

Dharma Teacher Order Newsletter

VOLUME 8 SPECIAL EDITION

SEPTEMBER 2022

Dear DTO Members and Friends,

Our DTO Newsletter has been dormant for about a year. This edition is either a rebirth of our newsletter or a one-time special edition. It depends whether or not we get anything to publish and that depends on you. This time around, we are soliciting original creative writing pieces that have sprung from the spiritual richness that lies within each of you, a very different approach from the sangha news of yore. It will be wonderful to see in print what lies in the recesses of your heart and mind that you took the time to express in writing. How enriching it will be for all of us to know how Buddhist teachings have influenced the thoughts that you have put to paper in the form of poetry or prose. This is not a format for dharma talks and it is experimental but I feel brave enough to put this idea up for your consideration. I know these writings exist and more will be written as the spirit moves us and as time allows. Please think about sharing with your fellow DTO members and friends. We want to learn from each other and be enriched by each other's thoughts.

With metta and gratitude,
Janet Reale

Special Edition to Celebrate Ordination

CONGRATULATIONS!

Thay David (Giac Vien) and Thich Nu Phap Lan



Reflections on Ordination Weekend

Bhikkhuni Ordination

September 4, 2022 Dinh Quang Buddhist Temple Springfield, Missouri

Submitted by

Thich Nu Pháp Lan

I was just sitting here thinking about the promise I made to wear the sanghati forever. Forever. That means for all of this life and all the lives to come. Perhaps it means I have always worn it. That somehow seems more profound than all of the 348 precepts. Of course wearing the robe does represent the vow to learn, study, and practice those precepts. Forever.

One surprise, although I suppose it shouldn't have been. My Master addressed me as "Venerable" during the ceremony of transmitting the precepts. Venerable: a title of respect used for Buddhist monastics. For some reason, that made quite an impression upon me. That kind of respect is something to strive to earn.

The other Venerables kept saying, "Welcome to the Sangha." The monastic Sangha. I am really a daughter of the Buddha now, and I feel a part of a long line of spiritual ancestors. When we were in procession, that feeling was especially strong. What an honor it is.

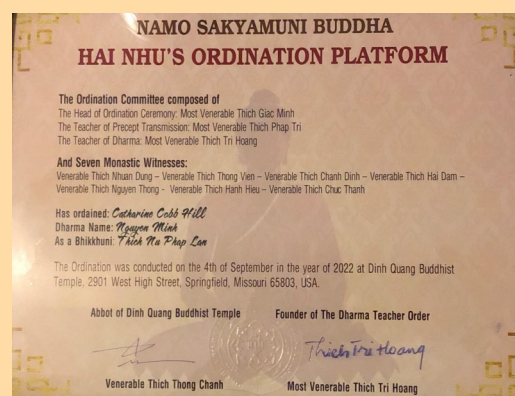
I feel so fortunate to have had this opportunity. It is rare and beautiful. It is almost unbelievable that it has actually happened. I would appear to be an unlikely candidate: older white American woman with an old school Vietnamese-American Master.

I have only been studying and practicing Buddhism for a little over eight years, although all the spiritual seeking, study, and practice during the previous years—and lifetimes—helped prepare me for this.

I am extremely grateful to my Master, the Most Venerable Thich Tri Hoang, for taking a chance on me, and for allowing me to serve in this way. I think I can do some good. I trust I already am. I do believe this ordination will make it easier to help even more beings in terms of opening hearts and minds.

I wish I had more time to learn, study, and practice. Not only do I have too much on my plate in general, but I am older and more tired than I used to be. And let's face it. I don't have a whole lot of time ahead of me. Maybe 20+ more active years if I am lucky. I do promise to make the best use of that time.

Someone asked me how the ordination weekend went, if everything went according to plan, and how I felt about my elevated status.



The weekend was great: sometimes funny, sometimes embarrassing, sometimes profound, always exhausting.

The schedule was constantly changing as always, which did create a bit of confusion. But, as my friend David Ketchum (who was ordained as a novice) and I adopted as our weekend mantra, “Oh well.”

It was so lovely to have my daughter, son -in-law, and brother there. It was a bit of an ordeal for them at times I know, but they were very loving and supportive. I was able to spend very little time with them, as the monks kept me very busy. I know my family is proud of me, although this is all still something of a mystery to them. It was also very special to have several members of my Texas Sangha travel to Missouri for this occasion. I felt loved and supported by my spiritual family.

It was a beautiful ordination ceremony, only part of which was for public consumption. The other ceremonies during the weekend were powerful as well, and I was included in them to one extent or another. The abbot was so helpful and kind. He made me feel very welcome at his temple.

