

Sakyadhita Newsletter

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100,000 Bows in One Week

It was a late night during winter, just after the Korean War. Only the moon was a Dharma friend to the practitioner sitting cross-legged under a big pine tree, with the appearance of a novice nun. She looked just like a snowman under the moonlight against the dark mountain. A novice monk, holding a blanket at his side, called out to her: "Sunim, Sunim." But there was no reply. Instead, a very soft voice repeated, "Amitabha Buddha, Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva...."

The novice monk approached with great concern. The nun's eyes shone like stars, reflecting the moonlight. "Sunim, please cover yourself with this." "What is it?" she asked. "A blanket," he replied. "The great master will scold us. Please take it with you." "But Sunim, you might die of cold," he implored. "Novice monk, I am doing retreat here. I will live here if I can. I will die here if I die."

One week passed. The nun survived on the rice balls offered by the village people. When the rice balls froze, she made them edible by thawing them in the river. Nobody could begin to match her resolve for enlightenment.

Eventually the great master Song-chol sent a message through a novice monk: "I will take her as a student if she successfully finishes 100,000 bows to the Buddha image at Songju Temple." This was a test to see whether the nun had a strong mind of enlightenment. It was scarcely imagined that anyone would be able to do it. However, she finished 100,000 bows in a week and returned after accomplishing the task. Defeating Mara and touching all the Buddhas, she succeeded by the mental strength of earnestly seeking the Dharma,

This incident occurred at Chonche Cave near Anjong Temple in Tongyong, Kongnam. The

Dharma relationship between the great master Songchol and the nun was established in an exceptional way. The nun's name was Yu Hyechun. She sought out Chonche Cave in hopes of becoming a student of Songchol. When she arrived at the cave, however, Master Songchol did not accept her as a student and told her to leave before dark.

Hyechun said goodbye to the master, but she could not leave. She reflected for a while and then asked the novice monk to let her see the master again. Songchol still did not grant her request. The night became darker and darker, colder and colder, but the nun did not move. Finally, the master replied to her with a big bowl of water. He poured the water right on Hyechun, in the midst of a rigorous winter. Just after this extraordinary meeting, she began her retreat and her robes gradually dried.

This extraordinary meeting between master and student reveals Hyechun's attitude toward seeking Dharma for her life. She became a prominent Son (Zen) practitioner who did not put her hwadu (koan) aside for even a single moment. Her mind was stronger than a knife made of a golden jewel and her character was as straight as a reed. The intense resolve she demonstrated under the pine tree was comparable to that of Hyega, the monk who became the great master's Dharma successor.

Leaving Home for Haein Temple

When Hyechun reached the world, she was already liberated from the bonds of cyclic existence. It was her task to turn an important page in the history of Korean nuns.

She was born in a village in Kyonnam in 1919. Her father was a judge and she was born as the third child in a family with three brothers and four sisters. Her worldly name was Songjuk. As a child, she was mild and wise - the best of daughters. In 1937, she graduated from Hamhung Girl's High School in the north and left for the south of Korea. The Korean War broke at that time and the war changed her life. She started studying Buddhism at this time and was touched by the words, "Meeting results in parting and living results in dying." Pobjon, a monk from Bulgap Temple, encouraged her to become a nun. Soon after, she happened to hear a Dharma talk on the Brahmajala Sutra from a prominent Vinaya master named Jiun. Her determination began to grow.

In 1951, a year after the Korean War, Hyechun visited Haein temple. There, at the age of 31, she began to practice under the instruction of the bhikkhuni master Changho. A year later, she became ordained as a novice nun. She participated in a total of 36 retreats in various Son temples and she always practiced in a very strict way. During this time, she visited the great master Songchol, who predicted, "She will become a great nun." Under Songchol's influence, she continued to practice Son. She was strict with herself, but she was also not simply an observer of the movement to purify the monastic order that occurred in 1954. She stood up for the movement with her Dharma friends and worked to make it a success.

In 1961, she received the bhikkhuni precepts and the bodhisattva precepts from Jaun, a Vinaya master of Tongdo Temple. In the Son retreat center at Songnam Temple, she was given the position of ipsung, one who teaches and guides other practitioners, and held this position for ten

years. After completing this task, she began a special 3-year retreat with other great nuns, such as Inhong, Jangil, and Songu. By this time, she had reached the age of 52. Her tireless determination in Dhamma became well-known among other Son practitioners.

To finish the special 3-year retreat was a great accomplishment. However, this was just the beginning. She founded Bohyon Hermitage, the first Son retreat center for nuns, located in the Kaya mountain. This was good news for all nuns, because the center was available to all of them and the great master was available to teach as well.

