

Upāsikā Kee Nanayon ("oo-pa-see-ka Key Nah-nah-yon"): Life, Legacy & Women's Practice in Buddhism

An Unentangled Knowing: The Teachings of a Thai Buddhist Lay Woman, by Upāsikā Kee Nanayon, and translated by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

Key Turning Points for Women in Buddhism

- Buddha's reluctant approval of women's ordination (~5th century BCE)
- Founded by the Buddha; first bhikkhunī was Aunt and foster mom Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī (Mah-hah-pah-jah-pah-tee Go-tah-mee.)
- Ordained after Buddha initially resisted, persuaded by Ānanda
- Established with 8 garudhammas (special rules for nuns)
- Flourished in early India with many enlightened nuns
- 3rd c. BCE: Spread to Sri Lanka via Sanghamittā (Ashoka's daughter)
- Later transmission to China, Korea, Vietnam (Mahāyāna)
- Survived in Mahāyāna traditions using Dharmaguptaka Vinaya (Dar-ma-goop-ta-ka Vih-nigh-uh)

Timeline of the Bhikkhunī Order

- Loss of Theravāda bhikkhunī lineage (~11th century CE)
- Political instability and warfare
- Structural limitations in Vinaya
- Patriarchal cultural systems and lack of support
- Loss of institutional continuity and memory

Theravāda Tradition

- Historically, bhikkhunī lineage died out ~11th century
- Revival began in 1998 with ordinations in Sri Lanka, supported by Mahāyāna nuns
- Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā (Thailand) - ordained 2000's. [More info](#)
- Ajahn Brahm (Australia) – supported revival, faced institutional backlash
- Some nun communities still face lack of recognition or support

Mahāyāna & Zen Traditions

- Bhikkhunī lineage (Dharmaguptaka Vinaya) continued in China, Korea, Vietnam
- Fully ordained women in Zen (especially in West)
- Key Figures:
 - • Roshi Joan Halifax (Upaya Zen Center)
- Women serve as abbesses, teachers, and lineage holders

Tibetan Buddhism / Vajrayāna

- No historical full ordination lineage for women
- Women received novice ordination; efforts underway for full bhikṣuṇī ordination
- Key Figures:
 - Pema Chödrön – first fully ordained Western nun (1981)
 - Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo – advocate for full ordination
- Some nuns ordained in Dharmaguptaka lineage as a workaround

Plum Village (Thích Nhất Hạnh)

- Fully ordained bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs (Dharmaguptaka Vinaya)
- Equal training, leadership, and visibility
- Key Quote: 'The next Buddha may be a community—and she may look like you.'
- Sister Chan Khong: early female leader and lay dharma teacher
- Global model for equity in monastic life

What's Possible Going Forward

- Full ordination is now available for women in many Mahāyāna traditions
- Theravāda bhikkhunī ordination spreading but still contested
- Lay women teachers increasingly recognized and empowered
- Communities like Plum Village model equity and mutual support
- Growing global awareness of historical gender imbalances in Buddhism

Historical Challenges for Women

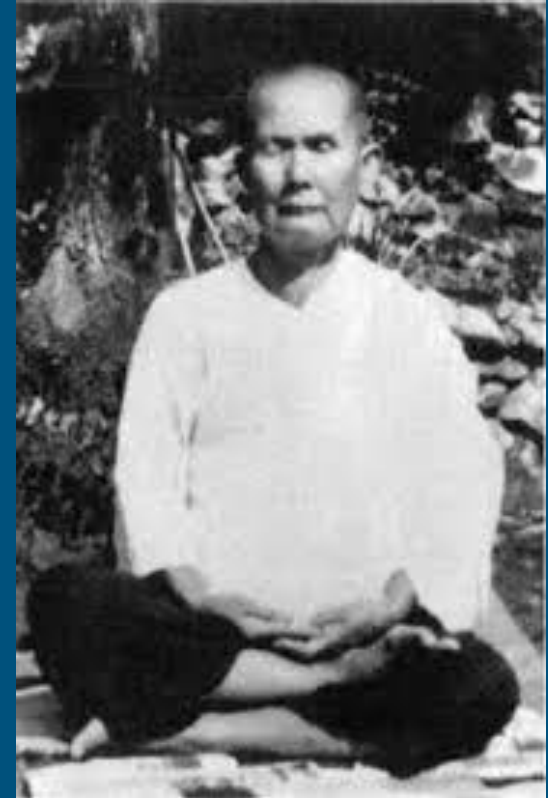
- No bhikkhunī ordination for centuries
- Social expectations: family roles, dependence
- Dismissal by senior teachers
- Laywomen can observe 8–10 precepts, but lack institutional ordination
- Community and government support missing

