

# SAKYADHITA NEWSLETTER

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## Report on the Second Sakyadhita Conference

Bangkok, Thailand (October 1991)

Along the shaded paths of Thammasat University, Rangsit Campus, walked colorful, graceful figures representing twenty-seven different countries. The historical occasion was one of great celebration for Buddhists all over the world - the first International Conference on Buddhist women. The representatives - including householders and renunciates, women and men - spoke different languages, but were united in their concern for the welfare of the world's Buddhist women.

Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, a professor at Thammasat University and chief organizer of the conference, opened the conference. The Thai national anthem was sung and the refuge and precepts recited. A message from the Sangharaja, Supreme Patriarch of Buddhism in Thailand, was read, encouraging women to exert themselves in the practice of Dhamma. Blessings were conferred by Thai bhikkhus, as well as by Ven. Mahatero, a leading bhikkhu from Bangladesh, by Ven. Hye Chun, President of the Korean Bhikkhuni Association, and by Ven. Shig Hui Wan, Director of the Institute of Sino-Indian Studies in Taiwan. A very supportive opening address was given by the President of Thammasat University and a message was delivered by Ms. Priti Kana Barua, President of the Bangladesh Buddhist Women's Association.

Many conference participants were old friends and everyone made new friends, gathering daily for meditation, talks, discussion groups, tea, and special evening presentations. Each morning there was meditation and chanting in the special style of a particular Buddhist tradition - Thailand, Tibet, China, and Korea. The papers presented covered a wide range of topics: Social and Cultural Factors Determining the Future of Buddhist Women (Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo), The Need to be Aware of Other Traditions (Sulak Sivaraksa), Feminism, Lay Buddhism, and the Future of Buddhism (Dr. Rita Gross), The Role of the Teacher (Ven. Ayya Khema), Understanding Buddhist Texts from Women's Perspective (Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh), and Relevance of Vinaya in Modern Circumstances (Ven. Jampa Tsedroen).

The largest delegations were from Thailand, Korea, and Bangladesh, but people came from as far away as Estonia, Italy, and New Zealand. Simultaneous interpretation into Thai was provided via headphones by skilled and sensitive translators. Spontaneous translation into Bengali, Sinhalese, German, Korean, Tibetan, and other languages was provided whenever the need arose. Especially heartening were the bhikkhu participants - from Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos, the U.S. and Germany - who followed the issues with close attention and contributed enthusiastically to the discussions. A close bond developed between the nuns of Thailand with their sisters from other countries and a valuable exchange of information regarding Vinaya ensued. Discussion were instructive as well as inspiring.

Added attractions included video presentations (on bhikkhuni ordination and monastic training for women in Korea, on education and monastic training for women in Taiwan, on Buddha-Haus retreat center in Germany), a slide presentation on Taraloka women's community in England, a talk and video presentation on Buddhist women's activities in Sri Lanka, a panel discussion on women and environment, not to mention the delicious Thai food!

One day was devoted to a tour of the temples of Bangkok, with a sumptuous luncheon at Wat Songdharma-kalyani and blessings from Ven. Voramai Kabilsingh, Thailand's only Thai bhikkhuni. To visit these holy sites in the company of illustrious Dhamma teachers and close spiritual friends was a great privilege and inspiration. Spontaneously gathering for words of advice or simply enjoying their powerful presence, many blessings were received by all.

The conference traced its roots to a global networking of people actively concerned about the role of women both in the past and the future of the Buddhist tradition. A pivotal juncture in what is being termed "the Buddhist Women's Liberation Movement" was the first International Conference on Buddhist Nuns, held in 1987 in Bodhgaya, the spot of the Buddha's enlightenment in India. This conference brought together 150 people from twenty-six countries to discuss the special role of ordained Buddhist women and the challenges they face in the world today.

The Bodhgaya conference culminated in the formation of Sakyadhita, the International Association of Buddhist Women. Since 1987, Sakyadhita members have initiated

projects to further communications among Buddhist women, to improve education and practice facilities for women, to do research and publish works on the social and religious history of Buddhist women, to compile biographies of eminent Buddhist women, and other efforts. Founded on the principle that Asian and Western Buddhist women have much to learn from each other, Sakyadhita now has a mailing list of over 600 members worldwide and is growing steadily.

