

# Sākyadhitā

International Association of Buddhist Women

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## SĀKYADHITĀ: AN EXPANDING FRONTIER OF BUDDHIST WOMEN AND GLOBAL LINKING

*By Bhikkunni Thich Nu Nhu Nguyet, Vietnam*

Very often, people are of the opinion that, at best, women can only cultivate themselves and cannot undertake important Buddhist tasks that could support the spread of the *Buddhadharma*. However, as we have seen in recent times, *bhikkhunīs* in the worldwide Sangha are now displaying strong determination to become involved in the teachings of the Buddha, and together with *bhikkhus*, have shared the important task of educating talented *bhikkhunīs* in order to preserve and promote Buddhism. This is indeed a significant achievement to be recorded in the history of contemporary Buddhism.

Buddhist women in the modern world have proven their abilities by serving in a variety of positions in different fields, typically through Sākyadhitā activities. The aim is to continue the tradition of Buddhist women and especially to expand the frontiers of their activities further, through the global network of Sākyadhitā. Toward that end, this paper will focus on: (1) global routes to Sākyadhitā; (2) the continuing development of Sākyadhitā; and (3) the current shortcomings and future prospects of Sākyadhitā.

### Global Routes to Sākyadhitā

Sākyadhitā International Association of Buddhist Women includes people from various cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. I have personally witnessed how inclusive Sākyadhitā is in welcoming all traditions – Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana – in their activities. Women from a wide range of Buddhist traditions easily come together, irrespective of the differences in their interpretation of Buddhist teachings. This is a very exciting development in Buddhist history. The Sākyadhitā conferences are public gatherings that attract *bhikkhunīs* and laywomen, and also some monks and laymen, in addition to followers of other religions. These gatherings are historically important. They are proof of a unique phenomenon taking place in the world of Buddhism: the emerging recognition of the contributions to Buddhism that earlier generations of *bhikkhunīs* have made and the potential for future generations. Buddhist women are increasingly conscious of



Ranjani de Silva of Sri Lanka, former president of Sākyadhitā; Bhikkhuni Thich Nhu Nu Nguyet of Vietnam; and Sr. Malia Dominica Wong, OP, of Honolulu, on-site registrar at the 2012 conference in Bangkok

their responsibility to help fulfill one of the Buddha's important teachings, which is to propagate the *Buddhadharma* "for the benefit of the many, for the welfare of the many, out of compassion for worldly beings." It is noteworthy that for many centuries, women's potential has not been fully recognized. I now realize that when women come together to share their experiences and to discuss their various approaches, they do not only teach the *Buddhadharma*, but they also undertake various activities to alleviate the sufferings of the human condition they see, at both the local and the global levels, with an unwavering spirit.

Many young nuns with few opportunities to advance in their study of Buddhism and share their practice experience with fellow practitioners have been welcomed into the embrace of Sākyadhitā. For all of us Sākyadhitā is an expansive frontier of all Buddhist followers in the world.

By the 11th Sākyadhitā Conference in Vietnam, Sākyadhitā had grown to such an extent that it attracted many less-privileged nuns and laywomen from far-flung regions and snow-covered regions who are generally unknown in the world. Sākyadhitā represents a milestone in the lives of many Buddhist followers, giving voice to their thoughts and bringing light to their life. I have asked many women what it is about Sākyadhitā that appeals to them. Some of the answers I received were, "Meeting these many great living practitioners in person makes me believe in my own spiritual potential." From another, "Meeting Buddhist women teachers such as Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo and Bhikkhuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo at the Sākyadhitā conferences has inspired me and many others. The teachers and practitioners are all truly compassionate – they do not differentiate among people. Rich or poor, educated or not, they open their hearts to all of them. They work tirelessly to help women develop their potential, giving them the keys they need to move onward and upward."

### The Continual Development of Sākyadhitā

The first Sākyadhitā Conference in 1987 in Bodhgaya brought together Buddhist nuns and women for the first time in the 2500 years of Buddhist history. These Buddhist women had previously lived isolated lives in their own communities without meeting Buddhists

of other traditions. Although the focus of the first Sākyadhitā Conference was Buddhist nuns, Sākyadhitā has always been inclusive. Everyone was invited to this first conference, regardless of gender, social status, religious affiliation, or place of origin. At this conference and at subsequent Sākyadhitā conferences we see people coming from both Asian and Western countries working together with warm affection and close friendship – something that was impossible to imagine previously, due to the strong impact of colonialism. The power of the Buddhist spiritual tradition breaks through all kinds of boundaries, and links people together despite their vastly different backgrounds.

Six years after its first gathering, Sākyadhitā organized its third conference in Colombo, Sri Lanka. This event was a milestone in the history of Sri Lankan Buddhism. After more than a thousand years the *bhikkhuni* lineage, which had disappeared in Sri Lanka, has been re-established, inspired by Sākyadhitā and its many courageous female participants. Today, there are over 500 fully ordained *bhikkhunis* in Sri Lanka and a locally organized Sākyadhitā Training Centre for Nuns in Colombo. These developments signify a major step forward in Sākyadhitā development.

Today, social, economic, and political shifts affect Buddhist societies and traditions across the globe. Even with the current negative impact of the global economic downturn and natural calamities that affect millions of lives, Sākyadhitā still draws the attentions of thousands of women students, researchers, and practitioners from all walks of life from many countries. Intellectuals, monastics, and lay Buddhist followers come together to discuss issues that are relevant to their lives, such as the role of women in modern society, opportunities for full ordination for women, the challenges facing Buddhist women today, and the roles of Buddhist women past and present.

We are faced with many challenges in the world today, many of which can be attributed to a decline in moral values. More than ever before the world and its inhabitants need to restore such positive human values as compassion, honesty, non-violence, selflessness, and peace-loving spirit. Through its regular conferences, the growing presence of Sākyadhitā in today's world has helped to awaken people to their inner peace and to the values that the



2012 Workshop on "Empowering Women through Grant-making" led by Elise DeVido and Susanne Mrozik



Buddha taught centuries ago. There are more than 300 million Buddhist women worldwide, and this represents a powerful force for good in the world. If all these women unite for compassionate social action they can be a major force for global transformation. In this context, Sākyadhitā has indeed become an important and positive global communion of Buddhist women in the world, nourishing them academically and spiritually for the good of the world.

The fact that new Sākyadhitā branches are continually being instituted in as many as ten countries in North America, Europe, and Asia is a sign of the organization's development. A series of publications – *Sākyadhitā: Daughters of the Buddha* (1998); *Sisters in Solitude: Two Traditions of Monastic Ethics for Women* (1996); *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming against the Stream* (2000); *Bridging Worlds: Buddhist Women's Voices across Generations* (2004); *Out of the Shadows: Socially Engaged Buddhist Women* (2006); and *Buddhist Women and Social Justice* (2004), to mention just a few – have appeared in bookstores and on library shelves across the globe. These publications create an introduction to the contributions and struggles of Buddhist women in academic circles and the general public, acting as another reflection of Sākyadhitā's constant development.

### The Present Shortcomings and Future Prospects of Sākyadhitā

Alongside Sākyadhitā's many great achievements, some shortcomings still remain. First, the research papers and reports presented at the Sākyadhitā conferences are largely theoretical in nature. As a result, the conferences have not met the expectations of all members of the younger generation of nuns as they seek to advance their studies and practice. On one hand, the Sākyadhitā conferences have helped gain credibility for Buddhist women's research. On the other hand, young nuns would like to see more emphasis and discussion related to practical issues.

Second, it would be good if Sākyadhitā could create a strong financial foundation for its activities. It needs help in cultivating a larger network of donors and hopefully, with these donors' support, we could establish business enterprises to provide Sākyadhitā, its national branches, and local chapters with a stable source of funding. This would enable Sākyadhitā members to provide programs to support and train Buddhist women to become a major resource base with professionals in a range of fields, allowing women to take leading roles. If this could be done, Sākyadhitā would no longer be dependent on membership fees and donations, but instead could extend its support to members, women's monasteries, retreat centers, and other projects.

Third, Sākyadhitā needs to expand its operations over a wider geographical area to reach more people from different social strata. This is possible with the help of modern mass media, such as the internet. The association could expand its publications in different languages, with a focus on Asia where the vast majority of Buddhist women live, often in disadvantaged circumstances. Additionally, Sākyadhitā could also further expand its engagement in social welfare activities.

Fourth, many feel that Sākyadhitā should establish learning centers for nuns and laywomen in various locations. Some are



A painting depicting Māyādevī and Gautama Buddha shortly after his birth. Māyādevī's sister and the Buddha's step-mother, Mahaprajapati Gautami Theri, would later become the first Buddhist nun.

very passionate and ambitious, calling for the establishment of a *bhikkhunī* sangha that unifies nuns all over the world. Of course, we all recognize that Christie Chang, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, and their dedicated team are already working night and day to achieve these aims. Sākyadhitā desperately needs greater support from those who share its aims and values. Therefore, we call on all women to come together to support each other in complete trust and love, and to work together in harmony for the greater good of Buddhist women and society as a whole.

I believe that through the 13th Sākyadhitā Conference, we can find solutions to these challenges. A course of action should be outlined that will establish Buddhist nuns and laywomen as scholars, practitioners with activities on par with their male counterparts. If we work together selflessly, we will all be able to contribute more effectively to help develop valuable global links among Buddhist women and maintain our own unique cultural values.

### UPDATE: 13th Sākyadhitā International Conference on Buddhist Women Vaishali (Bihar) India, January 5-12, 2013

The conference theme, "Buddhism at the Grassroots," highlights the efforts and achievements of Buddhist women who work to alleviate the sufferings of living beings "on the ground." Presenters will share their own work and a variety of approaches, including social activism, performance, education, meditation, and philosophy. Since the 1950s, Buddhism has undergone a renewal throughout the world. No longer confined to monasteries, nunneries, and retreat centers, Buddhism is being taught as a practice for everyday living. Until recently, Buddhist women primarily supported the practice of others, but today women are among the most dedicated and diligent practitioners. The 13th Sākyadhitā Conference will highlight the achievements of Buddhist women from earliest times until today.

Mahaprajapati Gautami Theri, the foster mother of Sakyamuni Buddha, was the first nun ordained by the Buddha. She is famous for founding the Bhikkunī Sangha, the Buddhist order of nuns, in Vaishali, India. Through her courage and vision the Buddha recognized women as full participants in his lineage and women

gained an equal footing on the path to liberation. However, Mahaprajapati, herself, and the heroic achievements of these pioneering Buddhist women were almost forgotten. India as well as many Asian countries had the lineage of *bhikkunīs* either lost or never introduced. The site where Mahaprajapati became the first Buddhist nun was unmarked and uncommemorated for centuries. This year, the 13th Sākyadhitā International Conference on Buddhist Women will be held in Vaishali to celebrate Mahaprajapati's ordination and the contributions of all Buddhist women.



