

# *Sakyadhita*

## *INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF BUDDHIST WOMEN*

### **A BRIEF HISTORY**

Sakyadhita, the only active international organization of Buddhist women, evolved naturally out of the dialogue, forums, and fellowship experienced by the women who attended the first International Conference on Buddhist Nuns held in Bodhgaya, India, in 1987. Over 1,500 people attended the inaugural address by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, in which he emphasized the equal spiritual potential of women and men. Women from 27 countries, along with a few monks and laymen, gathered at this first Buddhist conference that focused on the problems faced by ordained and lay Buddhist women. Sakyadhita's subsequent bi-annual conferences have brought together scholars, government dignitaries, and religious leaders from around the world. These conferences have made significant contributions toward improving the educational, religious, and social opportunities available to women throughout Asia (as discussed below in Outcomes).

Sakyadhita is an international initiative to optimized the potential and increase the well-being of Buddhist women and their communities. Since 1987, Sakyadhita has had a significant impact on the self-perception and social standing of Buddhist women internationally. This was accomplished was through networking and by sponsoring the participation of nuns and laywomen from developing countries at the Sakyadhita International Conferences on Buddhist Women. Women from Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, India, Nepal, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, who would not otherwise not have been able to attend, were given an experience that changed their lives forever.

### **SAKYADHITA: GLOBAL COALITION OF BUDDHIST WOMEN**

Since 1987, Sakyadhita: International Association of Buddhist Women has been working to benefit Buddhist women around the world. Established at the conclusion of the 1<sup>st</sup> Sakyadhita Conference in Bodhgaya, India, in 1987, the organization has almost 2000 members and friends in 45 countries around the world. Every two years, an international conference brings laywomen and nuns from a variety of countries and traditions together to share their experiences. Project projects to improve conditions for Buddhist women, especially in developing countries, are encouraged. Sakyadhita International Conferences on Buddhist Women have been held in Bodhgaya, India (1987); Bangkok, Thailand (1991); Colombo, Sri Lanka (1993); Leh, India (1995); Phnom Penh, Cambodia (1997-98); Lumbini, Nepal (2000); Taipei, Taiwan (2002); Seoul, Korea (2004); Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (2006); Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia (2008); Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (2010); and Bangkok, Thailand (2011). The 13<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita Conference is scheduled for Vaishali, India, in January 2013.

Working at the grassroots level, Sakyadhita provides a communications network among Buddhist women internationally. The organization promotes research and publications on Buddhist women's history and other topics of interest. It supports Buddhist women's initiatives to create education projects, retreat facilities, training centers, women's shelters, and local conferences and discussion groups. Members strive to create equal opportunities for women in all Buddhist traditions. The goal is to empower more than 300,000,000 Buddhist women worldwide to work for peace and social justice.

## **SAKYADHITA MISSION STATEMENT**

Sakyadhita aims to promote world peace through the creation of a network of communications among Buddhist women throughout the world, to work for gender equity in Buddhism, the improved well-being of women in developing countries, and increased harmony and understanding among the Buddhist traditions and the world's religions. The goals that were expressed at the first Sakyadhita conference in 1987 and reaffirmed in 2004 are:

1. To promote world peace through the teachings of the Buddha;
2. To foster an international network of communications among Buddhist women;
3. To promote the physical and spiritual welfare of the world's Buddhist women;
4. To encourage education and training projects for Buddhist women;
5. To promote the education of women as teachers of Buddhadharma;
6. To provide guidance and assistance to Buddhist women interested in meditation and ordination;
7. To conduct research and prepare publications on Buddhist women's history and other topics of interest to Buddhist women;
8. To establish an international alliance of Buddhist women and work toward an international Bhikshuni Sangha.
9. To encourage the development of Buddhist culture and education;
10. To promote harmony among the Buddhist traditions and ecumenical dialogue;
11. To support the preservation of Buddhist sacred sites;
12. To encourage compassionate social action for the benefit of humanity.

## **GENDER EQUITY IN BUDDHISM**

Sakyadhita is committed to helping create gender balance in the world's Buddhist traditions through improved education and training, and by helping women gain equal opportunities for full ordination. The Buddha affirmed the equal spiritual potential of women and men in the sixth century BCE. This represented a significant departure from prevailing views that defined women in terms of their biological function and their capacity for productive labor. Buddhism is in a unique position among major religions in recognizing the spiritual equality of women and men. Unfortunately, this egalitarian theory has not always been recognized in practice.