Challenges in Mainstream Buddhism

- Mainstream Buddhism often adapted to social norms over original teachings
- Monks pushed into astrology, medicine, or admin roles
- Even men often discouraged from full-time forest practice
- Women often relegated to household roles even in celibacy
- Designer Buddhism

Upāsikā Kee Nanayon ("oo-pa-see-ka Key Nah-nah-yon") upasika - female lay disciple

- Born 1901 in Rajburi, western Thailand, to a Chinese-Thai merchant family
- Exposed to Dhamma by her religious mother from an early age
- At age six, fled home after witnessing suffering of childbirth – a formative moment
- In adolescence, supported her father and began deep meditation practice



Path to Practice

- Taught her father meditation before his death
- Worked to save money for future practice
- Moved in 1945 with aunt and uncle to Khao Suan Luang, mountain/hilltop and took over an abandoned monastery
- Started a frugal, disciplined meditation retreat for women
- Limited options for women in 1940s Thailand
- No bhikkhunī ordination; mae chees lacked formal support
- Many roles for women were domestic or ritual-based
- She chose seclusion with her aunt and uncle instead

Community Building & Teaching

- Early visitors were family and friends
- 1950s–1960s: recorded talks and publications spread her teachings
- Her talks and poetry became widely distributed for free
- Center attracted more women and evolved into a respected community

Community Building & Teaching

“When I first came I was afraid of ghosts and of people, but my resolve was firm, and my belief in kamma gradually lessened my worries and fears. I had never before lived in the forest. I hadn’t seen any purpose in it before, and thought that it would be better to stay in the town, running a store and having enough money to last me the rest of my life. But coming to the forest and living very simply, I came to feel light-hearted and free. Seeing nature all around me inspired me to explore inside my own mind.”

With no struggling, no thinking,

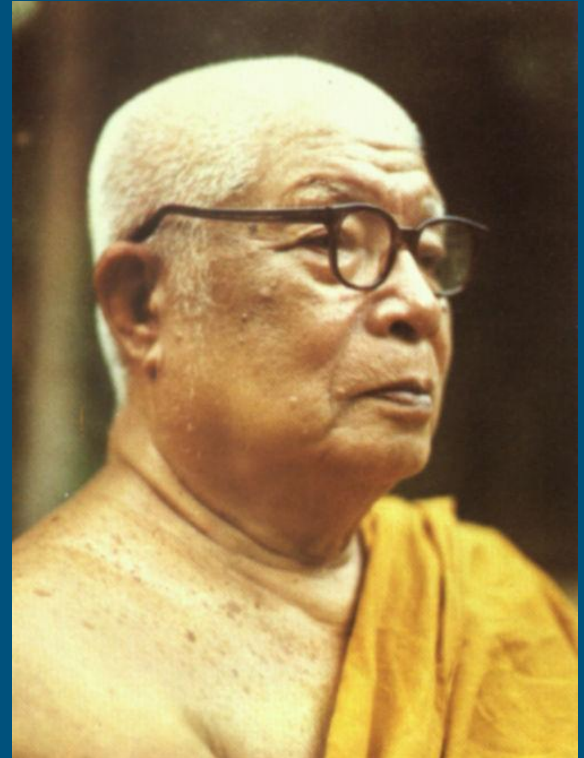
the mind, still,

will see cause and effect vanishing in the Void. Attached to nothing, letting go:

Know that this is the way to allay all stress.