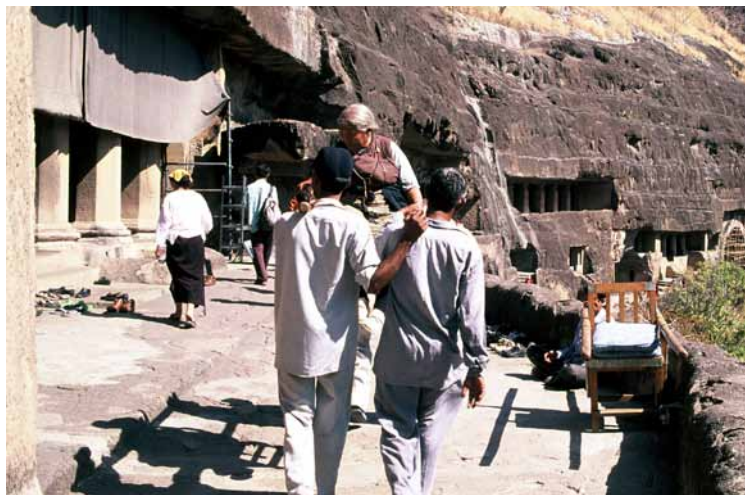
## DISABILITY ACCESS TO BUDDHIST TEMPLES

By Dr. Diana Cousens, Australia

In 2006, after His Holiness the Dalai Lama performed the Kalachakra Initiation at Amaravati, I went with many of the Tibetans who attended the pilgrimage to sacred places around India. At the famous Buddhist cave sites of Ajanta and Ellora I was intrigued to see that a palanquin service was offered at Ajanta. Upon request, older visitors with mobility problems could be carried around the temples by four Indian bearers holding a stretcher with a chair. It seemed an ingenious response to the problems of physical access for the disabled. The caves are located in a high place, with stairs and steps to climb, and a palanquin allowed access for everyone.

In less well-visited places, however, even at Ellora, a small distance from Ajanta, bearers carrying palanquins were not available. In such circumstances, physically disabled people may not be able to enter the temples. It seems to me that, as Buddhists who wish to make the *Dharma* available to as many people as possible, it is a basic requirement that temples are accessible to those who rely on wheelchairs, crutches, or other walking aids.

I did not think about this again until 2009, when I was invited to join a reference group as the Buddhist representative on the Multifaith Disability Project, funded by the Victorian Government



At the Ajanta Buddhist caves in central India, four Indian bearers carry this elderly Tibetan woman on a palanquin.

(a state in Australia) and the Uniting Church. The Project sought to put the issue of disability access on the table and show a way forward for all faith communities. The report made numerous recommendations set in the context of some basic principles and legislation. According to the Victorian Government State Disability Plan, the Principle of Equality recognizes that "people with disabilities are citizens who have the right to be respected and to have equal opportunities to participate in the social, economic, cultural, political and spiritual life of society. As citizens, people with a disability also have equal responsibilities toward Victorian society and should be supported to exercise these." Being able to enter a temple is surely a basic right in this context.

The report looked at ways disabled people were both included and excluded, suggested strategies to increase participation, recorded personal experiences and emphasized the importance of leadership in the faith communities to promote positive change. Inclusion was taken to mean not only physical access, but also an attitude of inclusiveness that was not prejudiced against, or which held low expectations of those with disabilities. It was recognized that obstacles to participation come about because of attitudinal, structural, and personal circumstances, while people who lived with a disability sought equal acceptance, though their family members could be overly protective, keeping them from faith activities for fear of negative treatment. This is not without reason, as individuals with disabilities report many negative attitudes that were supported by biased interpretations of sacred texts. Faith leaders acknowledged the problems and the need for improvement. They all affirmed values such as justice, hospitality, and compassion. Many good things are happening, particularly around improving the existing environment, and there is an opportunity to share ideas, strategies, and resources on this subject within Australia, and internationally.

If we, as Buddhists, affirm the value of compassion, then it is surely our role to start where we are, as we are, and assist all beings towards enlightenment in whatever way is possible and acceptable. If we look at our sacred texts and interpret disabilities as arising from some kind of karmic punishment, then we fail to see the value of the person with the disability and the fact that everyone may at some stage of their life experience a loss of ability due to aging and sickness. Surely, we must look beyond the outer form when relating to others.

The issue of disability access is an issue that touches on the principles of equal opportunity, self-determination, diversity, and human rights. In terms of principles, it is a big issue. However, as a Buddhist for nearly 30 years, until I joined this committee I had not put the issue at the forefront of my concerns. I was the Centre Director for a Tibetan Buddhist *Dharma* center in Melbourne for ten years and routinely hired halls and teaching spaces that were inaccessible to people on crutches or in wheelchairs. Access would occasionally cross my mind, but not very often, even though one of our center members who uses crutches – and sometimes a wheelchair – would occasionally complain that she found it hard to get up the stairs. Similarly, I learned from this committee that other religious organizations also provided uneven levels of access. The newest and largest churches, temples, synagogues, and mosques



are required by government regulations to be accessible. These places have ramps to key areas, such as prayer halls. Older, smaller, and more informal places of worship, such as a large proportion of Buddhist centers, lack disability access. So, what should we do?

As a committee member of the Federation of Australian Buddhist Councils (FABC), I put the need for a policy paper on the agenda for the Annual General Meeting in 2009 and the FABC agreed to the need for a plan. I made it plain that it was not my intention to tell temples and centers what accessibility policies to enforce, but we did need to raise awareness of the issue, and supply resources to encourage directors to create their own creative responses. It may be useful to make a point about culture here. In the top-down world of Buddhist hierarchy, getting the politics right is vital. It is not the role of the FABC or of any layperson to tell the monk abbots or center directors how to run their temples. So my emphasis in this project is on raising awareness and providing resources.

We are at the start of a new process in raising awareness of disability issues in the Buddhist community. Consider that in Australia many of our most devout Buddhists belong to an older generation of migrants. They are likely to have mobility issues in the not too distant future, so putting strategies in place to assist the disabled community is in the interests of temples in both the short and long term. If we have a mission to benefit all beings, then it would be a great oversight to exclude some of our own members from the blessings of attending temples.



### **"MAY ALL SENTIENT BEINGS BE WELL AND HAPPY:" LET'S MAKE IT A REALITY FOR OUR ANIMAL FRIENDS**

*By Bhikkunī Dr. Karma Tashi Choedron, Malaysia*

Humankind has interacted with the animal kingdom since the dawn of humankind itself. In fact, Darwin's theory of evolution claims that all life on planet Earth is related. Buddhism concurs and explains the differences between life forms according to the degree of sentience. Darwin declared that human beings are more evolved than the so-called "lower" forms of life in biological terms whereas Buddhism considers human beings the most fortunate of beings in the six realms of existence, due to their high capacity for awareness. Nonetheless, both science and Buddhism stress the inter-relatedness of all life forms in terms of our genetic and physical make-up.

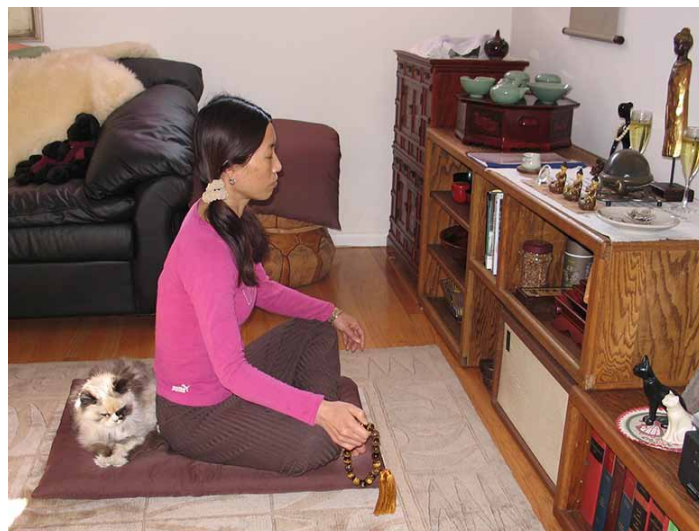
Mahayanist Buddhist philosophy goes a step further through a very strong assertion that there has not been a single being who has not been our mother since time immemorial. Buddhism expounds the ideal of *bodhicitta* or the spirit of enlightenment whereby one takes the *bodhisattva* vow to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings in all six realms of cyclic existence. Hence, since all sentient beings have been our mother and each and every living being has been most kind to us throughout our existence in *samsara*, we, as sincere Buddhist practitioners, have a

moral responsibility to repay their kindness by not only liberating all beings from cyclic existence, but paving the way for all sentient beings to achieve supreme enlightenment.

### **Animals: Do We Really Know Who They Are?**

Animals are living beings, who just like humans, feel pain. Deeply understanding this basic bond between humans and animals, we must never kill nor cause to kill. The proposed Universal Declaration on Animal Welfare has attempted to describe the concept of animal welfare to the United Nations thusly: "...to recognise that animals are sentient and can suffer, to respect their welfare needs, and to end animal cruelty – for good." Sentience can be understood first and foremost as a level of conscious awareness, supported by the capacity to have feelings and to experience suffering and pleasure. This is the reason why in Buddhism, beings are commonly referred to as "sentient beings," to stress the fact that all living beings possess sentience, albeit to different degrees. The difference is the level of awareness, not feeling.

Buddhism categorizes animals as being part of the three lower realms of *samsara*, i.e., the cycle of birth and death. It is a largely unfavorable place in the six realms of existence, which constitute *samsara*. The animal realm, according to Buddhism, is an undesirable realm where beings are subject to the suffering of slaughter, bondage, and stupidity. As unfavorable an existence as an animal life may be, it is neither permanent nor devoid of value. One of the core teachings of Buddhism is on the impermanence of all conditioned phenomena and the law of karma and rebirth. One's place in *samsara* is therefore not permanent and one ascends or descends to any of the six realms of existence, according to one's deeds. Hence, animals are likewise only beings occupying temporary existence, as humans are but guests in the human body. Moreover, according to the Mahayana Buddha-nature (*tathagatagarbha*) doctrine, all beings possess Buddha nature and can therefore achieve awakening.



*Hyunmi Cho meditates with the company of her cat Coco.*

## Buddhist Attitudes Towards Animals

The core of environmental ethics in Buddhist teachings is compassion (Pāli; Skt: *karuna*) and loving kindness (Pāli: *metta*, Skt: *maitri*) towards all living beings. *Metta* is the genuine wish for our own happiness and the happiness of others while compassion is the wish for oneself and others to be free from suffering. Buddhism emphasizes *ahimsa*, the principle of non-violence or non-harm – a powerful concept to curb human's violent tendencies towards other beings.

Through the five precepts, Buddhism advocates respect for life and property, the rejection of a self-indulgent lifestyle, and the notion of truthfulness for the benefit of oneself and of the community. Buddhism teaches that the heaviest karmic offense is that of taking the life of another being. Utmost importance is placed on non-killing and it forms the first of the five basic precepts for lay Buddhists. According to the Noble Eightfold Path, fishing, hunting, setting one animal on another, raising animals for flesh, selling meat or dealing with weapons and arms are considered wrong livelihood and are regarded as extremely unwholesome as they lead to the destruction of life. In the *Kutadanta Sutta* (Pāli Canon), the Buddha denounced the slaughtering of animals for religious sacrifice. Animal slaughter entails an offence in the Buddhist *Vinaya* as well.

