

Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara Los Angeles USA

Updated 19 December 2025

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Under the leadership of the late Venerable Havnapola Ratnasara Maha Thera and Venerable Walpola Piyananda Maha Thera the Dhamma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara were pioneers in the development the use of Precepts for *Upasakas* and *Upasikas* in the West. Their *Dhammacari* and *Bodhicari* Precepts are an expansion of the *Ajivatthamaka Sila* (Eight Precepts with Right Livelihood as the Eighth).

The Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara website explains on the [webpage](#) Initiation for Lay People

“Dharma Vijaya has a program whereby lay people can be initiated with titles reflecting their level of commitment to learning and practicing Buddhism. The first level is *Upasika*; the second is *Dhammacari*; and the third is *Bodhicari*, which is the equivalent of a Jodo Shinshu Buddhist minister.”

Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara Silver Jubilee 1980-2005: Golden Jubilee of Ordination of Bhante Walpola Piyananda 1955-2005, explains on pages 13-15

“In time it occurred to Bhante [Venerable Walpola Piyananda] that the best way to establish Buddhism here [the USA] with native teachers was to develop a new system to supplement, not replace, the traditional system... In consultation with Ven Dr. [Havnapola] Ratanasara and Ven. Lenagala Sumedha Ananda Maha Nayaka and the support of Ven. Madewala Punjabi Ven. Piyananda and Ven. [Pannile] Ananda were able to develop a three-step system of ordination. First, anyone who takes five precepts and is initiated into Buddhism is called an *Upasaka* [*Upasika*]. He or she is expected to follow a specific study program and practice meditation. After practising for two years and showing development, he or she can advance to the level of *Dhammacari*. The *Dhammacari* follows 9 precepts, and follows a more advance syllabus of study. He or she is qualified to teach Sunday school and start meditation classes, but is not considered a fully ordained minister. The *Dhammacari* is basically a lay religious teacher. Finally, after a few more years of study and practice, those so inclined can apply for the level of *Bodhicari* who follows 12 precepts. He or she is a fully ordained lay minister, on the level of, say, a Japanese Jodo Shinshu or a Methodist minister. He or she can perform many religious ceremonies and activities, yet remains a lay person. Dharma Vijaya also has a *Brahmacari* initiation for those so inclined.”

In *The Faces of Buddhism in America* Paul David Numrich explains in Chapter 8 Theravada Buddhism in America in the section Experimentation with Intermediate Religious Statuses pages 158-160

“Traditional Theravada Buddhism stresses the distinction between lay and monastic lifestyles. Even so, the tradition offers specific opportunities for lay Buddhists to approximate the renunciatory monastic ideal on a limited basis. Lay devotees may take the Eight Precepts (*attanga sila*) during *uposatha* (sacred) days, wearing white and living in a disciplined and reflective manner at the temple... Various Buddhist

groups in the West have implemented novel hierarchies of graduated religious statuses for their members... For more than a decade Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara of Los Angeles has experimented with such categories. In part to provide initiation ceremonies for American converts to Buddhism, but more importantly in an effort to train an indigenous American leadership in lieu of cultivating a native *bhikkhu-sangha*. "Buddhism can hardly occupy a firm place in the mainstream of American society if it constantly has to be replenished with foreign born clergy who themselves may not be integrated into our society," asserts Dharma Vijaya's pamphlet describing its most recent hierarchy of lay statuses. Taken as a whole, Dharma Vijaya's five categories represent intermediate religious statuses between the ordinary layperson and the *bhikkhu* which creates something of a para- or quasi-monastic order ... At the first level, *Upasaka*, a person makes "a commitment to approach life from a Buddhist point of view." The *Upasaka* receives an ivory-coloured sash at an initiation ceremony, promising to live by the Five Precepts and to recite some basic Buddhist verses twice daily. The special nature of the at least one year of study and practice, at least eighteen years of age (or parental and temple monks' approval) - set this apart from the traditional status of Buddhist lay devotee (*upasaka/upasika*). A *Dhammacari*, the next status, must be an *Upasaka* of at least two years' practice and deemed "suitable" by the monks of the temple. "A *Dhammacari* is a committed practising Buddhist, at least 18 years of age, who has the knowledge and experience to teach Dhamma School, give Dhamma talks, conduct meditation classes, and even organize Buddhist groups." The candidate receives a light yellow sash at an initiation ceremony, pledging to adhere to nine precepts in life - the standard Five Precepts plus abstention from "tale-bearing," "harsh speech," idle chatter," and "wrong livelihood" - and to practice a twice-daily recitation ritual. Dharma Vijaya considers the third status in its hierarchy to be on the same level as the *Dhammacari*, though it reflects one difference in lifestyle." The *Anagarika* is a *Dhammacari*, who substitutes the more stringent precept of abstention from all sexual relations (*abrahmacariya*) for the usual precept of abstention from simple sexual misconduct (*kamesu micchacara*)."