Kee's Teaching Style & Influences

- Autodidact—no formal teacher; learned from Pāli Canon and texts
- Influenced by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, but developed unique approach
- Buddhadasa (27 May 1906 – 25 May 1993) was a Thai Buddhist monk. Known as an innovative reinterpreter of Buddhist doctrine and Thai folk beliefs, he fostered a reformation in conventional religious perceptions in his home country, Thailand, as well as abroad.
- She was focused on self-honesty, simplicity, and direct investigation



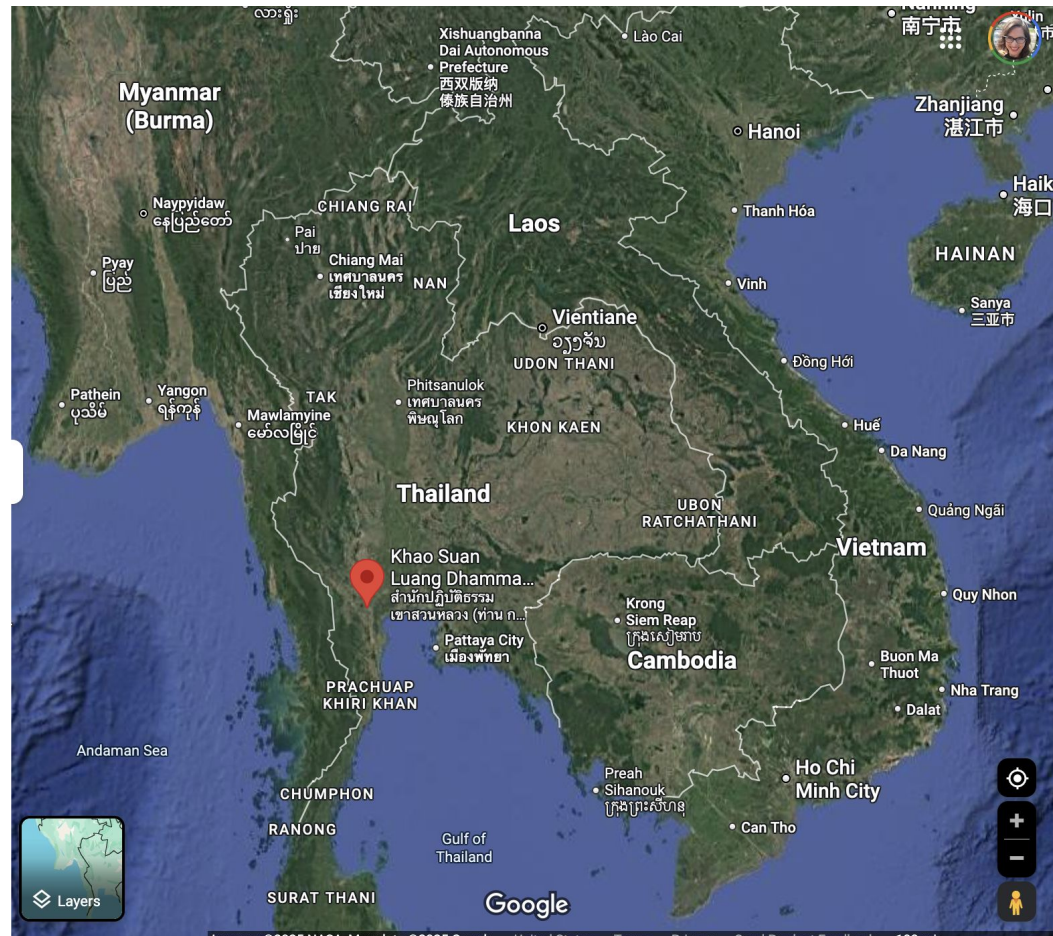
Later Years & Legacy

- Went blind later in life but continued teaching and meditating
- Died in 1978, leaving leadership to a committee
- Succeeded by her sister Upāsikā Wan until 1993
- Community still active today with ~60 women residents
- Her tradition parallels the Thai Forest Tradition (Ajahn Mun, Ajahn Sao)
- Emphasized simplicity, inner renunciation, and non-mainstream values
- Her talks are still listened to nightly at Khao Suan Luang

Practice Center Today

“Please help keep this forest fragrant till earth and sky are no more,
the forest of RoyalPark Hill,
still garden of calm
where the Dhamma resounds: the Unbound—Nibbāna—is a
nature devoid
of all suffering.”