Mahayana Buddhism places great emphasis on generating *bodhicitta*, which can be defined as a “primary mind wishing to attain enlightenment for the benefit of others.” *Bodhicitta*, or the supreme altruistic wish is the attitude based on great compassion wishing to remove the suffering of others and the recognition that to be of greatest benefit to both oneself and others, it is ideal to attain enlightenment, i.e. Buddhahood. It is the motivation with which the Mahayanist engages in all practices. Shantideva categorized *bodhicitta* in two general categories, “aspiring *bodhicitta*,” (i.e., the mind that aspires to be awake), and “engaging *bodhicitta*,” (i.e. the mind that ventures to do so).

## How to Help Animals?

Mahayana Buddhism places great emphasis on vegetarianism. According to the *Brahma Net Sutra*, meat-eating is a violation of the secondary *bodhisattva* vows. Deliberately eating the flesh of any sentient being goes against the spirit of great compassion. The *Lankavatara Sutra* explicitly states “all meat eating, in any form, in any manner, and in any place, is unconditionally and once for all, prohibited for all.” Meat eating is frowned upon even in Tibetan Buddhism. Meat eating generates negative karma for those involved in killing, preparation, and consumption of meat. As the Bhutanese Agricultural Minister, Lyonpo Kinzang Dorji, said, “If we really want to stop the sale of meat and ban the slaughter of animals, we have to stop eating meat. If we stop eating meat, there will be no demand for meat. If there is no demand for meat, there will be no need to slaughter animals.”

Adopting pets from animal shelters is another good idea. Hundreds of thousands of animals are killed every year because they cannot find homes. Instead of buying animals

and encouraging the brutal “puppy mill” animal industry, one can choose to adopt a rescued stray from animal shelters and help give them a new lease of life. This kind act will not only help to save the life of one animal, but reduce the stray animal population and also make room for other strays to be rescued as animal shelters are usually small and cramped and therefore, fast adoption of rescued animals will ensure that other strays too can get new homes.

People are not helpless. In this modern age, remarkable progress has been made in terms of communications. Many of the numerous animal welfare organizations that work to stop animal cruelty are online. One can sign up as a member on these websites, read the information on animal abuse and sign petitions started by such organizations, which put pressure on governments to stop animal abuse or to improve legislation on animal cruelty.

One can also boycott products that are produced through the suffering of animals. For example, women who use cosmetics must know the origins of the cosmetics by checking labels and whether the products have been tested on animals. One can also write to the companies to protest against animal testing for consumer products. If enough people put pressure on such companies, then these companies will be forced to look for alternative ways of testing their products without using animals.

As our compassion develops, we can directly help animals by working or volunteering in animal welfare organizations. Some outstanding individuals, through the power of their compassion, have started their own foundations to champion for animal welfare. One such individual is Soraida Salwala who founded the Friends of the Asian Elephant in 1993, a Thai non-governmental group which cares for injured or mistreated elephants.

Liberating animals about to be killed is an important practice, especially for people with life-threatening diseases. This practice is usually recommended to prolong one's life, based on the premise that if one saves the life of another, one's own life would be saved. One must use one's wisdom when practicing compassion for the benefit of sentient beings. For example, one should have some knowledge of a suitable ecosystem for the animal before releasing it into the wild. Also, one must be careful not to support those who exploit animals by selling them to Buddhists for the very purpose of animal liberation, only to catch them all over again. Buddhist organizations or *Dharma* centers can organize events to raise awareness amongst devotees on the benefits of animal liberation. Animal liberation involves all of the six perfections, (i.e: generosity, morality, patience, enthusiastic perseverance, concentration, and wisdom.) It especially involves generosity whereby one gives protection from fear to animals which not only brings happiness to the liberated animal, but also creates causes for one's own future happiness.

Generosity is one of the six perfections and giving *Dharma* to sentient beings is considered the highest form of charity. If one wishes to save a certain being, but it is beyond one's capacity, then one can recite mantras or chant prayers for them. For example, if one sees animals that are about to be slaughtered, but is unable



to liberate them all, one can plant the seed of enlightenment in the mindstream of the animals by single-mindedly reciting the Buddha's name so those creatures can hear it. Practitioners who know *phowa*, a Vajrayāna meditation practice, can also help to transfer the consciousness of a deceased animal to the Pureland. The possibilities for helping animals are endless.

## Conclusion

It takes only one individual to make a difference in the lives of animals. Even if only one person in a family, monastic community, or organization sincerely practices compassion and loving kindness, it will have a beneficial effect on others. In addition to the benefits of *metta* meditation and other practices, one must actualize the “engaging *bodhicitta*” and not confine one's compassion and loving kindness to the meditation cushion. Our actions will ultimately have profound effects and spread the light of compassion and loving kindness in our respective countries. In conclusion, I quote the words of Mahatma Gandhi, the leading proponent of *ahimsa* in the 20th century: “The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.”



## WHY WALK? WALKING MEDITATION AND SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE: ASIAN AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES ON EMBODIED SPIRITUALITY

By Suellen S. Semekoski, USA

“Why walk?” No doubt walking is good for us. It is good for our mental and physical health. Walking can clear our minds of the clutter of our thoughts and calm our bodies. It can help us to maintain our health and to get fit. In the spring of this year the New York Times reported research on the benefits of walking and its positive effects on the brain. In a control group of older adults who walked, participants showed a significant increase in the size of the hippocampus, which is the part of the brain able to process new memory. We can grow parts of our brain by simply walking! My classroom for spiritual growth has involved a lot of walking from both a Western Christian perspective of walking as spiritual pilgrimage and from an Eastern Buddhist perspective of walking meditation as spiritual practice. In the Christian tradition, I have felt “heaven on earth” and in the Buddhist tradition I have touched the “pure land” while walking. Simply slowing down and walking offers embodied healing for our earth and for us.

As a woman from the West living in fast paced city, I am aware of the power of intentional walking and walking meditation as a simple and profound spiritual practice. Every step we take can be an expression of our relationship to our mother earth. Our first small step was a developmental milestone but also a miracle. We stood up, looked around and as we moved through space there was one sensory delight after another. It was both alluring and confusing, but we met the world *with wonder*. As witness to our first steps, our mothers made sure we were safe, and by doing

so preserved our capacity for delight and wonder in the world. Our mother's aspirations for our stability began with our first step and will end with our last. It is profound aspiration shared by all mothers all over the globe. It doesn't matter whether our mother is alive or with us in spirit. Her desire for our stability is everlasting. The experiences of being lost, finding your way, being able to get up after a fall finding balance and recognizing our missteps would become metaphors for growth, our well-being, and spiritual journey. Our mother's aspiration for our stability is profound because she knew if we had the capacity to be stable; chances were everything and everyone within a few feet of us would also be stable.

If we could walk with attention and intention, we could have a better chance of knowing how to get from here to there and becoming the person we aspired to be. If we were stable, we could continue to be in touch with the wonder and delight in our world and honor our mother earth. When we began walking we never stopped to think about the miracle of support under our feet, we just ran, skipped, tumbled, fell, and yet our mother earth was there to meet us, to support us in our every step. When we walk one foot receives support from the earth and with the other we give back to her. There is a flow in the exchange of energy, receiving and giving, giving and receiving. Gravity, a gift of strong attraction from the universe reminds us of her support and that we are a miracle walking on a miracle. In 2002, I walked the Camino de Santiago, or the Way of St. James, a 500-mile (800 kilometer) ancient pilgrimage route across northern Spain. In the early days of Christianity in Europe it was one of three pilgrimage routes, one to Jerusalem, one to Rome and the third to Santiago on the west coast of Spain. Today it is a beautiful walking route in nature, rich with history and spiritual mystery. It attracts spiritual seekers from all over Europe and the world. I began walking in southwest France on the border of Spain and ended the walk 46 days later in Santiago. The physicality of the Camino or “the way” forces me to pay attention to my body.

When we acknowledge our physical vulnerabilities, a compassionate space opens up inside our hearts for the possibility of embodied healing. This healing begins with acceptance of the suffering in the body, mind and spirit, it also means taking in a sensory diet of the beauty of nature, fresh air, silence, companionship, and the spiritual discipline of the daily practice of walking. Another important part of embodied healing is the understanding of being a part of a compassionate community of millions of pilgrims who have walked “the way” in the past and will walk it in the future. When walking with an open heart we are able to spiritually open ourselves to the landscape. The physical geography becomes a spiritual geography. A deep resonance is felt with the landscape, best described as becoming one with nature. We look for a sign from the Divine and resonate with the metaphors of the landscape; the muddy places where we get stuck in life, the mountainous challenges in life that appears too big, the moist lushness of green trees, and plants breathing spiritual life back into us, or the dry, parched desert-like places where we look for signs and there is nothing, we feel lost separate from the Divine. Walking becomes prayer in communion with nature. I

visited Plum Village Monastery in southwest France the following year, not far from where I began the Camino. I was introduced to the teachings of Zen Buddhist Master Thich Nhat Hahn or Thay, become a student of the *Dharma*, and receive my *Dharma* name. My journey would change, my path would shift direction, however, I would keep walking.

In 2005, I was one of forty-five people from fifteen nations who would accompany Thay in the first portion of his return trip to Viet Nam after thirty-nine years of exile. As Westerners we had limited opportunities to understand and process the dizzying amount of new information each day. The schedule for the tour was challenging and much of our time was spent in noble silence, which helped us to retain our energy and focus. Everyday we did walking meditation. We focused on walking gracefully and smiling as a way to embodying our practice, while following Thay and the monastics in public procession. In the evening we walked in small groups in our hotel rooms. The outpouring of love by the Vietnamese people, many bearing visible and invisible scars of the American War was an unexpected gift, especially to us Americans. As the tour went on while waiting at temples, small groups in our lay community would informally start to walk with small groups of Vietnamese people. We would engage in these small spontaneous, silent conversations about peace through our mindful walking meditation, our healing was embodied.

In March of this year I presented at an International conference on “Trauma and Spirituality: An International Dialogue” in Belfast, Northern Ireland, sponsored by a group of activists, Catholic and Protestant clergy and clinicians, a group called Journey Toward Healing and funded by Northern Ireland Mental Health Association with the purpose of bringing together international activists, clergy, and trained clinicians to exchange ideas about psycho-spiritual approaches to trauma, after forty years of sectarian violence in Belfast. In my workshop on “Walking and Embodied Healing East and West” I read the stories I shared with you today, then we cleared away tables and chairs from the middle of the room and did walking meditation together in the grand ballroom of the hotel. Crazy, yes? No, not really. The Europa Hotel had been bombed thirty times in forty years. Although a peace accord was signed forty years of symptoms of intergenerational trauma remained (e.g. alcoholism, depression, anxiety, domestic violence); the populace was traumatized. Afterward a wise, young psychiatrist from Belfast who participated in our workshop talked with me about his growing up as a boy in the midst of the violence of North Ireland. As a psychiatrist he was now treating trauma patients many of whom were former paramilitary. Some were former enemies from the opposition and had perpetrated violence in the very neighborhood in which he grew up. “So,” he smiled, “It is just as simple as putting one foot in front of the other, right?” I understood the enormity of his question and smiled back at him “Yes I think, it is that simple, and it is also about each of us taking our first step with stability, breathing... and remembering that it is a beautiful world.”



