

Temporary Ordination

When the opportunity came to take temporary ordination with Ayya Ariyañani at the retreat in Passadhi earlier this year I took it almost unquestioningly. Not that I was overjoyed, or even terribly enthusiastic. To some extent it was the urge to do my duty, to pay respect to the people and to the tradition that makes sense of life for me. Underneath this weight of obligation trickled the trust that something good always comes of taking every opportunity to deepen my commitment to the Dhamma.

My mind didn't dwell long on the challenge before me, but some instinct drew me to a wig shop so that I could conceal my bald head after the retreat! Once I had the wig in place I found the courage to tell my mum of my plans. To my surprise she took it fairly easily – I had been anticipating massive grief because my mum and her generation were, like me, brought up as Roman Catholics. Although this issue is still unresolved for me, it was very encouraging that my first disclosure was gently received.

All in all, then, I approached the retreat with a fairly light heart. Having my head shaved didn't disturb me much - apart from the bitter cold of the first night bald as a baby! I found the peachy-pink robes quite attractive and easy to wear. To my utter surprise it was my new name which upset me. When I heard Ayya Ariyañani say the name 'Puññanadi' the sound sank into my psyche and echoed back 'Poo' and 'Puny' and 'Punitive'! I vaguely heard the translation as 'Rejoicing in Merit' but my heart was too busy with misery and anger to be consoled.

The following meditation was a turmoil of rejection – how could I own such a horrid name? What on earth had I taken on here? Who would want to know someone called Puññanadi? But mindfulness did its quiet work and even before the meditation had finished my thoughts were converging towards acceptance of this stranger, Puññanadi, who had just come to live within me, and a determination to do my best to befriend her.

The battle re-ignited time and again over the next few days, until it came to me that, if I could have the courage to tell people that my name was Puññanadi, then I could also tell them all kinds of other unwelcome news – including news of old age, sickness and impending death. I reflected that concealing bad news was an automatic habit of mine and often very unhelpful. This aversion towards my new name would give me exactly the opportunities I needed to undermine this habit. The name, Puññanadi, now seemed like a net I could cast around me to catch all unwanted thoughts rejected out into the world around me. Once caught I could draw them into my heart and learn to live with them. I felt stronger and happier now that I had this new tool to help me live my life, and so myself and Puññanadi began to make our peace.

The retreat allowed for silent meditation and also for discussions and DVDs illustrating the life of nuns in Burma and elsewhere. This mixture allowed us to take in the meaning and implications of ordination and let it sink deep. On reflection, the retreat provided a powerful opportunity to make a symbolic new start in life – this time with the wisdom and support to make more skilful choices.

My thanks to Ayya Ariyañani, to Ayya Aggañani (Marjo Oosterhoff) for organising the retreat and all my 'sisters' in temporary ordination.

Now the question is, could I do take on the robes again – this time without a time-limit?
CanPuññanadi take long-term residence in this body, this life?