Several Sakyadhita meetings were held during the conference in Bangkok to discuss the accomplishments of the past five years and plans for the future. Sakyadhita national representatives reported on recent events in their countries and each national branch decided on a focus for future activities. New officers were elected: Chatsumarn Kabil Singh as President, Ayya Khema and Jampa Tsedroen as Vice Presidents, Karma Lekshe Tsomo as Secretary, Rita Gross as Treasurer, Thubten Dekyong and Wendy Barzetovic as members of the board.

The theme that emerged from the conference was strength in unity. If Buddhist women work together - nuns, laywomen, and women priests all together - the benefits for society and for Buddhism will be limitless. That which unites us is far more valuable than that which separates us. A greater appreciation was gained for the efforts of others to become better human beings and for the valuable efforts of all the Buddhist traditions in working toward that ideal. The value of spiritual development for individuals in the modern, mundane world was stressed, as well as the value of Buddhism for society. A warm feeling of admiration developed for others' genuine commitment to benefiting the world through the Buddha's teachings.

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Man and Woman in the Teachings of the Buddha

by Dr. Hellmuth Hecker

A full-length article by this title appeared in German in the bi-monthly Buddhist magazine Wissen und Wandel (Knowledge and Conduct) in 1989. Sakyadhita requested the author, Dr. Hellmuth Hecker of Hamburg, to send a summary of it for the

benefit of English-speaking readers. The article is based exclusively on the suttas of the Pali Canon.

We must differentiate between what the Buddha observed concerning the position of women in Indian society during his time and how he himself commented upon it. First, we must check what he said about the equality of the sexes and then what he noted concerning the differences between the sexes.

## Equality

We can speak about equality in the beginning, in the middle, and in the end:

### 1) Origins

While in Christianity women appear to be discriminated against from the beginning (for example, being created from the rib of man, seducing man, and so on), there is no such idea to be found in Buddhism. The Buddha's understanding of the origin of humankind and the evolution of this world system was that human beings were not sexually differentiated at first. Only later on, a division of labor developed at the time of the rice harvest. In connection with this, a differentiation between the sexes arose. From this time onwards only did sexual reproduction exist; in the beginning, beings incarnated by spiritual means. (Digha-NikayaNo. 27)

### 2) Aims

In Buddhism, the highest and real aim of humankind - the ideal of life - consists in the attainment of absolute freedom, that is, reaching a state where one is no longer controlled and conditioned by the urges of nature. Sovereignty and independence from all transient things is only to be found in nirvana, which can be reached during one's own lifetime. That is the nature of bodhi (enlightenment or perfection). This salvation can be gained in the same manner by men and by women. There are not even slight differences in this connection, neither in the method nor in the quality of attainment. The Buddha discovered that gender is of no importance for the aim of freedom. A female

saint (arahat) or a female being striving after sainthood is in no way subordinate to a male saint or male follower of the Buddha. It is not possible to declare a higher or more important equality of the sexes.

### 3) On the Way

According to the teachings of the Buddha, there exists no practical difference between the sexes. Man and woman are equal in their dependence upon each other and in their clinging which must be overcome (Angutara-Nikaya I,1). Man and woman are equal in the rights and duties of their partnership, as the Buddha described it for lay followers in the famous sermon to Singalako (Digha-nikayaNo.31). In particular, adultery is as unwholesome for men as it is for women. The third precept (sila) is the same whether one is a man or a woman.

For those people who are striving after the highest aim of the spiritual life in this very lifetime, the Buddha founded the Order (Sangha) - an order for monks and an order for nuns. The founding of an order of nuns was a revolutionary act in ancient India, since there previously existed no such communities for women. In establishing an order of nuns the Buddha had to consider the social situation of women in Brahmanism. In the Indian society of the sixth century B.C.E., women were in no way prepared or educated to establish a religious institution such as an ascetic community. The Buddha, therefore, set forth for nuns eight special rules, binding them to the order of monks. These rules are to be regarded as a shelter and help for the nuns, not as evidence of discrimination (Anguttara-Nikaya VIII, 51).

In the Pali rendition of monastic law (Vinaya) there exist 227 numbered rules for monks and 311 for nuns. The additional rules are not an added burden, but only elucidate other rules. As for the unnumbered rules, there are many more for monks than for nuns.

On his last day, the Buddha delegated to the Order the possibility of altering the lesser, minor rules after his death. It would still be possible today, therefore, to cancel those eight special rules in Theravada Buddhism, provided that there existed an order of nuns in that tradition.