## GENDER, BUDDHISM AND EDUCATION: DHAMMA AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION WITHIN THE THERAVADA TRADITION

By Emma Tomalin and Caroline Starkey, UK

This article explores the role that Buddhism plays in maintaining gender disparity in education, as well as promoting agendas for reform. Our focus is on three types of interrelated education that are relevant to contemporary Buddhist practice and societies: the role of education within a monastic setting; the significance of religious education within lay Buddhism; and the role that Buddhist education can play in social transformation. In particular, our aim is to reflect upon the ways in which each of these types of education are gendered and the implications of this for female Buddhists, both in terms of their spiritual as well as their social development. While these three aspects of education are relevant across different Buddhist traditions and within different Buddhist locations, we will only consider them within Theravada Buddhism, and will particularly focus on women’s experiences in Thailand and Cambodia.

In this article we argue that although education plays an important role within Buddhist traditions and the aim of Buddhist teachings is to educate the individual, whether male or female, to overcome suffering (*dukkha*), in practice, women have had less opportunity to learn and practice the *Dhamma*. We argue that this has nothing to do with women’s ability to practice Buddhism, but instead can be seen as part of a trajectory found in many religious traditions whereby women are often denied access to institutions that are typically occupied by men. Moreover, since Buddhist



The Bodhisattva Guanyin, Bodhisattva of Compassion.



women in many contexts are not in a position to undertake serious textual scholarship that aims to uncover gender bias and promote interpretations that are more gender equal, the patriarchy within the lived tradition remains largely unchallenged. An important element of this paper is the exploration of different discourses concerning the role of *bhikkhuni* and *mae chi*, through an examination of their relationship to monastic and lay female education. Ultimately, we ask what is the relationship between the reassertion of women's traditional ordination rights and female empowerment through education?

### Buddhism, Gender, and Education within Thai Monastic Settings

Until relatively recently, girls in Thailand have experienced an educational disadvantage compared to boys, evidenced by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Although the UNDP states that Thailand has already achieved one of the Millennium Development Goals in relation to education and is highly likely to achieve the other, the quality of educational provision is currently a concern, as is the provision of education for children in the poorest households. Several scholars, both Thai and Western, have implicated Buddhism as one explanatory factor for the historical inequality between genders, particularly in the poorest areas. While young boys were able to spend time living in temples (*wats*) as temporary monks, where they received a free religious (*Dhamma*) and general education, this opportunity was denied to girls. Ordination as a "temporary monk" continues to be an important Thai rite of passage for young men and brings with it social merit as well as additional educational and spiritual advantages, over and above those provided by the state. As this opportunity is not afforded to girls, the result is that poor girls have a more limited choice of educational (and spiritual) guidance and arguably have a greater responsibility to support the family financially.

The debate about girls being able to enroll as temporary monks in Thailand is often linked to discussions about the revival of the *bhikkhuni* ordination. It is argued that the creation of a respected and recognized community of fully ordained female monastics in Thai Buddhism could eventually enable the institutionalization of education within the temples for girls as well as boys, improving both social and spiritual outcomes for girls and women.

Support for the revival of the *bhikkhuni* ordination draws attention to the ways in which gender hierarchies within Buddhism have a broader cultural impact upon social attitudes that disempower women and limit their development. Many advocates of the *bhikkhuni* ordination consider that there is a direct relationship between the low status of women in many Buddhist traditions and the inferior status of women within Buddhist societies. Thus, the introduction of the *bhikkhuni* ordination is not only considered to be significant for religious reasons, which would benefit women who choose to embark upon this religious life, but also for its potential to empower women more broadly, including creating the conditions for girls to be able to ordain as temporary monks and thus receive increased education and social support. In our paper, and no doubt in a number of papers at this conference, the challenges that have faced supporters of the *bhikkhuni* ordination within the Theravada

tradition will be explored in more detail. However, despite strong reactions, there are a growing number of Thai *bhikkhunis* committed to social and religious reform who have education at the heart of their agenda. Through support for the *bhikkhuni* ordination, they aim to enhance women's ability to practice the *Dhamma*; to educate the public about women's equality to men; and to provide lay education in temples, schools, and other social settings. However, the widespread acceptance and growth of a *bhikkhuni* movement in Thailand is still a long way off, if indeed it ever does flourish and achieve its aims. Thus, the institutionalization of education for girls as well as boys within temples via groups of supportive *bhikkhunis* is not currently realizable.

Instead, others have focused their attention upon the reform of the *mae chi* (8-10 precept nuns) institution as a vehicle for both greater access for females to education and as a means of transforming negative stereotypes supported by the tradition. Yet, there still exists a fair amount of negative opinion about the validity of the *mae chi* institution and the ability of individual *mae chi* to be effective and respected teachers in a society where they are often portrayed as fallen and destitute women who have had no alternative but to become renunciates. However, some recent scholarship has highlighted several high-profile *mae chi* who have achieved national (and international) respect and veneration for their spiritual abilities, including from the upper echelons of the Thai Sangha. Despite this increasingly nuanced picture of *mae chi* emerging in western scholarship, there are still fewer successful *mae chi* than male monastics and the tensions regarding their social and religious status, and the subsequent impact on increasing educational opportunities for women, remains.

Having looked at the role of the *bhikkhuni* and *mae chi* in monastic and lay Buddhism in Thailand, we can also see that each is tied to movements for reform that could contribute considerably to agendas for social change. Despite the unresolved issues regarding the *bhikkhuni* ordination in Theravada Buddhism, there remains a potential for Buddhist teachings and religious roles for women to be educational and transformative. In the final section of this paper, we look at the role of Buddhist women in social development, focusing on Cambodia.

### Buddhist Education and Social Transformation for Women

In Cambodia, a country ravaged by war and political violence, eight- or ten-precept female monastics (*donchee*), akin to the Thai *mae chi*, are playing a role in education linked to social development. Cambodia faces significant challenges in its attempts to increase school enrollments beyond the primary level and the UNDP has identified a gender disparity in educational attainment. Cambodian women are under-represented in the public sphere, face high rates of maternal mortality and HIV infection, and experience domestic violence.

Like neighboring Thailand, a majority of Cambodians are Theravada Buddhist. Yos Hut Khemacaro, ordained Buddhist monk who helped rebuild the Cambodian Sangha following the Khmer Rouge, argues that, "Buddhism is the sole institution which cuts across the deep political divisions separating Cambodians

today.” Following the reestablishment of monastic institutions post-Khmer Rouge, it has been suggested that there could be a social and educational role for Buddhism in Cambodia, and that female religious practitioners might be “a very visible potential resource.”

Yet, while the Association of Nuns and Laywomen, like the Institute of Thai *mae chi* in Thailand, provides educational support to women in both secular and religious spheres, the level of education of the *donchee* themselves is still limited. As in Thailand, this has a direct impact both on their status in Cambodian society compared to the male Sangha. A *donchee* states, “Most of us are poorly educated. We have to study first, in order to be recognized as equal to monks in Cambodian society.” In addition, for female Buddhist practitioners, there is a tension between engagement with social work and secular educational development, and spiritual practice within a religious lineage which does not always value engagement with “worldly” or “political” matters. However, if a balance can be achieved by improving opportunities for *donchee*, support for social and educational development may simultaneously raise their profile and gather additional support from the wider society.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have identified some of the complexities in relation to gender, Buddhism, and education as experienced by women in Thailand and Cambodia. Buddhism provides both grounds for patriarchal values to affect women’s education and life chances, but also can act as a resource to empower women in contexts where they are oppressed and disadvantaged in relation to men. This process of female empowerment, has both religious and secular components. The three interrelated types of education (i.e. monastic, lay, and social development) that we have discussed here all have a significant impact on the life experiences of individual women and cannot be considered in isolation. Ultimately, each is tied to movements for reform that could contribute considerably to agendas for social change.

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## ESTABLISHING BHIKSHUNĪ SANGHA IN NEPAL

By Bhikshunī Dhammananda, Thailand

The very first batch of Nepali *anagarikas* (non-ordained ten-precept nuns) received full ordination as *bhikshunīs* (Sanskrit, from the Mahayana lineage) at Hsi Lai Temple in Los Angeles in 1988. As of today, the number of Nepali *bhikshunīs* has increased to twenty-

nine, yet they are neither recognized as, nor do they live the lifestyle of *bhikshunīs*. In this article I will try to understand the difficulties that *bhikshunīs* face in Nepal.

An overall picture of Buddhism in Nepal is necessary before discussing the particulars of the *bhikshunī* issue. First, in terms of numbers, government statistics indicate that the Buddhist population in Nepal is only 9.8 percent, even though Nepali Buddhists themselves claim to represent forty percent of the population. When we look around Nepal, we realize how difficult it is to pinpoint the exact number of Buddhists in the population, for Buddhism in Nepal is a blend of various sources of belief and practice. There is a strong stream of Buddhist practice from the Tibetan tradition intertwined in a strong Hindu-based society. There is also a group that practices both Tibetan and Hindu traditions. In its external expressions, the practice of many Nepali Buddhists resembles Hindu practice. The Theravada tradition has only recently been revived and there are fewer than three hundred Theravada monks in Nepal. We can conclude that Nepal is not a strongly Buddhist country. Many Buddhist temples are run by laypeople; in fact, the Hiranavarna Mahavihara has no monks in residence, and is instead solely run by Buddhist laypeople who belong to Shakyas and Vajracharya families. This is just one example of many. The situation is very different from the Buddhist temples we see in Southeast Asian countries.

## The Emergence of Bhikshunīs in Nepal

In Nepal, there are women who renounce worldly concerns and receive eight or ten precepts. These nuns have taken their lineage from Burma; therefore, they wear pink robes like the *thilashin* of Burma. Interestingly, according to the Vinaya, pink is a color that is not allowed for ordained Sangha members. Could this be a way for the monks to imply that religious women are not ordained after all?

Under the Rana, a Hindu Rajput dynasty which ruled the Kingdom of Nepal until 1951, Buddhists in Nepal were greatly suppressed and, under the restraints of a Hindu government, women were further suppressed by the male Sangha. This is evident in the story of Dhammacari, an early Nepali *anagarika* a prominent nun who drew together many *anagarikas*, including her successor Dhammawati.

The story of *bhikshunīs* in Nepal begins with the life story of a nun named Dhammawati. Born in 1933, she had great desire to study Buddhism and went on foot to Burma at the young age of thirteen. She spent many years in Burma (now Myanmar) and came back with the Buddhist knowledge she received in Burma. She started the Dharmakirti Nunnery and offered it as a space for Buddhist laypeople to come both to practice and to learn more about the Buddhist teachings. Her teachings and practice followed the Theravada lineage from Burma.

