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Venerable Pannavati, Groundbreaking African American Theravada Bhikkhuni and Respected Nonsectarian Teacher, Has Died

By Joan Duncan Oliver

Venerable Pannavati Bhikkhuni, a former Christian pastor ordained in both the Theravada and Chan Buddhist traditions who was a lineage holder in the Zen Peacemaker Order and a disciple of H.H. Dorje Chang Buddha III of Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions along with Rinpoche Zhaxi Zhouma, died on Thursday, February 26, at 1:30 p.m.

A shared statement from the [Heartwood Mandala](#) community in Hendersonville, North Carolina, where she was spiritual leader and cofounding teacher, reads:

“Our dearest teacher, Venerable Pannavati, left her body on this auspicious day, 2/26/2026 at 1:30 p.m. EST. Her monastics, two lay residents and Kaye, her devoted Kappiya and friend, held vigil for her from 9 a.m. through her transition. Words will never explain how she impacted all of our lives and touched our hearts. Her joy was contagious, and her fearless compassion paved the way for so many people. She was a true kalyanamitta, and her favorite thing to do was to give a dharma talk! Everything that she did was for the dharma and for saving sentient beings.”

As an African American Theravada *bhikkhuni*, or nun, Venerable Pannavati was an anomaly. “I don’t think I’m the first,” she once told an [interviewer](#), “but I do believe I’m the only one.”

Though deeply committed to contemplative life, she was equally dedicated to service. Her [message](#) was clear: “It is not enough to sit on our zafus. These times call for compassionate action to be an integral part of our practice.” She was widely respected for decades of humanitarian work as varied as establishing Buddhist practice centers, community-building with India’s Dalits, or “Untouchables,” providing housing and support for homeless young people, and promoting full ordination for Theravada Buddhist nuns.

With Venerable Pannadipa, now deceased, Venerable Pannavati cofounded Embracing Simplicity Hermitage, a contemplative Buddhist order near Hendersonville, North Carolina, and in 2017, cofounded Heartwood Refuge, a nonsectarian intentional community and residential center, also in North Carolina, that evolved into Heartwood Mandala, a global sangha for which Venerable Pannavati was spiritual director. My Place, Inc., which she set up in 2009 to provide homeless and at-risk youth with housing, education, and job training, became a model for a program adopted by the state of North Carolina.

Venerable Pannavati was well-known for her advocacy of women monastics. Historically, ordination as a *bhikkhuni* was forbidden to women in Thailand and Cambodia, but in an unprecedented move, she arranged the ordination of fifty Thai *bhikkunis* in 2009 and, a year later, ten Cambodian nuns—in both cases with the support of the Buddhist monastic hierarchy.

“After [I became] a Theravada nun . . . I could really see the patriarchal aspect of institutionalized Buddhism, and I became very disenchanted with it,” she told [Tricycle in summer 2011](#). “I needed to walk my own path, so I just did what I felt that I had to do, and I found support from senior Thai monks and Western nuns.”

Venerable Pannavati was also a founding circle director of Women of Compassionate Wisdom, an international Buddhist Order and Sisterhood. Describing her unwavering support for women, Michaela Haas, author of *Dakini Power*, said, “She insist[ed] on equality and respect in Buddhist life for both female monastics and lay sangha.”

Venerable Pannavati’s efforts on behalf of the disempowered were not limited to America. In 2011, responding to an email from a man working with the Dalits in India, she “adopted” ten Dalit villages, organizing practical assistance like education, sanitation, and micro-grants, and helping them become egalitarian communities grounded in Buddhist principles. Curious about how the Dalits had chosen her to help them, the man who had contacted her said, “I googled a Black Buddhist nun. You were the only one who came up.” He figured an African American Buddhist would understand how to deal with racism and the plight of the marginalized. “I didn’t think any people could feel more marginalized than African Americans, but there are [some]!” she later said.

Venerable Pannavati received numerous accolades for her work, including in 2008, the Outstanding Women in Buddhism Award in Bangkok. In accepting it she said, “I accept it for all the women everywhere struggling under patriarchal oppression, for all the girls in countries where they are sold to provide the means for the boys to excel, for all the African Americans who are seen in so many spiritual traditions as lesser.”

Venerable Pannavati was born in Washington, D.C., in 1950 and grew up in Washington and the surrounding Maryland area. By her own admission, she was a tough kid. “In spiritual circles we like to talk about being a spiritual warrior,” she said in her [video](#) *Finding True Refuge*, “but I was a straight-out street fighter.” She was also a devout Christian. “I felt the love of Jesus enter my heart when I was 6,” she told *Tricycle*. She played the piano and organ at First Rising Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Washington before she reached her teens. At age 13, she began having spiritual experiences—including speaking in tongues—that the Baptist church disavowed. So she turned to the Pentecostals—“they called those ‘Holy Rollers’ in my day,” she said—sneaking out to attend services against her mother’s will.

From there, she followed a charismatic televangelist who preached the prosperity gospel, became a Christian pastor, and cycled through Unitarian Universalism and Taoism before taking refuge in Buddhism. “In 1985, I had a vision,” she told *Tricycle*, describing how it led her “away from the church onto my own path, and I entered into a fifteen-year dark night of the soul. I was really trying to find out who I was, what the meaning of life was.”