As significant as the Buddha's affirmation of women's spiritual equality was, this affirmation alone was not sufficient to erase gender discrimination entirely. Although the Buddha established a monastic order for women, monks remained dominant. Men are educated to become scholars and teachers; women are trained to nurture and support them. By joining the order, males automatically gain status and a good education, and become eligible for positions within the elite and powerful ecclesiastical hierarchy. As Buddhism spread beyond India, male dominance of Buddhist institutions continued. The belief that women are somehow inferior to men remains deeply rooted in many Buddhist cultures today. Today, women can obtain full ordination on a par with men in only three traditions – Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese.

Sakyadhita works to rectify gender injustice in Buddhist societies. With the support and encouragement of Sakyadhita's conferences, research, and writings, many new monasteries, meditation centers, and educational programs for women are being established and supported. Higher ordination ceremonies are being organized and the gender imbalance within Buddhism is being rectified. Increasing numbers of women are taking greater roles in Buddhism and in their communities. Sakyadhita members have made undreamed-of progress in just 20 years.

## **FOCUS ON THE WELL-BEING OF WOMEN**

Sakyadhita is committed to improving the well-being – physical, mental, and spiritual – of the world's 300 million Buddhist women. Special emphasis is on improving opportunities for women in developing countries to obtain secular and Buddhist education, healthcare education, and leadership and empowerment training. Buddhist education and training have proven especially effective in helping women develop their potential.

There are an estimated 300 million Buddhist women worldwide, including at least 130,000 nuns. These numbers indicate tremendous potential for transforming our global community economically, socially, and spiritually in an integrated and collaborative approach to mutual problems, solutions, and goals. An expanded role for women in helping transform society is urgent. Buddhist women live in some of the poorest and most war-torn countries in the world.

## **EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROJECTS**

Creating schools, monasteries, and training centers where young women can gain skills, education, training as teachers, and ordination as nuns if they wish, is a way to transform many lives. Sakyadhita's bi-annual international conferences are a way to help optimize women's energies and potential. Although Buddhist women's advancement is a long-term project, these conferences have stimulated rapid improvement in the educational, religious, and social opportunities available to women throughout Asia. Programs that have resulted include:

### ***Jamyang Foundation***

Jamyang Foundation has established innovative study programs for young girls and nuns

in two of the neediest and most remote parts of the world: the Indian Himalayas and the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. These projects foster women's learning potential in ways that are harmonious with their unique Buddhist cultural backgrounds. In the Himalayas, there are currently twelve Jamyang Foundation study programs: nine in Zangskar (Ladakh), two in Spiti (Himachal Pradesh), and one in Kinnaur. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, Jamyang Foundation founded and supports three primary schools for girls. Two pioneering projects in Dharamsala (Himachal Pradesh) and one in Spiti are now self-sufficient, fulfilling Jamyang Foundation's mission of empowering women and creating sustainable communities run by women themselves.

Of the 387 students currently enrolled in Jamyang Foundation's study programs, 277 are women from remote Himalayan areas of India, ranging in age from 6 to 73, and 110 young Marma girls living in remote tribal areas of Bangladesh. Most have had little, if any, schooling. The reasons are significant: parents often send the boys to school and keep the girls at home to work. Furthermore, if there are any local schools, they teach an unfamiliar culture in an alien language. In the Himalayas, the students are from Tibetan Buddhist cultural backgrounds; the government schools teach Hindi and Urdu. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the students are Marma Buddhists; the government schools teach Bangla. Teachers in government schools often fail to show up for classes. Girls may face the danger of sexual assault on their way to school.

### ***Sakyadhita Institute for Buddhist Women***

In Sri Lanka, a groundbreaking new Institute for Buddhist Women has been established. At this institute a selected group of nuns who have shown leadership skills through social work in their communities have begun a three-year training program in social work and leadership. This program, truly an international effort, was funded by the Heinrich Boell Foundation of Germany and developed by the Sri Lanka Professional Workers Association in collaboration with the National Institute for Social Development.

The institute, the first ever to provide professional training to Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka, includes classroom training as well as field work. The curriculum includes social work, intervention methods, communication skills, and training in leadership, human rights, conflict resolution, ethnic harmony, and peace making skills, with an emphasis on Buddhist perspectives on social development.

### ***Sanghamitta School for Girls***

In Bangladesh, Buddhists comprise less than 1% of the population. As a minority population in an impoverished country, Buddhists lack adequate educational opportunities. Girls are most at risk for health problems, sexual abuse, and illiteracy. This primary school will give girls an opportunity to attend classes in a safe environment, with a curriculum based on Buddhist principles.