However, as Theravada does not offer ordination for women. In 1988 she went to join an international ordination offered by Fo Guang Shan at Hsi Lai Temple in Los Angeles. Three Nepali nuns received *bhikshunī* ordination at that time: Bhikshunī Dhammawati, Bhikshunī Dhammavijaya (now Dr. Dhammavijaya), and



Bhikshunī Pannawati. In 1998, Professor Min Bahadur Shakya, who, with my deep regret, passed away in 2012, assisted thirteen *anagarikas* who became ordained in Bodhgaya, India, at another international ordination organized by Fo Guang Shan. As of this year, the total number of *anagarikas* who have taken *upasampada* is twenty-nine – a large number of *bhikshunīs* dedicated to bringing benefit to their motherland.

### The Difficulties

The first difficulty the nuns in Nepal face concerns their robes. The outer appearance of *bhikshunīs* in Nepal is the same as that of *anagarikas* from Burma. Even after receiving the *upasampada* (full ordination), they still wear their pink robes. The reason they do not replace these robes is, as they put it, “The monks don’t like it.”

The *bhikshunīs* are not wearing the proper *civara* that is expected of the Sangha. A *civara*, a patched robe brownish in color that is expected of the Sangha, originally dyed by using the bark of trees. The shade of the *civara* may vary. We see saffron in Sri Lanka, maroon of the Tibetan lineage, and shades of brown in Southeast Asia, but pink is a color that the *Vinaya* specifically prohibits.

Bhikshunī Dr. Dhammavijaya and her nuns at Kimdol Vihara near Swayambhu, Kathmandu, wear brown color robes, but this is also not sufficient, since the robes are not properly stitched in the prescribed patchwork pattern – the pattern designed by Ananda at the time of the Buddha, modeled on the paddy fields of Magadha. This design was praised by the Buddha; in the Theravada tradition, we have tried our best to preserve it. I made a point of offering the *civara* to Bhikshunī Dhammavijaya and Bhikshunī Dhammawati on my recent visit to Nepal, but it is up to them to see the significance of wearing the robe as prescribed in the *Vinaya*.

A certain lifestyle is expected of ordained Sangha members. As outsiders, it is impossible to distinguish between *anagarikas* and *bhikshunīs* in Nepal, because they all dress the same way. Although they know who has gone forth and received *upasampada*, it is not visible to outsiders. The nuns use handbags like laywomen, wrist watches like nuns in the Tibetan lineage, and slippers that are not distinctively for monastics.

### Observing Sanghakamma

Sangha members are expected to observe the *sanghakamma*, which is a kind of formal democratic council to preserve discipline and regulate the Sangha’s collective affairs. The nuns of Nepal do not do so, because they do not know how. The significant obstacle for Theravadan practitioners receiving ordination from the Mahayana lineage is that the *sanghakamma* given in the Chinese Mahayana tradition, based on the Chinese language and tradition. Thus the Nepali *anagarikas* have not been able to perform *sanghakamma*, which includes the determining of their robes, bowls, etc.

Ordination alone is not sufficient. One cannot establish a *Bhikkhunī* Sangha simply by receiving *upasampada* (ordination); one must follow the training afterwards in order to function properly as a *bhikkhunī* in the *Bhikkhunī* Sangha. For this reason, I feel that Buddhists in Southeast Asian countries should not take ordination

from the Mahayana tradition, as they do not have access to the required cultural traditions.

My own mother, Bhikshunī Ta Tao Fa Tzu (Voramai Kabilsingh), was the earliest example of a *bhikshunī* who took ordination in the Mahayana tradition. She remained a good *bhikshunī* until the end of her life, but could not perform any *sanghakamma*. Not only did she not have a Sangha with whom to perform them, but she also did not receive any training to be able to do so.

### Living in a Theravedan Bhikkhunī Sangha

As one becomes familiar with the complicated procedures involved in following the Vinaya rules and regulations, one realizes that living a *bhikkhunī* (from the Pāli) lifestyle really requires the support of a Sangha community. There are at least three *sanghakamma* for which the *Bhikkhunī* Sangha require the presence of the *Bhikkhu* Sangha. First, after the recitation of the Patimokkha every new moon and full moon, the *Bhikkhunī* Sangha must seek *ovada* (instruction) from a senior monk, a *mahathera*, which means twenty years’ standing as a *bhikkhu*. Second, at the completion of the *vassa* (three month rains retreat), the *Bhikkhunī* Sangha must perform the *pavarana* procedure, a means for dealing with potential conflict and breaches of disciplinary rules during the *vassa*. Third, at an *upasampada* (full ordination), the candidates who wish to become *bhikkhunīs* must first be ordained by the *Bhikkhunī* Sangha (a minimum of five *bhikkhunīs*), then again by the *Bhikkhu* Sangha, in what is known as *upatosangha*, or ordination by a dual Sangha.

In Thailand, even though the *Bhikkhunī* Sangha is not yet officially recognized, the *sanghakamma* described here have always been performed. The *bhikkhus* know that the *Vinaya* requires them to comply with the request of the *Bhikkhunī* Sangha. The only *sanghakamma* that they have not yet performed is the ordination of *bhikkhunīs*. For this reason, until now the *bhikkhunī* ordination in Thailand is still dependent on the Sri Lankan lineage.



Nuns from Nepal constructing a sand mandala during the 2012 Bangkok conference.

## The Support of Laypeople

As mentioned earlier, the situation of Buddhists in Nepal is not easy. Many who claim to be Buddhists do not have much understanding of the basic teachings. Their practice and beliefs are influenced by the practice of Hinduism. In addition, in Nepali Buddhism, the monastic lifestyle is still new. Members of the local Buddhist clergy are not celibate. They perform the necessary rites and rituals, but do not maintain a monastic lifestyle, such as we are accustomed to in Southeast Asian countries. The Theravada lineage of monks appeared only recently in Nepali Buddhist society.

The establishment of the *Bhikkhunī* Sangha in Nepal needs strong support from Buddhist laymen and laywomen. Not only should Buddhist laymen and laywomen support the *Bhikkhunī* Sangha, but they themselves must also have some understanding of the Buddhist teachings. The positions are interrelated.

The four sectors of a Buddhist society – *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs*, laymen, and laywomen – all need proper Buddhist education to be able to practice the Buddhist teachings properly and eventually support the *Bhikkhunī* Sangha. The Nagarjuna Institute of Exact Methods, a private institute directed by Professor Min Bahadur Shakya, works very hard to further an understanding of Buddhism and an acceptance of the *Bhikkhunī* Sangha among Nepali Buddhists. He was instrumental in assisting the thirteen *anagarikas* who received *upasamapada* in 1998 in Bodhgaya.

The international *Bhikkhunī* Sangha has been largely silent in response to the needs of *bhikkhunīs* in Nepal. The reasons include a lack of communications, since very few Nepali *bhikkhunīs* speak English, the international language. Even those who speak English often do not correspond. Therefore, the problems facing the Nepali *Bhikkhunī* Sangha are unknown outside the country. They have been isolated for a long time.

## Solutions

The *bhikshunīs* of Nepal have expressed their commitment by receiving full ordination. In their own country, however, the



*Bhikkunīs and anagarikas in Nepal.*

religious and social structures do not provide them with the support they need to live the lifestyle expected of *bhikshunīs*. This issue needs to be addressed. I proposed a simple solution, suggesting that the Nepali *Bhikshunī* Sangha go through another full ordination in the Sri Lankan lineage to enable them to follow the Theravada *Vinaya*. A second ordination is called *dalikamma*, or confirmation. The nuns would not lose their seniority.

During my recent trip to Nepal, in an interview with Bhikshuni Dhammawati on April 29, 2011, I offered to help train her younger *bhikkhunīs* during the rains retreat. I offered free board and lodging for all the Nepali *bhikshunīs* and said that, by the end of the three month retreat, they would have covered all the *sanghakamma* (formal council) necessary for leading the life of a *bhikshunī*. In ways like these, the international *Bhikshunī* Sangha can help our sisters to be fully established in the land where the Buddha was born.

Sākyadhitā International Association of Buddhist Women has acted with foresight in holding their conferences in various countries and strengthening Buddhist women around the world, so that they can fully participate in the roles expected of them by the Buddha. We take this opportunity to congratulate and rejoice in the wholesome actions of Sākyadhitā. We are very much part of its evolution.



## ROBINA COURTIN: AN UNCONVENTIONAL BUDDHIST?

*By Anna Halafoff, Australia*

Robina Courtin is one of Australia's most prominent Buddhist teachers. Born in Melbourne in 1944, Courtin has been a Buddhist nun in the Tibetan tradition for over thirty years. As founder of the Liberation Prison Project and a teacher of international renown, Courtin has been the subject of two Australian documentaries *Chasing Buddha* (2000) and *Key to Freedom* (2007). The wisdom, directness, and humor of her teachings, coupled with her limitless compassion, have served as inspirations to Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. Arguably, it is her particularly Australian down-to-earth style that has enabled her to deliver Buddhism in a practical and accessible way to Westerners both in and beyond Australia.

## Robina Courtin in and Beyond Australia

Robina Courtin was born into a Catholic family, the second of seven children. Despite economic hardships, she was educated at Sacré Cœur, a prestigious girls' school in East Malvern, Melbourne. As a young girl, Courtin was a devout Catholic with a questioning and rebellious nature, whose good heart remained largely hidden behind her bad behavior. At the age of twelve, she begged her mother to let her become a Carmelite nun like her hero, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, who was ordained at fourteen. Yet by nineteen, Courtin had traded her religious aspirations for the experimental life of a hippie in the 1960s. She moved to London in 1967 and dedicated the next decade of her life to left-wing, black, and feminist politics in the United Kingdom and Australia.



In the mid-1970s, Courtin became a passionate student of the martial arts, until a car accident abruptly cut short her karate career. During her recuperation in Melbourne, she saw a poster advertising a course on Buddhism with Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche, the first Tibetan Lamas to visit and teach in Australia, at Chenrezig Institute in southern Queensland. Courtin was immediately attracted to the reflexive and devotional nature of Tibetan Buddhism, which was well suited to her questioning mind and sat comfortably with her Catholic upbringing. It was at Chenrezig Institute that she finally realized, "Ah! That's the kind of nun I want to be." She was ordained 18 months later by Lama Zopa at Kopan, his monastery in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Courtin spent the next ten years studying Buddhism while working for Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa's Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), helping to develop Wisdom Publications in the United Kingdom and overseeing its editorial and production departments. In 1987, at the request of Lama Zopa, she began teaching Buddhism in Australia and in 1994 she was appointed editor of FPMT's *Mandala Magazine* in California.

Courtin's story was widely publicized in Australia when "Chasing Buddha," an award-winning Australian Film Industry documentary about her, was shown on Australian television in 2000 and given a theatrical release in several Australian cities. The film follows Courtin criss-crossing America as she teaches Buddhism at FPMT centres and in maximum-security prisons. Because of the success of "Chasing Buddha," Courtin was invited to visit prisons and to give public talks throughout Australia.