At the time, she was “a great spiritual practitioner,” she said. “[I] knew and understood the Bible, but I had not mastered my emotions.” Meditation helped. “When I got to the place where I was no longer afraid of myself—[where I knew I wouldn’t] act in some way that I would come to regret five minutes later—I knew I was on the right path.”

Since childhood, she had been drawn to a more cloistered life, “but we were Baptist, and Baptists don’t have nuns,” she said. Secular life intervened: She married three times and had children, earned master’s degrees in business and education (she later added a PhD in religious studies) and owned businesses. Asked about her three husbands, she told an interviewer, “I enjoyed every one of them. But in life, there is this truth of impermanence, and things are constantly changing.” By the time she was 40, “I had done everything, good and bad, that I wanted to,” she said. “Becoming a nun was really like stepping into a freedom, something that was the last thing for me to do—or be.”

Given her trans-lineage orientation, it is no surprise that Venerable Pannavati was a nonsectarian teacher. “We shouldn’t think in terms of Theravada versus Mahayana or Vajrayana, or arhat versus bodhisattva,” she told a panel discussing the bodhisattva path. “When we start dividing in this way, we get into dogma. But the Buddha was talking about actual organic experience.”

A [vision statement](#) on the Heartwood Mandala website articulates that view:

“Heartwood is neither defined by a single lineage nor confined by any single sect or practice. Our retreats, refuge, courses, training, practical life, and social engagement in the world are geared not towards an outward show of Buddhism as a religion but towards cultivation of the inner integrity and the development of being that the Dharma inspires. . . Heartwood is a container for nonsectarian practice, conscious living, and empowerment in service.”

Just as she was nonsectarian, Venerable Pannavati avoided racial favoritism. When Black Buddhist leaders criticized her for turning down invitations to speak to POC—People of Color—groups, she told them, “I’m not a Black dharma teacher; I’m just a dharma teacher. Call me back when you want me to come and talk to your whole sangha.” She was opposed to affinity groups, she explained to *Tricycle*, because she thought “we all need to stay together and work on overcoming our discomfort with one another.”

From the beginning, Venerable Pannavati walked her talk. Henderson, the rural county in North Carolina where she established her first center, Embracing Simplicity Hermitage, was ultraconservative and overwhelmingly white. It was there, as a 13-year-old child visiting her aunt, that she had experienced a searing, indelible encounter with racism. One night, the Ku Klux Klan showed up at her aunt’s door, demanding to know why Pannavati hadn’t stepped off the sidewalk to let a white woman pass. The clansmen wouldn’t leave until her aunt had spanked her. Pannavati immediately fled north, vowing never to return. But against all odds, she did. To overcome local resistance to a Buddhist center run by a self-described “outspoken” Black nun, she drew on her background as a Christian pastor and doctor of religious studies to win over the community. Many of the local women came around and provided support; some even joined the sangha. “I believe in people’s ability to change,” she wrote in an [excerpt](#) from *Afrikan Wisdom: New Voices Talk Black Liberation, Buddhism, and Beyond*, reprinted in *Tricycle*. “I believe we all possess buddha-nature. We just need help discovering it.”

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My Place, Inc., which she set up in 2009, not only provided housing, education, and job training for local young people but from 2011 until 2013 operated a successful bakery, My Gluten-Free Bread Company. The bakery funded My Place and gave the residents valuable work experience. (A model for the enterprise was the Greyston Bakery started by Roshi Bernie Glassman in 1982 to provide employment for the marginalized in Yonkers, New York.)

Venerable Pannavati’s wealth of life experience made her a practical as well as compassionate mentor for sangha members worldwide. Her dharma name was emblematic of the role she played: The Hindi word *panna* means “emerald” or “wisdom”; *vati* means “the one who has” or just “female sage.”

Known for her warmth and generosity, until she retired Venerable Pannavati led retreats at some fifty centers every year and annually visited the Dalit communities, often with sangha members in tow. She was a frequent guest teacher at Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Massachusetts and Spirit Rock in northern California, and in 2015 led weekly meditations for *Tricycle* during Meditation Month. Many of her recorded teachings are posted on YouTube. They convey her deep understanding of *buddhadharma* in clear, accessible terms, peppered with humor and down-to-earth examples from her own rich and varied life.

Dedicated to a life of service, Pannavati continued to work in India until Covid, running migrant summer camps for children and young adults whose families were working the fields in the area, providing local resources for children and families in need, as well as assisting in hurricane recovery efforts. Another one of her many signature projects had been the Dharmacharya Program, a two-year training path designed for serious practitioners, which can lead to nonmonastic ordination. From 2013 through 2022, the program enrolled more than one hundred students.

And anyone who knew or spent time with Venerable Pannavati also knew that she possessed a genuine love of music and would often express her dharma through song. Out of this love grew Venerable Pannavati’s dharma

singing group, **DharmaVoci**, which has recorded covers and original works blending traditional Buddhist chants with contemporary musical styles, bringing together the musical lineages of different spiritual traditions.

According to Heartwood Mandala, a Henderson-based memorial is being planned, “most likely in April,” with details to be shared soon. In the meantime, people are welcome to schedule a visit to the sangha.

Joan Duncan Oliver is a *Tricycle* contributing editor and the author most recently of *Buddhism: An Introduction to the Buddha’s Life, Teachings, and Practices* (St. Martin’s Essentials).