The first Jamyang Foundation project in Bangladesh, Sanghamitta School, was founded in Bandarban District of the Chittagong Hill Tracts 2001. The school provides primary

school education for 136 Marma tribal girls who study in bamboo thatched classrooms. The school has become very popular among the local people, because the teachers hold regular classes and show such loving care for their students. The local villagers are now helping support the school. Everyone agrees that educating girls is the best way of protecting them against sex trafficking and other dangers.

In 2004, Mahamaya School was founded for Marma tribal children in a small village near Rajasthali, a remote Buddhist tribal area in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. By 2007, there were 60 students studying in four classes. In 2006, Visakha School began with 38 girl students in two classes, initiated by people in Manikchari Thana, a remote village in Khagarachari . In 2007, the number of students increased to 66. In 2008, a new class of 15 girls will be admitted, so the total of three classes will increase to 51 girls.

### ***Scholarship Programs***

In 2002, Jamyang Foundation initiated a scholarship program to support high school and college education for Buddhist women in developing countries. Ten young women have received scholarships so far. They are now studying at Mahapajapati College in Thailand, Delhi University and Kullu College in India, and at Chittagong University in Bangladesh. Many other young women are hoping to pursue higher education when more scholarship funds become available.

## **INTERFAITH INITIATIVES**

Sakyadhita is committed to the understanding and appreciation of the world's diverse religions, philosophies, and cultures. Sakyadhita members are equally committed to bringing harmony and understanding among the Buddhist traditions. By encouraging interfaith and ecumenical understanding, Sakyadhita works to prevent and resolve conflicts on both local and global levels.

Interfaith gatherings, networking, and research have been a key element of Sakyadhita activities since its beginning. By welcoming and initiating dialogue among different religious traditions, Buddhist women are contributing to cross-cultural understanding and a kinder, healthier global community.

Europe and North America is now home to the largest expansion of Buddhism anywhere in the world in the last 1,000 years. All Buddhist traditions work together on a multitude of social service projects. Women are in a unique position to explore innovative solutions to the problems facing humanity.

## **SAKYADHITA ORGANIZATION**

### ***Founding***

The creation of Sakyadhita: International Association for Buddhist Women evolved naturally out

of the dialogue, forums, and fellowship experienced among those who organized and attended the first International Conference on Buddhist Nuns in Bodhgaya, India, in 1987. Over 1500 people listened to the encouraging words of His Holiness the Dalai Lama at the inauguration of this historic event. For the first time ever, a Buddhist conference focused on the concerns and interests of Buddhist women.

### ***Current Organization***

Sakyadhita currently consists of the following three levels of organization, each with members from a wide range of nationalities and backgrounds.

The International Advisory Board consists of 14 religious leaders, professionals, and scholars from 11 countries who act as advisors on strategy, publications, and issues related to specific countries and traditions. These advisors act as national and international spokespersons on Buddhism, women, and development issues.

The Board of Directors consists of 12 religious leaders, professionals, and scholars from five countries. These directors develop strategy; organize conferences; publish books, newsletters, and conference papers; maintain the Sakyadhita website, raise funds, and oversee communications. The directors also act as national and international spokespersons on Buddhism, women, and development issues.

The General Membership consists of almost 2,000 women and men, including religious and community leaders, professionals, and scholars from around the world. Members help organize international and local conferences; assist with development and communications; oversee study centers, meditation centers, and monasteries; and initiate community action projects.

Sakyadhita is operated entirely by volunteers. The small, active volunteer nucleus at the heart of Sakyadhita includes professional women and men from many countries, who contribute their knowledge and skills to accomplish Sakyadhita's mission of worldwide benefit. As part of this mission, these professionals work to nurture creative and administrative skills among women and men from a variety of less-privileged backgrounds, through formal and informal training programs.

The Board of Directors and Advisory Board members actively support Sakyadhita through contributing their time, expertise, and resources. Representatives of Sakyadhita's Board of Directors and Advisory Board regularly publish books and articles related to Buddhist philosophy and culture. Representatives meet with religious leaders, government officials, and community leaders; serve as board members of organizations such as the Buddhist Peace Fellowship; and attend international gatherings, including forums at the United Nations, peace conferences, and interfaith conferences.

## **SAKYADHITA ACTIVITIES**

The remarkable achievements of Sakyadhita have been accomplished due to the commitment of its membership and Board members. Primary among Sakyadhita's many achievements are: creating and successfully producing a complex series of bi-annual international forums; creating national and local chapters and forums; supporting community-based education and training programs; research; and publications. These achievements have been made possible by the sustained efforts and deep personal commitment to Sakyadhita's mission and the enthusiasm and support of the organization's members.