### Not Your Average Nun? Aussie, Down-to-earth, and Accessible

"Forget your image of an obedient and mild-mannered Buddhist," says Rachel Kohn, "She does wear the maroon robes of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, but Australian, Robina Courtin, has brought her edgy personality and boundless energy to her 24 years as a Buddhist nun."

In addition, Courtin's own experiences of suffering and violence in her youth, including incest and rape, have enabled a level of empathy to develop between her and students both inside and outside of the prison system. As the majority of Buddhist teachers (particularly Tibetan Buddhist Lamas) who have visited and taught in Australia have been men, it follows that Australian women are drawn to the teachings of Buddhist nuns in the Tibetan tradition, such as Robina Courtin and Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, with whom they can more easily identify. Courtin's advice is the same to all regardless of gender. It's about developing self-respect through enhancing one's positive qualities: "The bottom line... is that a human being looks at themselves, takes responsibility and knows they've got potential to change" for the better. According to Aileen Barry of Liberation Prison Project in Australia, not only does Courtin have a profound understanding of suffering, but "what she's able to put across to people very clearly is it is possible to transform [it] ... she's a very grounded, practical, living example of that."



Bhikkhuni Robina Courtin

### Unconventional or Traditional?

A commitment to social change among Buddhists is not new and is not a Western development. It is a continuation of the tradition of the *bodhisattva* path described by Shantideva (the eighth-century Indian scholar monk) that stresses the Mahayana ideal of altruism and the *bodhisattva's* pledge to take whatever form may be necessary in order to be of most benefit to others.

It follows that the so-called unconventional Robina Courtin is actually quite traditional. She follows the *bodhisattva's* path of altruistic motivation for personal and social change. She begins and ends her teachings with traditional prayers. She dispenses traditional methods of practices, meditations, and vows. She encourages her students to study the Buddhist teachings and to meet with qualified teachers. Because of her appearance as an Australian woman and down-to-earth dynamo who has prevailed through many difficulties in her own life, it has been said that "in her own special way she has humanized Buddhism, made it more accessible and within reach for people with normal conditions and failings." In so doing, she has proven that "inspiration comes in all shapes and sizes." She follows the *bodhisattva* tradition, appearing where and when needed, and enacting whatever it takes to help all beings to be free from suffering and to find happiness, thus challenging prevalent notions of what Buddhists ought to be like.

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## BUDDHIST WOMEN AND THE UNIVERSAL MONARCH CONCEPT

by Kustiani, Sri Lanka

According to the Buddhist texts, during the Buddha's time there were 16 tribal states that adopted either republican or monarchical systems. Vajji and Malla were republics, while Kosala, Vasa, and Magadha were monarchies. From a Buddhist perspective, both systems were regarded as equal in status. The two systems of government were also equal in another sense: almost all Indian sources agree that, whether the state was a republic or a monarchy, the leaders were all men.

The king held the highest political position in the monarchical system. Buddhism developed its own ideal of such a ruler: in Buddhism, an ideal king is called a Universal Monarch (*cakkavattī*). A perusal of Buddhist texts shows that women are never mentioned as becoming Universal Monarch; in fact, the term *cakkavattī* is always used to refer to men. As far as the historical records are concerned, only during later do we find that Buddhist women became rulers in Sri Lanka.

### Women in Society and Politics as Depicted in Brahmanical Texts

Indian society prior to the emergence of Buddhism was Brahmanical, the precursor of Hinduism declining in 500 BCE, and patriarchal in its religious and social structure. It is said that even in the birthplace of the Buddha, *brahmins* officiated at the domestic religious functions of the Sakyan people and settled in an area called Khomadussa. The influences of Brahmanism were strong and had a deep impact on the mindset of the people. Political life was patriarchal, too; hence, the rulers were predominantly men, and generally from the warrior caste, or *khattiya*.

Brahmanic teachings place women lower than men in almost all respects. This is shown in the Laws of Manu, or *Manusmṛti*, the fundamental Brahmanical text regarding social organization. According to this text, in religious life, women are not allowed to study religious texts to the extent that men are and there are certain ritual mantras that women are prohibited from reciting. Women are regarded as beings who come into the world predisposed to seduce men. In their social and family lives, women's duties are mostly limited to producing children, serving their husbands, and doing domestic work. In general, women's roles in Indian society are as depicted in the *Manusmṛti* never move beyond the domestic sphere. It was impossible for women in Brahmanical society to have a significant role in political life.

Buddhism does not place women in such a low position as Brahmanism does, though Buddhist texts also do not speak much about the role of women in relation to political life and kingship. Some Buddhist texts mention that women are unable to become an Universal Monarch. For example, the Anguttara Nikāya, one of the five volumes in the Pāli Canon, clearly says: "It is impossible, monks, it cannot come to pass, that a woman should be a Universal Monarch. But, monks, it is quite possible for a man to be a Universal Monarch."

### The Buddhist Monarchical Concept and its Relation to Women

It is important to keep in mind that the concept of rulers of empires already existed in the Brahmanic society before the emergence of Buddhism. The development of the concept can be traced in some Brahmanic texts, such as the Maitryāya Upanishad. In Brahmanic society, the concept of a ruler is related to the concept of a god. Rulers of empires are said to be equivalent to the gods Indra and Varuna.

The concept of *cakkavattī* is found in the earliest texts of the Pāli Canon and seems to have developed later, as the temporal counterpart of the Buddha, who is viewed as a spiritual ruler or leader. In Buddhism, the concept of an Universal Monarch is not related to gods; rather, the status of an Universal Monarch can be gained by any king who is seriously concerned about the welfare of his people, including both their material and spiritual welfare. Socially and politically speaking, a *cakkavattī* is given a special status in later Buddhist texts, being regarded as equal to the Buddha in some aspects, such as working for the happiness of humankind and as the teacher of the people. Well-known Universal Monarchs in the Buddhist texts are Dalhanemi and Mahāsudassana.

Some Buddhist texts praise the physical qualities of the *cakkavattī*, which are same physical qualities that marked the Buddha. For example, both the Buddha and the Universal Monarch are said to possess the thirty-two bodily marks of a great person. These bodily characteristics include, for example, having wheels with a thousand spokes on the soles of the feet, being able to touch the knees with the hands, and a sheathed male organ. During the Buddha's time, the concept of the thirty-two bodily marks was common in fortune telling and prognostication practices in Indian society, though these practices were rejected by the Buddha as being low arts or pseudo-science. The thirty-two bodily characteristics provide evidence that, in order to become a *cakkavattī*, one must be a man. It can thus be assumed that a woman will not be able to be an Universal Monarch.

There is a relationship between women and the concept of the Universal Monarch in the canon, however; it is said that woman is one of the seven treasures of a *cakkavattī* – the woman treasure (*itthiratanā*). The other six being the wheel (*cakkaratanā*), elephant (*hatthiratanā*), horse (*assaratanā*), gem (*maniratanā*), household, (*gahapatiratanā*), and adviser treasure (*parināyakaratanā*). According to descriptions of a *cakkavattī* in the Pāli Canon, such as the *Mahā Sudassana Sutta*, a woman must possess certain qualities to be a treasure. She must be:

.... lovely, fair to see, charming, with a lotus-like complexion, not too tall or too short, not too thin or too fat, not too dark or too fair, of more than human, deva-like beauty. And the touch of the skin of the Woman-Treasure was like cotton or silk... Her body smelt of sandal-wood and her lips of lotus... was not unfaithful to the King even in thought, much less in deed (D.II. 175).

It is clear that the qualities of "woman" that are emphasized here are the "feminine" qualities. So far, we do not have any evidence that women were also given the opportunity to make contributions to the development of the country. The greatest worth of a woman is merely producing a crown prince for the continuity of the country.



## The Original Meaning of *Mahāpurisa* in Relation to *Cakkavattī*

Some may ask, why did the Buddha not say that a woman can also be an Universal Monarch (*cakkavattī*)? Does it mean that the Buddha was sexist? We cannot easily make such a judgment. The answer is related to socio-political conditions of Indian society at the time. Due to the patriarchal and sexist attitudes of Indian society at the time of the Buddha, it was difficult for women to hold high positions in political life. Women were only involved in the domestic sphere, without access to political knowledge. Even if there were women from royal families who gained access to politics, it would have been a “social shock” if the Buddha had openly admitted that a woman could be an Universal Monarch. When women learn about the Buddhist concept of *cakkavattī*, some women might never have the courage to participate in political life. They might think that it is useless to engage in politics, because it is not the world they should be involved in.

When we carefully examine the early and later strata of Buddhist texts, we discover that the reason may not only be a matter of socio-political conditions in Indian society of the day, but may also have been a different emphasis regarding the concept of a Great Person (*mahāpurisa*) in the early Buddhist texts and in later texts, where the concept becomes infused with references to the importance of bodily marks. In defining the concept of the great person, the Buddha provides a different view from the various notions that prevailed in Indian society at that time. This is well exemplified in the *Vassakāra Sutta* from the Anguttara Nikāya of the Pāli Canon where the Buddha defines the great person as a person who is concerned for the welfare and happiness of humankind, who has mastered the mind and the way of thought, has trained the mind well up to a certain level, such as possessing the four *jhānas*, and has destroyed the defilements of mind by attaining liberation of mind (*cetovimutti*) and liberation by wisdom (*paññāvimutti*).

Another explanation of the great person can be found in the *Mahāpurisa Sutta* from the Samyutta Nikāya of the Pāli Canon. In this *sutta*, the Buddha clearly says that a Great Person is one whose mind is liberated. Hence, it can be assumed that the Buddhist concept of a great person is related to qualities of the spiritual life. Although the word *purisa* is masculine in gender, the description of the requirements for a *mahāpurisa* in these two discourses is silent about gender and applies to all people, both women and men. Hence, it can be said that the concept of a Great Person applies regardless of physical qualities. This view is supported by the *Lakuntakabhaddiya Sutta*, which tells a story affirming that even an ugly dwarf can attain liberation of mind and become a person with great spiritual power. Although *Lakuntakabhaddiya* was an ugly dwarf, he was praised by the Buddha as a beautiful and delightful person, due to his mental qualities. The concept of an Universal Monarch is imbued with that of a Great Person, so it can safely be assumed that a real Universal Monarch should possess the mental and spiritual qualities of the *cakkavattī*.

The purpose here is not to try to provide justification for women to be Universal Monarchs. Rather, we seek a new perspective that may empower women's role in politics. Women do not need to think about the importance of being qualified to be a *cakkavattī*. The most

important thing that women must be able to access is the moral teachings that underlie this concept. Here, we want to focus on the inner spiritual qualities of a *cakkavattī* rather than the physical characteristics. Emphasis within several Pāli *suttas* is placed upon the essential quality or service that a “*cakkavattī*” had to conduct in accordance with the *Dhamma*, providing the right watch, ward and protection to the people.” It is said that when the king is righteous and keeps the precepts, a Wheel-Turning Monarch (*cakkavattī*) will appear in the kingdom. By trying to fulfill the mental and spiritual requirements for becoming a Great Person and considering the real meaning of the Universal Monarch women can become leaders of their community, country, and even the world. Though it may be difficult for women to gain the title *cakkavattī*, they can become leaders as great.

