

Joshin Luce Bachoux Sensei:

# Home For Elderly Nuns: A Project

Living in a temple is not only a life choice, it is a genuine joy for a nun. But when old age sets in, related issues and health problems can make temple life more difficult to follow.

Respecting the strict rules of a temple and practicing hours of meditation becomes more demanding, as does the requirement to work for the community. In case of illness, there is a fear of becoming a burden to others, of hindering their practice. But with no family and limited financial resources, few nuns have alternative solutions.

Ten years ago, I tried to start a project: a retirement house for Buddhist nuns. Although I received much interest through a paper in a Buddhist magazine, nothing came of it.

The main reason for this, I think, is that such a project is difficult to achieve without the support of a community. It requires the support of a Sangha, a group of other nuns, and, of course, the assistance of benefactors.

Nevertheless, this first attempt pushed me to go beyond this mere attractive idea, to think in a concrete and realistic way about all the issues that are related to setting up such a project, and to identify first solutions.

I have summarized below some of the questions that this project raises, and in the attached document a certain number of answers that I consider.

## **Who should be the recipients of this initiative?**

Only nuns, or nuns and lay women?

Or nuns and couples? And how many people?

## **Where should it be located?**

Why in France?

What kind of organization? Of administration?

What kind of buildings? What is collective and what is private?

Which rules and schedules?

Which relationship with the outside: nearest village, town?

Which medical facilities, inside and outside; how can we ensure that everyone can stay in this home up to the end, or at least as long as possible?

And last but not least: What about funding? Money to start, and then money to maintain the structure and the people?

Should we have, for instance, lay people buying some houses or apartments? Letting?

**There are two reasons that make me think I can handle this project:**

The first reason comes from my experience: 25 years ago, upon returning from Japan, I founded "la Demeure sans Limites", a temple in the center of France, with my Teacher's help. We had very little money at that time.

I had to master the administrative rules pertaining to religious organizations and learn things like accounting, smoothing over problems between people, creating a positive relationship with the village, being a teacher, a cook, a housekeeper, a gardener and so on. Things turned out well, and the temple has been thriving. It is now led by my disciple Sensei Jokei Lambert.

It is small - we purposely chose to keep it that way - but we welcome a good number of people throughout the year and are comfortable with the donations we receive.

All the experience I built up in this context could flow into this project.

The second reason comes from my personal motivation: some years ago, I was sick with cancer and had to stay in bed for a period of time. Hearing the bells, the woods, all the daily sounds punctuating the temple's daily schedule was a wonderful help: I was able to follow – in my head! - the regular activities, to link my limited life with all the temple life. "Now is zazen", I used to think, and I learned to meditate lying down; "Now is working time", and I tried to do some small exercises, moving my legs or

back... "Now is chanting time" or "Now is studying time", and I would read or chant in my mind.

I flowed through the days with the Sangha, never feeling isolated even though I was seeing very few people. When I recovered, I felt I had never stopped practicing.

This is what I would like to share with other nuns, this opportunity to practice until the last moment of their lives.

To my knowledge, creating a Home for elderly nuns, gathering different traditions and different nationalities, has not been done yet.

In Zen, we say: "We take care of the Dharma, and the Dharma takes care of us". Taking care of the Dharma also implies living out our commitment, looking with a clear mind at difficulties and finding solutions.

The project I would like to carry out in collaboration with others would give all nuns, whatever their school and whatever their nationality, and all female Dharma practitioners, the opportunity to live in a Sangha, to help each other and to support each other, up to their last day. This would require the help of all potentially interested persons.

Here are some of the questions to be answered and my suggestions, based on my personal experience as the founder of a Buddhist Temple in France.

This is a mere draft to be taken further together.

### **Where to set up such a community**

France seems the country of choice. It has a long tradition of monastic communities, mainly Catholic of course, but Buddhist monasteries are now also starting to emerge.

This has led to the adoption of very helpful laws for religious organizations, e.g. regarding tax exemption, donations or legacies.

Furthermore there is a unique legal and administrative status called "Religious Congregation", that provides for a number of benefits of a legal, material or moral nature.

([fondationdesmonasteres.org](http://fondationdesmonasteres.org) "Etablir une congrégation religieuse".)

France being a member of the EU, European citizens do not need a visa, and it is

quite easy for US citizens to obtain one.

The French countryside is still filled with places that can be bought and renovated at affordable prices.

Besides, and this is particularly important for this project, France has an excellent healthcare system offering a high standard of care, not only in hospitals, but also at-home, through district nurses who help keep sick or elderly people in their own environment. Healthcare is generally affordable and often even free, at least for EU citizens.

### **Who should be part of the project?**

Only nuns, or nuns and (female) lay people? I think the answer to this question is linked to the financing.

Since nuns in general will not have sufficient income to sustain themselves, we could imagine a partnership, with a lay person sponsoring a nun, i.e. for lodging and food and if necessary medication, following the Buddhist tradition.

Finding the necessary funding to buy an adequate building is of course a core issue.

One of my students is a project manager in a high-profile international company. He is specifically in charge of setting up funding for real estate projects, involving both public and private investment. He is supporting this project, bringing in his enormous expertise. Based on his experience, he believes that besides fundraising from Buddhist followers, it should be possible to ask for and obtain financial support from different private partners. In recent years, many projects based on community life and intergenerational housing projects have been carried out.

We are currently working together on a draft clarifying the opportunities for funding.

Funding will impact the direction of the project: which kind of building, where precisely in France, buying or renting, the scope of the remedial work to be done...

A number of other points need to be covered, discussed, and decided together with the persons willing to participate in the project.

Regarding the structure of the building, my idea is that we need both private and collective places such as a meditation hall, a refectory and a library, so that the residents can meet and practice together and build a real Sangha.

It would be interesting to have a few younger people in training. Following the

Buddhist tradition, monastics will share the teachings in exchange for help in the temple: gardening, cooking, and so on. The legal framework will have to be considered.

Good relationships with the surrounding community is also very important: this includes opening the place to non-residents (for meditation, teachings) and village people, organizing events, shopping nearby... This helps with gaining acceptance and smoothing any eventual resentment towards the "strange foreigners".

As is customary in monasteries, a board of benefactors and residents would decide the internal rules (minimum age to be accepted? Minimum months to be spent with the community? What about family visits? Personal items? ...).

All these points should be examined and rules established from the beginning, so that things are clear and lead to smooth interactions between people.

Shall we try? Shall we build a "new" Sangha, gathering different schools, gathering monastics and lay people, to live in harmony and take care of each other?

Shall we go beyond our personal practices to find the heart of the Buddha's teachings: shared wisdom through compassion in action?

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