But the Bhikkhuni Sangha has been extinct for many centuries in South and Southeast Asia. To revive it seems impossible since there must be at least ten Bhikkhunis to ordain a new one. This rule could be regarded as one of the minor ones which could be reformed by the Bhikkhu Sangha - if they wanted to do so.

## Non-Equality

The Buddha found that in India there were differences and discrimination between women and men on the biological, existential, and social level. What was his position in this regard?

### 1) Biological differences

In Samyutta-Nikaya (37,3), the Buddha enumerated five special sufferings of womanhood. Numbers 1 to 3 are concerned with the female body: menstruation, pregnancy, and giving birth. These sufferings exist only for some animals and humans; already female deities of the lower stages are free from them.

Numbers 4 and 5 are of a social nature, connected with Indian society of that day. The Indian wife had to leave her parental home and had to attend to her husband. These difficulties are not, however, necessarily connected with womanhood. In our modern society there could be enumerated completely different sufferings of women: violence in marriage, increasing rape, and the double burden of occupation and family.

The Buddha did not call these woes necessary or divine, but he referred to them as realities of womanhood (Numbers 1 to 3) or of Indian society (Numbers 4 to 5). He did not find it necessary to speak of the lesser physical strength of the average woman as a "special suffering of womankind". Only where women intend to compete with men in sport or business would this be of consequence. Indian women were more interested in spiritual aims than in sport.

### 2) Terminological differences

In the language of Middle India of his time, the Buddha found two expressions for the female: first, the neutral term *itthi* (woman) and second, the discriminating term *matugama*. Literally, *matugama* means "mother (*matar*) in the village (*gama*)" and describes a woman who does not think further than her village horizon, a woman who has no higher ideal than motherhood. Every *matugama* is an *itthi*, but not every *itthi* is a *matugama*. When the suttas are speaking of primitive women and of female vicissitudes, then women are called *matugama* and not *itthi*. Only in post-canonical literature do the contours become indistinct; there can be observed a tendency to generalize all women as *matugama* and as dangerous for the ascetic life of the monks, especially in the rebirth tales (*Jataka*).

The question may arise: why did the Buddha not use an equivalent term for primitive men without spiritual aspirations. Why did he not call them *pitugama*? The answer is simply that there did not exist such a term in Pali and the Buddha did not invent unusual terms.

### 3) Existential differences

The Buddha's saying that women are incapable of five leading positions may be most difficult to understand. He says, namely, that woman cannot gain dominion over hell, heaven, the Brahmas, that she cannot rule over the world of humans, and that she cannot become a Fully Enlightened One (*Samma-Sambuddha*). But Sakyamuni neither invented these impossibilities nor defended them; he only reports that by his universal clairvoyance he never saw a woman in these five positions in any of the innumerable aeons into which he looked. He adds that this would also be an impossibility. We can only try to understand why the wisdom of the Awakened One came to this conclusion.

That a woman cannot rule over hell and devils is by no means a drawback, but an advantage. Ruling over the sensual gods, the brahmas, and the world of humans is also something transient and of no importance for spiritual aspirants. A woman who is a streamwinner with the four kinds of trust, who has the guarantee of attaining nirvana after at least seven lives, has sixteen times more to gain than a ruler of the world with the four continents (*Samyutta-Nikaya* 55,1). Besides, the Buddha only says that a woman cannot gain "*Sakkatta*," that is, the position of Sakka, the ruler over the 33 gods in the



sensual heaven. He does not say that a woman cannot rule over other, higher sensual heavens. And every woman can become a Brahma, an inhabitant of the world beyond sensuality, as can a man. Brahmas are neither male nor female, but beyond those distinctions.

A woman can become an Arahat (saint) and a Pecceka-Buddha (silent Buddha), but not a Samma-Sambuddha. Why? The Buddha says there are only four things which cannot be understood by speculation, and one of them is the sphere of faculties of a Fully Enlightened One (Anguttara-Nikaya IV,77).

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Animals are Sentient Beings, Too

by Sramanerika Thubten Chonyid

H.H. the Dalai Lama said that human beings are basically compassionate, but ignorance makes us act in unwholesome ways. The weight of our cruelty has from the beginning of time fallen most heavily on our fellow earthlings, the animals. Yet, because cruelty and exploitation have been with us for so long, we do not see the evil of it. When we become Buddhists, we call animals "our old mothers." For their sake, we pray to be able to lay down our lives billions of times. For their sake, we visualize ourselves as our tutelary deity. Yet still, we continue to consume their slaughtered flesh. If we cannot see the suffering involved in each package of meat, which is plainly visible, how will we understand the suffering of more remote beings whom we cannot see, such as the hell beings and pretas?