### ***International Conferences***

Since its inception as a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation in 1987 in California, Sakyadhita has organized the only series of comprehensive international conferences for lay and ordained Buddhist ever held in Buddhism's 2500-year history. Hundreds of Buddhist women from more than 30 countries in Asia, Australia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas have participated in these meaningful summits. Monks and laymen from various Buddhist traditions and other religious backgrounds have also joined the conferences and contributed to the scholarly and action-oriented exchanges.

Since 1987, Sakyadhita has coordinated ten international conferences and several North American conferences on Buddhist women. The coordinators have made a special effort to hold these gatherings in developing countries for two reasons: first, to keep conference costs as low as possible to encourage the participation of as many women as possible from developing countries and, second, to fulfill Sakyadhita's aim to benefit those women in greatest need. The 10<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita Conference was held in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, in July 2008. As always, the women of the host country especially benefitted and have become activated to initiate programs of their own. The 11<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita Conference was held in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, at the beginning of 2010, and the 12<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita Conference was held in Bangkok, Thailand, in June 2011. Plans for the 13<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita Conference, to be held in Vaishali, India, are underway.

The Sakyadhita International Conferences on Buddhist Women are critical to realizing Sakyadhita's mission of creating an ever-stronger unity among the world's Buddhist women, made possible by facilitating communications among women from all corners of the globe. Active dialogue on issues of concern to Buddhist women is an essential avenue to empowerment, gender equity, social and economic justice, and increased understanding among women around the globe. In many communities, Sakyadhita is the sole Buddhist forum actively addressing issues that affect Buddhist women.

The Sakyadhita International Conferences on Buddhist Women are a collaborative effort between Sakyadhita International and the host country. Sakyadhita International's contributions are coordinated by the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors. On site, the conference planning is jointly coordinated by a local planning committee, the Sakyadhita Executive Committee, and teams of international and local volunteers. Sakyadhita International takes responsibility for the international aspects of the planning, while the host country takes responsibility for organizing locally.

### ***National and Local Conferences and Events***

In addition to international conferences, Sakyadhita organizes meditation retreats, study groups, and colloquia in numerous locations. Sakyadhita Hawai'i organized the visit of H.H. the Dalai Lama to Hawai'i in April 1994, with four days of events that attracted over 10,000 people. In England, Germany, India, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, Sakyadhita branches have hosted lectures and national conferences. In the U.S., forums have taken place at Claremont Graduate University, Smith College, and many other locations.

### ***Community-Based Educational and Training Programs***

Conferences facilitate Sakyadhita's mission and provide a foundation to achieve Sakyadhita goals, including vocational training programs, education programs, monasteries, women's shelters, and practice centers. Friendships and communications networks developed at international conferences have helped identify resources and enabled members to develop many worthwhile projects.

### ***Scholarly Achievements: Publications***

The talks from the 1st Conference in Bodhgaya, India, are included in the book *Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha* (Snow Lion Publications, 1989). Talks from Sakyadhita's Santa Barbara retreat are included in *Buddhism Through American Women's Eyes* (Snow Lion Publications, 1995). A book clarifying the issue of ordination for women has been produced: *Sisters in Solitude: Two Traditions of Monastic Ethics for Women* (State University of New York Press, 1996). The talks from the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th International Conferences (held in Bangkok, Colombo, and Ladakh) have been published in *Buddhist Women Across Cultures: Realizations* (State University of New York Press, 1999). Talks from the Sakyadhita conferences in Cambodia and Claremont are included in *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming Against the Stream* (Curzon Press, 2001).

Papers from the conference in Nepal were published in *Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, Challenges, and Achievements* (State University of New York Press, 2004). The proceedings of the Taiwan conference were published in *Bridging Worlds: Buddhist Women's Voices Across Generations* (Yuan Chuan Press, 2004) and those from the Korea conference in *Discipline and Practice: Buddhist Women Past and Present* (Sakyadhita, 2004). The proceedings from the Korea conference were published as *Out of the Shadows: Socially Engaged Buddhist Women in the Global Community* (Sri Satguru Publications, 2006), and those from the Malaysia conference as *Buddhist Women in a Global Multicultural Community* (Sukhi Hotu Press, 2008). The proceedings from the Vietnam conference will be published as *Eminent Buddhist Women* (State University of New York Press, 2012). Numerous other publications and research projects have been inspired by Sakyadhita's activities, creating a new genre of literature on Buddhist women. Translations of these publications have appeared in Burmese, Chinese, German, Japanese, Korean, Marathi, Mongolian, Thai, Tibetan, Vietnamese, and other languages.