Not Attaining Dharma is to Be Like an Animal

"Even a single portion of donated rice is just like Mount Sumeru. If you accept it and do not achieve the Buddhadhama, you will be reborn as an animal." These were Hyechun's favorite words. They were often repeated, both by her and other practitioners. These great words signify a simple lifestyle, gratitude for donations, and the noble aim of practitioners.

Hyechun did not own any belongings her whole life and she worked conscientiously for the welfare of others. Even at the age of 70, she founded a center for young people and participated in social welfare activities. In 1992, she established a huge retreat center and meditation hall for nuns. The Korean government conferred honors on her, to commemorate her compassionate works. In 1985, with the nuns of Packryon Hermitage, she founded the Korean Bhikkhuni Association in promote harmony among nuns.

Coming and Going are the Same

Hyechun did not take students until she was 50 years old, because she thought that having students would damage her practice. Instead, she continued to practice with other Dhamma friends. When she worked as the ipsung of Songnam Temple and a nun named Soyoung asked to be her student, she left the temple, which was a way of telling the nun to seek a better teacher. Soyoung waited three years to become her student.

Hyechun began to take students after she founded Bohyon Hermitage. Eventually she trained more than 20 nuns, including Soyoung. Her life passed in the practice of Son. She never lied, even when she was old, and could not even imagine skipping prayers. She missed playing piano and singing, which she had learned before she became a nun, but maintained consistently strict discipline. She was both lively and meticulous at the same time and put beginners at ease. Her natural simplicity was balanced by her practice of compassion.

Early one morning, she joined in the prayers at daybreak as usual and finished a bowl of gruel. She told those around her, "We come like this and leave like this. Coming and leaving are the same. The blue wind takes a long way." This was the song of nirvana. It was a day break. This symbolized not an end, but a new path. She reached nirvana just like a practitioner, taking only her bowl and robe. It was November 6, 1998. Her worldly age was 80 and her Dhamma (ordination) age was 47.

Translated by Dr. Oksun An.

Blossoms of the Dharma: Living as a Buddhist Nun

Edited by Thubten Chodron

Buddhism is now one of the fastest growing faiths in America, and people see Buddhist nuns in the grocery store, at the airport, and in schools, and ask, "Who are these women? Why did they choose this lifestyle? What do they do? What message do they have for society?"

In *Blossoms of the Dharma: Living as a Buddhist Nun*, nuns the major Buddhist traditions describe their personal experiences, explain the history of the nuns' order, and discuss the variety of lifestyles a nun may live. The informative and personal, told with wisdom and humor.

Published by North Atlantic Books.

Choosing Simplicity: A Commentary on the Bhikshuni Pratimoksha

By Venerable Bhikshuni Wu Yin

Translated by Bhikshuni Jendy Shih

Edited by Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron

Over 2500 years ago, the Buddha's stepmother, Mahaprajapati and 500 women from the Shakya clan went through incredible difficulties to request bhikshuni ordination from the Buddha. In giving them permission to enter the order, the Buddha affirmed women's ability to practice the Dharma, to liberate themselves from cyclic existence, and to become enlightened. Even since, women have practiced the Dharma and we are reaping the benefit of the practice they preserved and passed down.

Choosing Simplicity presents the monastic life as a living tradition. It describes the meaning and purpose of being a Buddhist nun and includes an explanation of the precepts Venerable Wu Yin gave to Western nuns at the Life as a Western Buddhist Nun program in Bodhgaya, India, in 1996.

Published by Snow Lion Publications

Mahapajapati Theri College: Thailand's First Buddhist College for Women

Thailand has been a Theravada country since the 12th century. More than 90 percent of the Thai people are Buddhist. During the Buddha's time there were both male and female renunciants, called bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, but among Theravada countries outside India, only Sri Lanka had an official order of nuns, which lasted for over 1000 years. Although there is no Thai order of nuns, female renunciants have a long history in Thailand. There have been Thai nuns called "maechee" since at least the Ayutthaya period (1350-1767).

Maechees take eight Buddhist precepts. They shave their head and eyebrows, wear white robes, and do not take any meals after noon. Thai nuns live at temples or nunneries and engage in a wide range of religious activities. The daily life of a nun does not differ significantly from that of a monk. They chant, meditate, study, and increasingly in recent times, go on daily alms rounds in the villages.

Maechee have long had limited access to education. Until now, government funding for religious studies in Thailand has only extended to male students. There are two universities and more than 100 high schools for monks and novices, but there has never been support for religious education for nuns and poor girls. Without educational opportunities, some girls enter the workforce in exploitative sectors, including prostitution. When Maechee Khunying Kanitha Wichiencharoen recognized this, she initiated the establishment of Mahapajapati Theri College.