- Khao Suan Luang, Ratchaburi province, western Thailand
- Women's retreat with ~60 practitioners; run by committee



Pure and Simple

“The first requirement when you come to practice is that you need to be the sort of person who loves the truth—and you need to possess endurance to do what’s true. Only then will your practice get anywhere. Otherwise, it all turns into failure and you go back to being a slave to your defilements and cravings just as before.”

Growing Old

“The way your practice has developed through contemplating and supervising the mind throughout your daily life has already shown its rewards to some extent, so keep stepping up your efforts. Don’t let yourself grow weak or lax. You’ve finally got this opportunity: Can you afford to be complacent? Your life is steadily ebbing away, so you have to compensate by building up more and more mindfulness and discernment until you become mature in the Dhamma. Otherwise, your defilements will remain many and your discernment crude. The older you grow, the more you have to watch out—for we know what happens to old people everywhere.”

High level Dhamma

“If you’re the sort of person who’s open and honest, you’ll find your window for disbanding suffering and defilement right where you’re honest with yourself, right where you come to your senses. You don’t have to go explaining high level Dhamma to anyone. All you need is the ordinary level of being honest with yourself about the sufferings and drawbacks of your actions, so that you can put a stop to them, so that you develop a sense of wariness, a sense of shame. That’s much better than talking about high-level Dhamma but then being heedless, complacent, and shameless.”

A Difference in the Knowing

“The Buddha has many teachings, but this is what they all come down to. The important principles of the practice—the four establishings of mindfulness, the four Noble Truths—all come down to these characteristics of inconstancy, stress, and not-selfness. If you try to learn too many principles, you’ll end up not getting any clear knowledge of the truth as it is. If you focus on knowing just a little, you’ll end up with more true insight than if you try knowing a lot of things. It’s through wanting to know a lot of things that we end up deluded. We wander around in our deluded knowledge, thinking and labeling things, but knowledge that is focused and specific, when it really knows, is absolute. It keeps hammering away at one point. There’s no need to know a lot of things, for when you really know one thing, everything converges right there....”

Heedlessness

“When you look back to the past, you see that it’s all an affair of your own heedlessness. Even though you knew the Buddha’s teachings and were able to explain them correctly, still the heart and mind were in a state of heedlessness. Actually, when people know a lot of Dhamma and can show off a lot of their knowledge, they can be more heedless than people who know only a little. Those who’ve never read Dhamma books tend to be more heedful, for they’re more modest and know that they need to read their own minds all the time. Those who’ve read a lot of books or heard a lot of talks tend to get complacent. And in this way they become heedless and disrespectful of the Dhamma.”

The Mind

“The mind without its own home—a mind without the Dhamma as its home—has to live with the defilements. This defilement arises and the mind goes running after it. As soon as it disappears, that one arises over there, and the mind goes running after that. Because the mind has no dwelling of its own, it has to keep running wild all over the place.”

Knowing

“We have to figure out how to use our own mindfulness and discernment to look inwardly at all times, for no one else can know these things or see these things for us. We have to know for ourselves.”

Drawbacks

“The important point in letting go is to see the drawbacks of what you’re letting go. Only then can you let it go once and for all. If you don’t see its drawbacks, you’ll still be attached and will miss having it around.”

What we can learn from her today

- Practice first - don't get caught up in studies/titles/roles
- Practicing on your own during periods without a teacher
- Rigorous honesty about your experience
- Deep inward looking
- Integrity
- Test the results
- Remain watchful for Designer Buddhism
- Don't stop, keep going with your practice, all the way to awakening