Offer your time and life energy. Consider spending a period of time acting as a “steward” for the nuns and nunneries to help them in ways their vows restrict them from helping themselves. Or offer your help as a volunteer in the many different capacities required to sustain a monastic community. These offerings are priceless!

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