Many Buddhist women can be taken as role models of successful leaders. A queen named Sima in the Kalinga kingdom of Indonesia was a just ruler in the 7th century CE. In contemporary times, we can take the examples of Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka, who in 1960 became the first woman prime minister in the world, and Aung San Suu Kyi, the democratic leader in Burma who won the Noble Peace Prize in 1991. They are examples of the changes that great women can bring for humankind through their role in politics.



## TEACHING DHAMMA IN PRISON

By Ranjani de Silva, Sri Lanka

As a member of the welfare committee of the prison system, I was able to arrange a *Dhamma* teaching program for the women in Welikada Prison in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Of a total of about 500 women who were in remand, some had been sentenced to life in prison. The death penalty was not operating in Sri Lanka at the time of their sentencing. I received special permission to take two Buddhist nuns with me to visit the women's section in the prison once a week. This program continued for about two years.

As we entered the gate, some of the imprisoned women welcomed the nuns and quickly arranged the room with mats and chairs to listen to the *Dhamma*. I personally went around to groups of women seated in the corners of the room and persuaded them to come forward. Some of the women were quite aggressive and did not wish to join the gathering. The nuns began the program by giving the women the five precepts. Then the nuns asked each of them which precept or precepts they violated that caused them to be in prison. All the women came forward with their stories and expressed sadness about what had happened. In fact, every one of them had violated more than one precept. The nuns then advised the women to keep the precepts while they are in prison. The women agreed that it would be possible and said they would try.

The women were very happy to meet the nuns and often shed tears as they related their sad stories, expecting some consolation and spiritual healing from the nuns.

## Candles, Flowers, and a Bodhi Tree

On the prison premises, there is a *bodhi* tree near it, a small shrine room. Every morning and evening some women gather to make offerings and chant. Many women circumambulate the *bodhi* tree, making prayers that they will be relieved of their miseries. For several women, this is the only way to find some peace and hope. The women light candles, offer flowers, and invite nuns to conduct a *puja*, or offering, at the shrine as they start the program.

Seelawathi, the most popular woman in the prison, was found guilty of killing the woman who was sleeping with her husband. She was sentenced to life imprisonment and was kept in solitary confinement. But she was found to be so honest and disciplined that she was given work in the office, where she attends to the many minor duties required of the administrative staff.

Seelawathi told us that she had committed a dreadful act of violence. For a while, she tolerated her husband carrying on with this woman, neglecting her and their two children. Finally, when she could not stand the situation any longer, she took an axe to the woman while she was sleeping with her husband, resulting in the woman's death. She asked us many times how she could expiate the karmic consequences of taking a human life. She said that she observed the five precepts in daily life, but in this situation she was not able to control herself. She said that when she works in the garden, she is careful not to kill even a worm. She is not so worried about her punishment in this life, but she continually asked what she can do to escape the consequences of the unwholesome act she committed and avoid the sufferings of cyclic existence (*samsara*).

Our nuns consoled her and told her that, from now onwards, she could keep the precepts carefully, be mindful, and learn from her past experience. The nuns relate the story of Angulimala, a prince who took the lives of 999 people while making a chain of a thousand fingers for his teacher. As he ran after the Buddha in an attempt to kill him and get the last finger to complete the chain, the Buddha, with his power of compassion, approached him and gave him teachings. From that moment on, Angulimala practiced the *Dhamma* diligently and became an *arahat*.

The women in prison love to listen to this *sutta*. Our nuns also chant the *Metta Sutta* and the women all join in the chanting. The nuns teach them how to meditate on loving-kindness and they all meditate together for a few minutes before ending the program.

There were some educated women who had committed crimes similar to Seelawathi's. A tall, large woman named Charlotte had been the wife of a doctor. Her story was very complicated, but the essence is that her husband provoked her to commit an act of violence. By nature, she was a good woman, very helpful and willing to learn. Since she could read and write, she took a leadership role and was helpful in conducting our programs. She was prepared to listen and follow the teachings.

## Successes and Challenges

My friend Jaye was an assistant commissioner of the Girl Guide

Association. She was a good teacher and initiated a program to teach women in prison. The women were required to take the Girl Guide Oath, which includes a promise to be honest and helpful in all their words and deeds and to do their best to serve others.

Sākyadhitā Sri Lanka's program and the Girl Guide program worked well together. The women were very happy and were willing to become better citizens. After some women were released, we conducted a follow-up program and visited some at their homes. Many of the women and their families were very happy and grateful. But many others were very violent, aggressive, and seemed to prefer being in prison. After being released and sent home, they returned to prison after committing the same offence. In most of these cases, the women were found guilty of selling drugs and their husbands were behind it.

In prison, there were pregnant women and some women with infants. Some women gave birth to their babies in prison and the welfare committee set up a baby room with all the facilities. Cots, nets, beds, and other baby items, as well as medicines, vitamins, and milk powder were provided to them. Children under six years old stayed with their mothers in prison. A pre-school and a play area were made available for these children, and a midday meal was provided by the welfare committee. Buddhist stories were read to the children and the nuns provided counseling for the mothers.

A few years later, I saw Buddhist women from other associations visiting the women in prison to provide counseling. They also helped them with legal advice. Some Buddhist women lawyers have offered their help free of charge. Most prisoners are in prison due to poverty. They do not have the means to pay even a small amount of money in fines to win their release. Many do not have funds to pay lawyers to defend them.

Some Catholic sisters visit them often, offering assistance and counseling. The Muslim community also helps members of their community by providing financial help to pay for lawyers and to pay fines to get them released. In the men's section of the prison, thousands of prisoners have benefitted from a regular meditation program conducted by Buddhist monks.



Meditation is Nature, under the shade of a Bodhi Tree, at the 12th Sākyadhitā Conference in Bangkok



Religious leaders have the ability to greatly benefit prisoners and reform them. The nuns who participated in this program always remember teaching *Dhamma* in prison as one of the best programs they ever conducted. It is important to realize that most of the women in prison are innocent and have become the victims of other criminals. These women need lots of compassion. They are mothers who have young children to care for. If they can be reformed and sent back to their families, that will be a great service to society.



## BOOK REVIEW

**Lori R. Meeks, *Hokkeji and the Reemergence of Female Monastic Orders in Premodern Japan*. Studies in East Asian Buddhism 23. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010. 432 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8248-3394-7 (hbk.). \$50.00.**

by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, USA

Today, as Buddhist women around the world struggle to establish or reinstate equitable access to ordination in their traditions, historical precedents of similar struggles arouse widespread interest. Entrenched resistance to equal opportunities within Buddhist hierarchies is evident in countries as diverse as Indonesia, Thailand, and Tibet. Even in the traditional story of the beginnings of the *Bhiksuni Sangha*, the omnipotent Buddha, savior of the world, is curiously portrayed as having needed convincing before he allowed his stepmother and her disciples to join the *Sangha*. Over time, this legend of the Buddha's hesitation to admit women to the order has subverted his own ideal of a harmonious Buddhist society balanced among laywomen, laymen, nuns, and monks. Instead, the ritual and institutional subordination of nuns became canonized through the imposition of eight 'weighty rules' that have had a deleterious effect on the social and religious status of women in Buddhism until the present day.

Against this historical background, Lori Meeks' study, *Hokkeji and the Reemergence of Female Monastic Orders in Premodern Japan*, provides a breath of fresh air. This in-depth analysis of Hokkeji, a convent in Nara, Japan that re-emerges from obscurity to become the leading convent of the thirteenth century, recounts the history of revitalization and determined leadership that enabled the first Japanese nuns in four hundred years to become fully ordained *bhikkunīs*. This meticulously researched volume documents how women in Japanese Buddhist orders negotiated the constraints of their presumed inferiority, barriers to Buddhist education, and obstacles to full ordination.

In Chapter 1, Meeks recounts the history of Hokkeji from its decline during the Heian period to its revival during the Kamakura. In Chapters 2 and 3 the author examines the clerical and soteriological status of women, contrasting the views of women with court connections and the views of men in monastic orders. Chapter 4 focuses on the movement initiated by the monk Eison (1201-1290) and his followers to revive and carefully institute *vinaya* practice and the role they played in helping revive ordination for women. Chapter 5 documents life at Hokkeji and its success as a center for women's training, ordination, ritual practice, and

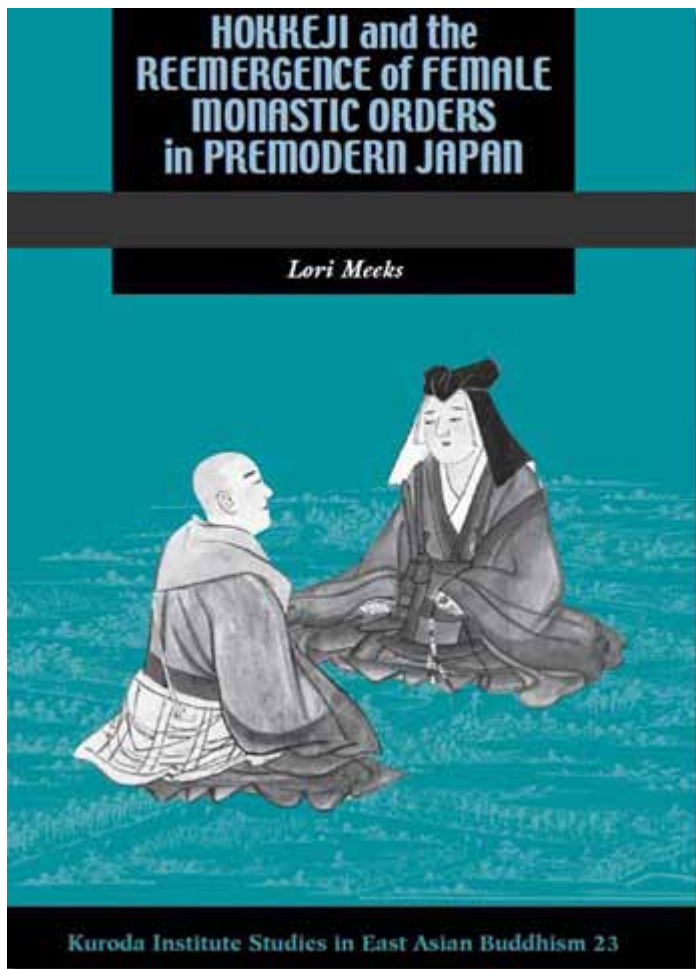
pilgrimage after its restoration. Chapter 6 analyzes the disparate discourses of monks such as those at Mt. Hier and nuns such as those at Hokkeji regarding the place of women in Buddhism and their prospects for liberation. A brief epilogue considers the story of Hokkeji within the broad expanse of Japanese religious history.