The Thai Nuns' Institute is a national organization for maechee which aims to assist and unite maechee from around the country. Established in 1969, the Institute came under the patronage of the Queen of Thailand in 1972. The Thai Ministry of Education is presently drafting a law to legalize the status of maechee. Under the law, monks enjoy support for higher education, free hospital services, and concessions on public transportation, none of which extend to maechee. Although there are female renunciants in Thailand with a profound knowledge of Buddhism and meditation skills, few have scholastic training. Education is increasingly seen as necessary for the nuns' advancement.

Maechee Khunying Kanitha was formerly president of the Women Lawyers' Association and the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women. Her work has focused on women's issues for more than 40 years. Since her ordination as a Buddhist nun in 1993, she has concentrated on improving the situation of nuns in Thailand.

In 1998, two pieces of land at Pakthongchai (Nakorn Rachasima) were donated for the purpose of building a college for nuns and laywomen. The idea of establishing such a college was proposed to Mahamakut University, one of two Buddhist monks' colleges, and the proposal was accepted in November 1998. A pilot project began in May 1999 in the outskirts of Bangkok, with teachers from surrounding universities and colleges, and there are currently 11 nuns and 4 lay students. The campus at Pakthongchai will open in 2001 and students will receive a Bachelor's degree after 4 years of study. The college also plans short courses and retreats open to women from around the world.

After the construction is completed, three faculties will open: Buddhist Studies, Education, and Social Welfare. A multi-purpose building will accommodate meetings, and sitting and walking meditation. The college will include a kindergarten for poor children from neighboring villages which will provide teachers' training. A adjacent piece of land will house a convalescent home for poor, aged women, for training social welfare students. Future plans include a shelter for women and children like the Emergency Home which the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women has operated for 20 years. The Home -- Thailand's first -- provides services to over 100 residents, including women who are pregnant, deserted, battered, caring for infants, and HIV positive. Care units operate night and day for the benefit of pre-school children and working mothers.

For further information on how to support the new college, please contact:

Mahapajapati Theri College
501/1 Mu 3 Dechatungka Road, Sikan
Donmuang, Bangkok 10210
Thailand
Phone: 662-929-222, Ext. 103
Fax: 662-929-2300

"Wonderful Lotus" Lights up the World

Ven. Thich Thuan Dinh, né Dieu Sen ("Wonderful Lotus") Nguyen, was born in 1941 into an aristocratic family in Hue, Vietnam. Her great-grandfather was an influential minister of the Vietnamese king, Duy Tan. Even as a young child, Ven. Thuan Dinh was known for her keen intelligence, and her kind and loving disposition.

Because of the war in Vietnam, her family was forced to move from place to place many times. Despite many hardships, Ven. Thuan Dinh studied hard and graduated from the University of Can Tho with a major in French. After graduation she taught French at the prestigious Trung Vuong High School in Saigon and also volunteered as a teacher at a temple school. In 1975, because her sister's husband worked at the American Embassy, she was able to leave Vietnam for the United States with her family. She attended college in Los Angeles, California, and worked as a financial counselor at Gems Institute, a well-known jewelry design school. During this time, she became a vegetarian and started practicing Buddhist meditation. After practicing Buddhism for many years, Ven. Thuan Dinh decided to become a nun. She studied under the famous Vietnamese meditation master Ven. Thich Thanh Tu, who tested her determination seriously before agreeing to confer the precepts. Always an independent spirit, she quietly received ordination without informing her family, fearing they would try to prevent her from entering monastic life.

Using her own resources, Ven. Thuan Dinh ("Proficient in Meditation") then founded a meditation center, Tue Thong Temple, in California. Very talented in sewing, music, and art, she was always called upon to do drawings of the Buddha for special celebrations at the temple.

In 1995, after years of teaching at the temple and intensive meditation practice in Vietnam, Ven. Thuan Dinh went to India to study at the renowned Varanasi Sanskrit University. After earning an M.A. in Pali with top marks, she began a doctoral program in Pali at the same university.

Ven. Thuan Dinh traveled to Lumbini, Nepal, to attend the 6th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women from February 1 to 7, 2000. Loved and respected by all who met her, she talked on "Understanding Vietnamese Buddhist Women," led meditation and chanting, and was a lively participant in group discussions at the conference. Tragically, on February 13, she was killed in a road accident while returning to Varanasi.

Ven. Thuan Dinh was an exemplary Buddhist practitioner and a light to the world. She will always be remembered for her warm heart and loving smile. She is survived by her sister in Florida, her brother in Vietnam, nieces, nephews, and a large community of Dharma friends around the world.

May she quickly achieve nirvana!

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

March 15, 2000
