

Abhayagiri: What's in a name?

by
Amaro Bhikkhu

How we name things is important. When contemplating what to call the new monastery here in Redwood Valley (Mendocino County), California, a number of different possibilities were considered. Since we have been the fortunate beneficiaries of the generosity of the Ven. Master Hsüan Hua, in receiving the initial gift of 120 acres of land here in Redwood Valley, it was obvious that it would be appropriate to somehow reflect the kindness of this offering and the spirit in which it was intended. It also felt important to use a name in the Pali language – to confirm our sense of allegiance to the Theravada tradition and to resonate the classical' style of forest monastic life that is being embodied here.

The name that was finally settled upon – Abhayagiri – means 'The Mountain of Fearlessness' or 'Fearless Mountain' ('A-' = 'not' or 'without'; '-bhaya-' = 'fear'; '-giri' = 'mountain'). It seemed appropriate for a variety of reasons, the most important being the way it resonated the intention behind Ven. Master Hua's gift. On several occasions when our communities met together he had made a point of stating that it had been the dream of his life "to bring the Northern and Southern traditions of Buddhism back together again." Master Hua was someone who acted upon his words, so when we received the news a few days before he passed away that he had offered us 120 acres of forest 15 miles north of The City of 10,000 Buddhas in Ukiah (Mendocino County), California, we were surprised but not surprised – such open-hearted gestures of ecumenical friendship were just his style. It was also in keeping with this same openness and trust that the gift was made with no strings attached – it was a pure offering, enabling our communities to be physically close and to relate in an atmosphere of mutual respect and harmony.

The original Abhayagiri monastery was in ancient Sri Lanka, at Anuradhapura. It was founded around 25 BC by King Vattagamani and lasted until the decline and fall of Anuradhapura some six centuries later. All that remains there today is the Abhayuttara Stupa. The Abhayagiri monastery was most notable for the fact that it welcomed practitioners and teachers from many different Buddhist traditions; where they lived amicably alongside one another, distinct in their particular practices but not separate as communities. It was also notable inasmuch as the monastery emphasized meditation practice and the direct realization of the Buddha's Teachings. Fa-Hsien, the Chinese pilgrim of the 4th Century, evidently spent the two years of his stay in Sri Lanka at Abhayagiri – according to him there were, at this time, 5,000 monks in residence there.

Another interesting fact, and one that again links the name of Abhayagiri to the City of 10,000 Buddhas community, is that the origins of the *bhikshuni* (nuns') order in China apparently stem from this same center. Around the year 430 CE the abbot of a monastery in China took it upon himself to give the full ordination to a group of women disciples – citing the fact that, as there were no nuns in China at that time, he was justified in following the example of Gautama Buddha who had ordained the first women on his

own. A visiting Vinaya master subsequently pointed out that this was an inappropriate course of action, particularly since there was, at that time, a flourishing bhikkhuni community in Sri Lanka. Word was then sent to the king of Sri Lanka, requesting some nuns be sent to China to establish the full ordination for women there. This request was received favorably and a party of nuns, including several *Theris* (Elders), set out from Abhayagiri; eventually reaching the monastery from where the request had come and giving the full ordination according to proper procedure to the community of women there. Thus the nuns' order in China was established and has continued, as far as can be ascertained, in an unbroken stream since then.

The great majority of members of the monastic community of the City of 10,000 Buddhas and its branch monasteries are women – bhikshuni and *shramanerika* (novices). The name Abhayagiri then reflects the home of this lineage so, after all these years, in some ways the circle has come around and closed itself again.

One final point on this subject, which is interesting to note, is that in the Thai language the word 'Abhaya' has changed its meaning over the centuries; it no longer means 'fearlessness' but 'forgiveness' – a rare and sorely needed commodity in the world, and one it is always good to have reminders of.

* * *