"With the institution of the... *Bodhicari*, Dharma Vijaya has sought to fill the "gap" in the Western transmission of Theravada Buddhism created by the dearth of monks. "A *Bodhicari* is a Buddhist lay minister, neither a lay person nor ordained Sangha," whose responsibilities and authorities... include... the possibility of conducting certain religious services [when monks are unavailable], holding chaplainships, conducting weddings and funerals, [and] initiating *Upasaka*." ... Nomination requirements include a minimum of four years of college and three years of training with a monk... the *Bodhicari* follows twelve precepts, the twelfth being the most important in emphasizing the selfless service exemplified by the Buddha in his previous lives as *bodhisattva* or Buddha-to-be: "I undertake the Precept to practise the Ten Perfections with compassion and skill". The *Bodhicari* also holds to a detailed daily ritual regimen. The final special status granted by Dharma Vijaya is *Brahmacari*, a *Bodhicari* who abstains from all sexual relations (*abrahmacariya*)... The temple has ordained a total of four *Bodhicaris* including the former *samaneri* Reverend Dhamamitta [a Thai woman]"

Professor Paul Numrich attended the Wesak ceremony in 1991 when the first *Bodhicaris* took these *Bodhicari* Precepts. Three *Upasakas* also took five Precepts and two *Dhammacaris* took Nine Precepts. The Nine *Dhammacari* Precepts are an amalgamation of the *Panca Sila* (The Five Precepts) and the *Ajivatthamaka Sila* (Eight Precepts with Right Livelihood as the Eighth). In *Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples* on page 130 Numrich explains:

“The twelve *Bodhicari* Precepts include ... two borrowed Pali phrases and one Precept composed by Venerable Piyananda himself. The borrowed Pali, with translation and sources according to Venerable Piyananda, are (1) *Sabba sattesu metta sahagatena cetasa viharana sikkhapadam samadiyami* ‘I undertake the Precept to live every moment with loving-kindness to all living beings’ (from *Nava Uposatha Sila* [the Nine *Uposatha Sila* with loving-kindness as the Ninth]); and (2) *Karunopaya kosalla pariggahitanam dasaparaminam paripurana sikkhapadam samadiyami*, ‘I undertake the Precept to practise the Ten Perfections with compassion and skill’ (from Buddhagosa’s commentary on the *Jataka*). Venerable Piyananda’s original Precept was; *Yavajivam aham ratanattayam na niggahissami tatheva tam samadarenagarukaram karissamiti sikkhapadam samadiyami*, I undertake the Precept not to revile the Three Treasures [the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha] but to cherish and uphold them’.”

In 2005 *Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara* reported that there were eleven *Bodhicaris* at Dharma Vijaya over half of whom were women.

In “Wesak Celebrations at Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara”, *The Asian Tribune: A Newspaper Published by World Institute for Asian Studies* reported on the 2009 Wesak celebrations at Dharma Vijaya in May 2009. This article explained

“We must mention that the highlight of the Vesak program was the acceptance of Buddhism by eight candidates who had studied the doctrine under the guidance of the venerable monks. They were recognized in three categories; 1 *Upasaka/Upasika* 2. *Dhammacari* 3. *Bodhicari*. This initiation ceremony which originated at Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara is an ongoing program where the recipients are expected to adhere to a certain code of ethics and also disseminate the Dhamma by being examples of the Buddha’s teachings.”