After this ordination, I feel different and not different. I think I am as ready for it as I can be. Two years ago I was not ready.

It really is such an honor, and a lot to live up to. In some ways, I represent a bridge from traditional Vietnamese Buddhism to an American Buddhism that continues to keep the lineage unbroken. There are a lot of growing pains. As a bhikkhuni, I have the responsibility to represent and maybe even inspire American women who aspire to a more committed life. I will try my best to be worthy of the trust that has been placed in me. I want to use this new position to continue to transform myself so that I can better serve others and help them to do the same. That's the whole point of all this. The precepts have been transmitted to me through a long unbroken line of bhikkus and bhikkhunis going all the way back to the Buddha himself. Now it is up to me.

And as to how I feel about my elevated status: a wise person once said, “After the ecstasy, the laundry.”



Reflections on an Ordination Weekend

David Ketchum (Giac Vien)

Last weekend was one of the loveliest – and busiest – weekends of my life. It included our Ulambana festival and the celebration of the 10th anniversary of our temple’s construction. We joyfully listened as children sang songs of gratitude and love for their parents. We honored and prayed for our ancestors. We cultivated compassion and generosity for hungry ghosts. We witnessed new members take refuge in the Triple Jewel and recognized new lay leaders in our temple community. We ate delicious food, caught up with old friends, and made new friends. And, in the early morning hours of Sunday, September 4, Phap Lan and I kneeled before the sangha and took vows.

Novice is the closest word we have for the commitments I made. As I understand it, I am a bit of an experiment, the result of the sangha’s skillful aspiration to create a bridge between householders and monastics. (Our Venerable Thay, Thich Thong Chanh, has been working with the larger monastic sangha on this idea for several years.) I still live at home with my family, but, over time, we hope that more American-born members will fully join the sangha. In this moment, my role is to help create a foundation of practice, help strengthen our temple community, and grow in understanding and devotion to a monastic mode of life.

Looking backwards, it wasn’t difficult to see how I ended up kneeling before the gathered sangha while my teacher shaved my head. There was an easily discernible thread that brought us to that moment, and it all made sense. But that was looking backwards. In truth, most of my life has taken me by surprise, and this was no exception. I have thought a lot about that over the last days, with gratitude for the shape of this unexpected life.

When I returned to this small city in 2010, Dinh Quang Temple was just beginning to form. Our local Vietnamese community had put in the preparation and our Venerable Thay arrived the same year. Services were held in a converted house, and my first visit was to a crowded 2011 Ulambana celebration there. I was very much a visitor: warmly welcomed, but a stranger and unknown. I could not have guessed that my visit then would open a path that led to this weekend. I did not guess that Venerable Thay would become my teacher, or that his friendship with Venerable Thanh from Virginia would lead to an introduction to DTO. It is strange to remember that I did not know any of these wonderful people, including all of you, at that time. These were all seeds, still hidden in the ground. And now our journeys have joined together in beautiful ways.

This is how it is, isn’t it? When I started practicing with the Buddha’s teachings around 2005, I did not intend to become a Buddhist. I found the practices to be supportive and transformative, and so I continued in them. My simple aspiration became, “Let’s see how far I can go with the teachings today.” So life is always surprising, unfolding in unexpected ways. But, as our practices deepen day by day, we come to trust that the path will unfold in these liberating and beautiful ways. We are surprised; we are also unsurprised. Looking back, we can see how the pot was filled, drop by drop. The conditions come together. Our lives bloom like flowers.

Years ago, I read a [teaching by Thanissaro Bhikkhu](#) that has stayed close to my practice. Reflecting on the Five Aggregates, he compared our attachment to them to carrying an ever-growing bundle of bricks. We think we are doing something great, grasping self-views so devotedly, and we don't even realize they are weighing us down, often until the suffering is overwhelming. But if we change our intentions toward the Aggregates, we can also change their functions. "Instead of using them for the purpose of constructing a self, we use them for the purpose of creating a path to the end of suffering." I returned to this teaching as I prepared for the weekend, and this gatha arose in my mind:

How heavy are the clinging aggregates,
like bundles of bricks on the back.
But laying them down, one by one,
they become a joyful path.

I felt lighthearted and easy as the clippers moved underneath the hair, close to the skull. I couldn't help but smile at the unexpected, yet completely expected, path my life has taken. The next morning, after the ceremony, one of the monastics greeted me with a warm smile and said, "Now you are 50% monk!" My teacher smiled, too, and told me: "Now it is time to practice." It was the same message he has given to me for eleven years. And it is still the right lesson.

Namo A Di Da Phat