Hokkeji was founded in 741 as a government-sponsored convent under the patronage of Queen-Consort Kōmyō (701-760) and flourished during the Nara period. By the mid-thirteenth century, however, Hokkeji had become dilapidated and the status of nuns had declined due to the rise of the Tendai and Shingon sects of Buddhism as the state religion during the Heian and Kamakura periods. Over time, these sects instituted various prohibitions against the full participation of women, to the extent that women became barred from entering their temples. These exclusionary measures were rationalized through the use of carefully selected Buddhist texts, by claims about women's polluted nature, inherent spiritual inferiority, and character flaws. Regardless, women at court, inspired by Kōmyō's example, maintained their devotion to Buddhism by supporting the monks and temples of these sects. Using rank to their advantage, these noblewomen developed a strategy that leveraged access to the court for these monks in exchange for access to Buddhist education and rituals that accrued spiritual benefit and merit. Gradually, many noblewomen began to sidestep issues of gender by pursuing practices that led to rebirth in *Tushita Heaven*, where they could keep their long hair, courtly pastimes, and female identity.

Beginning in the 1230s, the monk Eison became inspired by the renowned Chinese master Daoxuan (702-760) to restore the 'seven-fold' *sangha* described in the *vinaya* texts. Step by step, he began conferring ordinations—*sramanerika* in 1245, *siksamānā* in 1247, and *bhikkhunī* in 1249—and teaching *vinaya* extensively to the nuns at Hokkeji, using the same texts that he used for teaching monks. This set the stage for a nun named Jizen (b. 1187) and her cohort, Kūnyo, to revitalize Hokkeji. By 1280, Hokkeji accommodated over 250 women, who autonomously managed their religious, educational, social, and financial affairs. Inspired by the growth and success of Hokkeji, many other *ritsu-shū* convents followed their lead, as Eison expanded what he saw as a *bodhisattva* vision for the people of Japan.

Meeks' kaleidoscopic analysis reevaluates the androcentric perspectives of earlier studies on the ordination of nuns in Japan by carefully examining the attitudes and lines of authority among nuns, monks, court society, government officials, and Buddhist institutions, especially the rapid evolution of *vinaya* scholarship and ritual practice that occurred at Hokkeji with Eison's support. Whereas previous scholarship portrays nuns as socially awkward women driven to the convent by desperation and glosses over abundant evidence of nuns' accomplishments, Meeks offers new revelations based on conscientious scholarship. Delving deeply into centuries of historical documents, she documents and evaluates the strategies and self-reflections of these resourceful women who created a new destiny for themselves.

A definite strength of the book is its nuanced theoretical analysis. For example, Meeks questions the assumptions about gender found in earlier studies on the revival of Hokkeji and reveals that the nuns were far more self-reliant, capable, and central to the



process of restoring their monastery and the ordination platform than has previously been assumed. She rejects standard interpretations of Japanese society as universally androcentric, arguing that class differences altered ordinary preconceptions of gender relations among nuns of the nobility and monks of humbler background.

She provides evidence that the Hokkeji nuns and their associates were far more concerned with devotional practices than doctrine—an approach that allowed them to evade the supposed obstacles of a female rebirth and aspire to higher realms. Her argument is provocative, since it exposes the ways in which educated monks are able to mobilize textual evidence in support of patriarchal claims. She skillfully illustrates the interrelatedness of class, gender, and religious sensibilities, for example, in portraying the ways Eison and other *ritsu-shū* monks resisted manipulation at court.

Meeks presents an enormous amount of detailed information in a clear and cogent style. As a result, her investigation into the strategies, hindrances, successes, and indefatigable will of the nuns of Hokkeji is thoroughly absorbing. The questions that stimulated debate among Buddhist monastics in medieval Japan—whether the full ordination of nuns should take place and, if so, how—are the same questions that are being debated among Theravādan and Tibetan monastics today. The situation she describes as incoherent in medieval Japanese orders, namely, actively ordaining women as novices while refusing to ordain them as *bhikkhunis*, is precisely the paradox that women face in

many Buddhist traditions today. Ironically, now as then, questions remain as to whether greater institutional inclusion will improve women's status and opportunities or simply keep them under the thumb of male institutional elites. Are institutional subordination and autonomous obscurity Buddhist nuns' only options? For those involved in current efforts to restore the *bhikkhunī* order around the world, Meeks' insights into the Hokkeji nuns' struggles to establish their own legitimacy, authority, and agency give fresh impetus to the winds of change.

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## 2012 NEWS

*Collated by Bhikkhunī Karma Lekshe Tsomo and Danie M. Becknell*

### **Geshema Degree Becomes a Reality**

After years of debate and careful deliberation, Tibetan Buddhist nuns are finally set to receive *Geshema* degrees, which is equivalent to a PhD in Buddhist Philosophy. The historical decision was arrived at a high-level meeting organized by the Department of Religion and Culture of the Central Tibetan Administration last week in Dharamsala. "The decision to officially honour *Geshema* degrees was unanimously taken at the two-day meeting," Ngawang Choedak, the Secretary of Department of Religion and Culture said. "Learned teachers from six different nunneries and representatives from the Institute for Buddhist Dialectic Studies and the Tibetan Nuns Project were among those who attended," Choedak said while adding that the push came from the Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama.

"His Holiness the Dalai Lama has over the years strongly advocated for *Geshema* degrees and guided the concerned people in arriving at this decision," the secretary said. In September of 2011, the 11th meeting of Tibetan religious heads, presided by His Holiness the Dalai Lama had discussed the required steps for honouring of the *Geshema* degree, which became a reality in May. Nuns have been graduating from the rigorous 19-year program of philosophical studies as required for the normal *Geshe* curriculum study of the five Great Canonical Texts. Now with the decision, nuns, at par with monks, have the opportunity to appear for the very stringent doctorate examinations beginning as early as next year.

In 2011, Ven. Kelsang Wangmo became the first Buddhist nun to be awarded a *Rime Geshe* Degree by the Dharamsala based Institute for Buddhist Dialectic Studies with the authorisation from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The degree is titled *Rime Geshe* [Non-





*The bhikkunis from Jamyang Choling Institute who are going to join in the first group of Geshe exams in May, 2013.*

Sectarian Geshe] as the curriculum includes study with *Nyingma*, *Sakya* and *Kagyu* masters of their respective presentations of philosophy.

Jamyang Choling Institute in India has seven *Geshema* candidates who are going to take the first *Geshema* exam in May, 2013. The institute currently has 126 students from the Himalayan region, and offers a program that requires over seventeen years of intense study to complete. In addition to Buddhist philosophy, students are also taught English and computer and administration skills.

For more information on Jamyang Choling Institute please visit their website at <http://jamchoebuddhistdialectics.org>.

Collated from Phayul [online] and the Examiner [online], May 22, 2012.

### Japanese Buddhist Nun in Antinuclear Hunger Strike

Buddhists share a history of activism, so there has been a great deal of support among Buddhists worldwide after the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami that devastated Japan and caused nuclear accidents, primarily the level 7 meltdowns at three reactors in the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant complex, and the associated evacuation zones affecting hundreds of thousands of residents.

In May, novelist and Buddhist nun Jakucho Setouchi, 89, who has been described by Christopher Harding as “brimming with a mixture of gentleness, raucous laughter, and unexpected steel” joined a hunger strike with writers Hisae Sawachi, 81, and Satoshi Kamata, 73, in front of the industry ministry in Tokyo in protest of the government’s moves to restart idled reactors at the Oi nuclear

power plant in Fukui Prefecture.

The antinuclear civic group began the hunger strike on April 17, 2012 in front of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, which oversees nuclear power plant operators, in Tokyo’s Kasumigaseki district, home to a number of government buildings. “Many Japanese died in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” Setouchi said after she arrived at the site at about 9:30 a.m. in a wheelchair. “I feel ashamed that we have submissively used power generated by nuclear reactors. We should get rid of them.”

Pinning a band with the message “no to reactivation” to her nun’s habit, Setouchi said Japan is in as bad a state as she has known in her almost 90 years of life. “I can’t hand over the current Japan to the younger generation,” she said. Setouchi is opposed to reactivation of any of the nuclear plants, and has said that in the wake of the disaster-triggered nuclear crisis in Fukushima Prefecture, she believes the government’s moves to restart two idled reactors at Kansai Electric Power Co.’s Oi plant as “scary.”

Collated from the Japanese Times [online] and the Daily Yomiuri [online], May 3, 2012; the Examiner [online], May 8, 2012; and Aeon Magazine [online], November 19, 2012.

### Leadership Training for Nuns Concludes in Dharamsala

The week-long 4th Annual Nun’s Leadership Training, held from March 7th – 13th, 2012 in Dharamsala organized by the Tibetan Women’s Association, was attended by seventeen nuns from eight nunneries based in Nepal (Khachoe Ghakyil Ling Nunnery), Ladakh (Gephel Shadrupling), Tashi Jong (Dongyu Gatseling), Drikung Samtenling (Dehra Dun), Garoh (Jamyang Choeling and Shugseb Ugen Dzong), Solan (Redna Menriling), and Gaden Choeling in Dharamsala.

The training concluded yesterday with a panel discussion on the topic “Political Participation by Tibetan Nuns in the Exile Diaspora” held at the House of Peace and Dialogue, in Upper TCV School, Dharamsala. The guest speakers were Geshe Monlam Tharchin, Member of the Tibetan Parliament in Exile; nun Lobsang Dechen, the Executive Director of the Tibetan Nun’s Project; and Ngawang Choedak, Secretary of the Department of Religion. Each panelist offered powerful insight and constructive suggestions pertaining to “Political Participation by Tibetan Nuns in the Exile

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Diaspora” and presented additional feedback in a question and answer session.

Sharing her experiences, nun Lobsang Dechen emphasized the need for nuns to be able to administer their own nunneries and contribute back to the community. She referred to a few graduate nuns from Dolmaling, now teaching Buddhism at schools in Bylakuppe, south India and north-eastern parts of India. She also recalled the “political achievements of Ven. Thinley Chodon and Ven. Pachen Dolma as exceptional examples in Tibetan history.”

“I came across some classical writings of some nuns in the earlier centuries, but in this century, not many of our nuns have produced classical literary pieces. So, study hard,” Geshe Tharchin emphasised.

Geshe Monlam Tharchin reminded the nuns of their responsibility in carrying the Tibetan struggle forward. “There is scope for the nuns to be politicians and to be literary masters. So focus on your studies. It is important to participate in street activities in protest against the Chinese government, but education is the best weapon that we can use in the long run,” Geshe Tharchin said.

Ngawang Choedak urged the Tibetan nunneries to build networks with the Christian nunneries in India. “It would be great if our nuns can form ‘Nun-Associations’ and build networks with the Christian nunneries or other international women’s associations,” Ngawang Choedak said.

“I feel empowered and I wish more nuns could join such workshops in the future,” a nun participant said.

For more information on the Tibetan Women’s Association visit their website at <http://www.tibetanwomen.org>.

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