An article “Investigating the Integration of Buddhism into Western Culture”, by Ven Walpola Piyananda in *Asian Tribune* in 2012 stated

“Thirty-two years ago I instituted a three-step pathway for ordaining lay people as fully-certified Buddhist ministers (*Bodhicari*), which are comparable to Protestant or Jodo Shinshu ministers. This system has been very successful, and we now have many excellent, highly-qualified male and female lay ministers who can teach Dhamma classes, conduct weddings and funerals, give meditation instruction, and serve the Buddhist community in a host of useful ways. The three-step program is based on progressive levels of Buddhist education, commitment, teaching experience, and Precepts.”

Bhante Walpola Piyananda’s 2018 book *Sharing Buddhism in the Western World*, Chapter 7 Lay Initiation & Ordination explains the role of *Bodhicaris* on pages 58 and 60-63

...basing itself in Buddhist tradition, the *Sangha* of Dharma Vijaya experimented, first introducing *Dhammacari* and *Anagarika* initiations. This still left a gap, which was finally filled with the *Bodhicari* ordination, that of a lay Buddhist minister. The *Sangha* of Dharma Vijaya has developed a set of precepts and other requirements for this level, all based on traditional Buddhist teachings.” (page 58).

The Section *Bodhicari Initiation* (pages 55-63) includes information from the 1994 issue of the *Dhamma Vijaya Magazine*. Pages 60-63 of the book explain the requirements for being nominated to be a *Bodhicari* and the role of a *Bodhicari*. It also records that 27 *Bodhicaris* had been initiated by 2018. Bhante Piyananda also explains how he sees the future of the current three-step program of *Upasakas*, *Dhammacaris* and *Bodhicaris* at Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara.

The chanting *Bodhicaris* undertake includes the *Metta Sutta* (Loving Kindness Sutta) and the short form of the *Sacca Vibhanga Sutta* (The Analysis of Truth Sutta). These Suttas are both included in Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara's 1990 book *Buddha Vandana: A Book of Buddhist Devotions* and 2019 book *The Great Book of Protective Blessings: Pali-English*.

Ven S Dhammika in *The Broken Buddha* in Chapter 31 Buddhayana on page 152 of the 2006 edition and page 184 of the 2020 edition says

"At least one forward-looking and thoughtful Sri Lankan monk...Ven Piyananda of Los Angeles has a program of lay training and ordination which has had some success and could well be a model for similar efforts."

Venerable Balangoda Ananda Maitreya Mahanayaka Thera Aggamaha Pandita Abhidhaja Maharatthaguru DLitt DLitt (24 August 1896 -18 July 1998)

Venerable Balangoda Ananda Maitreya Mahanayaka Thera Aggamaha Pandita Abhidhaja Maharatthaguru DLitt DLitt (24th August 1896 -18th July 1998) is the person who did the most to support and encourage these developments. He took part in the BBC TV series *The Long Search*, and regularly visited the West.

He explains in *Nine Special Qualities of the Buddha & Other Essays* on page 16

"The perfect moral conduct or character can be categorised under the Eight Precepts called *Ajivatthamaka Sila*. These are refraining from eight unwholesome ways, namely, killing, taking what is not given; a life devoted to sensuality; falsehood, slandering, backbiting, harsh speech, gossip; and wrong livelihood. All the good conduct and keeping Precepts or *Patimokkha* rules of Buddhist monks are included in these eight Precepts."

Paul David Numrich reports on page 114 of *Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples* that an American laywoman received the *Panca Sila* (Five Precepts) from Venerable Ananda Maitreya in 1986 at Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara Los Angeles. She was one of the first two people to take the *Bodhicari* Precepts and received the Buddhist name Vajira at the same Vihara in 1991.

Bodhicari Vajira explained in "Letter from our Reader", *NIBWA Newsletter on International Buddhist Womens Affairs* (Number 34) pages 19-20, that Venerable Balangoda Ananda Maitreya was in Sri Lanka at the of the first of the *Bodhicari* ceremony in 1991, and gave his approval from there. She has since joined the Buddhist Sangha Council of Southern California (under the title of "Reverend"), and she serves as the Buddhist Chaplain at UCLA.

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