### ***Creative Achievements: Videos, CDs***

Three videos have been produced: "The Power of Compassion" documents the 4th Sakyadhita conference in Ladakh; "Women in Buddhism: Unity and Diversity," filmed at the Cambodia



Conference in 1998, presents portraits of Buddhist women around the world; “Living and Dying in Buddhist Cultures” looks at a variety of traditional beliefs and practices concerning the universal experience of dying. A CD titled “The 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama in Hawai`i” has recently been released by Sakyadhita to bring this Noble Peace Laureate’s message of peace and compassion to a wider audience. The latest CD is titled, “The Liberating Power of Mantras.” These videos and CDs help further Sakyadhita’s mission of increasing understanding and compassion throughout the world.

### ***Sakyadhita: A Vital Communications Network***

Communications and networking for compassionate social action is at the heart of Sakyadhita’s activities. The Sakyadhita Executive Committee, active volunteers, and the general membership communicate daily by e-mail. As many members as possible meet every two years at the international conferences.

### ***Newsletter***

The Sakyadhita newsletter has been published continuously since 1990. The newsletter is the organization’s primary communications link. The newsletter reports Sakyadhita’s activities and keeps the membership informed of issues and events. A valuable tool of networking among Buddhists and the international women’s community, it provides a forum for members’ ideas and experiences, stimulates research, and encourages reflection on issues of common concern. The newsletter is produced twice a year and distributed globally. It supports education, fundraising, membership recruitment and retention, and outreach activities among the international Buddhist community.

### ***Networking***

Until recently, the organization has relied primarily on print communications. Now email has replaced printed documents as the primary means of communications among the Executive Committee, committee chairs, consultants, and members, facilitating publications, conference organizing, and the exchange of information. However, recognizing that the organization’s primary goal is to benefit needy women who generally lack access to computer technology, especially in developing countries, printed publications remain essential.

### ***Website***

The Sakyadhita website (<http://www.sakyadhita.org>) was created in 1997 to publicize the organization’s goals and activities, to create a forum for discussion among members, and to serve as a resource directory for research on Buddhist women. It contains an extensive bibliography, book reviews, biographies of eminent Buddhist women, a description of female Buddhist archetypes and deities, a complete collection of Sakyadhita newsletters (1988-2012), and information on human rights, women’s legal rights, religious rights, Buddhist women’s projects, and peace activities. It has also become the primary source of conference publicity and new memberships.

## **SAKYADHITA: LONG-RANGE GOALS**

### ***Restructuring for Growth***

Over the last several years, there has been a phenomenal growth of interest in Buddhism and in Buddhist women's issues both in Asia and the West. Simultaneously, Sakyadhita's range of activities and influence continue to grow. Sakyadhita continually reviews its organizational structure to facilitate growth and expand its programs.

### ***Staff***

At present, Sakyadhita is staffed entirely by volunteers. Additional staff members are needed to handle the increasing administrative tasks and to respond to voluminous requests for information and assistance. To maintain quality programs and publications, stipends are needed to support professional consultants.

### ***Facilities***

Funds are needed to expand office operations. To date, all equipment (computers, printers, answering machines, cars, furnishings, calculators) have been donated to the organization. Office space is shared, and supplies are donated and recycled to keep expenses as low as possible.

### ***Organizational Development***

Three new committees are being established by the Board: Administration, Development, and Program. The Administration Committee is charged with directing the Executive Committee, legal matters, finance, and operations issues. The Development Committee addresses membership, communications (including website development), fundraising campaigns, a proposed endowment campaign, newsletter development, and general funding issues. The Program Committee manages conferences, retreats, and local forums; support for research and higher ordination; the content of the newsletter and website; and education and training programs.

### ***Sanghamitra Institute: An International Buddhist Women's Training Center***

One of Sakyadhita's key goals is to create an international Buddhist women's training center. Land for this purpose has already been procured in Bodhgaya, Buddhism's most sacred site, where the Buddha achieved enlightenment. This four-acre plot of land is an ideal location to organize critically important training programs in meditation, languages, leadership, healthcare, conflict resolution, monastic life, and the arts.

Sanghamitra Institute is named after King Asoka's daughter, who took the lineage of full ordination for women from India to Sri Lanka. Sanghamitra is therefore an apt symbol of women's empowerment and a meaningful portent for the future. To create such a facility would enable women from around the world, especially those from developing countries, to participate in long-term and short-term courses for training and empowerment and prepare them for community development projects. The development of a permanent training facility at this site would be a major contribution to Buddhist women's development.