There are two misconceptions that keep us eating the flesh of our fellow beings. The first one is that we believe animals live comfortably and are then humanely killed. Don't we all have to die anyway? We think modern, humane America must have laws to prevent unnecessary suffering and to ensure a minimum of comfort. We have the USDA, inspectors, humane societies, the ASPCA. We have in our minds images from the books of our childhood: cows in green meadows, pink pigs wallowing happily in

mud, mother hens and their chicks in tender scenes. These images, notwithstanding the industry's ad campaigns, could not be further from the truth. The truth is that America is hell for animals. Between five and six billion animals are slaughtered here each year. The great majority of these animals spend their miserable lives in factory farms. These farms are huge complexes that can house up to a quarter million animals. Sheer numbers and the maximum efficiency ethic ensure profit even if thousands of lives are lost in the process. Anti-cruelty laws do not extend to food animals; neither does the concern of humane societies.

About three months ago the newspapers carried a story about high-school students who won the Seiko Science Prize for devising a way to turn into methane fuel the carcasses of the eighteen million chickens who die each year in Delaware of "natural causes" such as disease and heat stroke. The numbers hint at the depth and extent of animal abuse. Yet there was no outcry. The article was simply about the solution of a disposal problem. We are so used to trusting that there are laws, that horror belongs to another time and place, that we even believe Frank Perdue when he says his "farms" are chicken heaven. But what can be more horrible than to be killed for food? What is more gruesome than arrays of body parts?

Shocking as they are, the extent of the suffering comes as no surprise to anyone who knows anything about modern animal agriculture. Egg laying hens are squeezed five or more into wire cages (beings in cages!) the size of an album cover. Their beaks are burnt off so as to prevent stress-induced cannibalism. The male chicks of layer strains are sorted out and thrown live into garbage bags or macerators. Calves are taken from their mothers within a day or two of birth. They are placed into wooden crates from which they emerge only to go to slaughter at the age of twelve weeks. These crates do not allow stretching, grooming, or turning round. The horrors of such a life are too numerous to mention here.

One of the worst atrocities I read about concerned chicken feet lying severed in the bottom of transport trucks and crates. It seems that legs and feet that stick out of the bottom of the wire crates get cut off when the trucks move and the crates shift. There are also reports of pigs in winter that arrive frozen solid or frozen stuck to the sides of the truck. And then there are all the heat-strokes suffered from waiting hours on unshaded loading ramps. More elaborated accounts of animal suffering can be found in Philip Kapleau's *To Cherish All Life*, John Robbins' *Diet For a New America*, and Jim Mason's *Animal Factories*.

As for slaughter, we think that animals in America must die quickly and painlessly. But when it come to killing animals, we are one of the most backward and cruel of countries. Unlike European countries, we still allow the horrible Kosher method of slaughter. This involves hanging cows by a hind leg, either with a chain or by passing a metal hook through their tendons, passing a hook through the nostrils to immobilize the head, then slashing the throat and letting the animal bleed to death. Because Kosher meat must be free of veins and arteries, large amounts of meat must be utilized. In New Jersey, about seventy percent of all cattle die this way.

How sad it is that even as they go to their death and suffer their last, animals are never given even a pitying glance or a prayer! Instead, they go in fear - prodded, kicked, punched, and shouted at. Those animals that are too sick, scared, or injured to walk (the "Downers") are tied with ropes or chains to tractors and pulled along the ground and onto platforms on their bellies.

Cattle that is raised outdoors is undoubtedly happier than those which never see daylight. But this brings us to another problem: environmental destruction. When we hear of rainforests being cleared for grazing lands we have to realize that the natives are not doing this for their own steaks. They cannot afford to eat meat. We in the United States import three hundred million pounds of beef annually from Central and South America. Environmentalists in the States protest the grazing of cattle on the Western prairie, since it greatly disturbs regional ecosystems. But alternatives do we have? The only plausible alternative is to stop eating meat.

Feedlots and factory farms are no kinder to the earth. The sewage they produce causes enormous pollution of the ground water and rivers. Cattle alone produce twenty times more excrement than the total human population of the U.S. Animal agriculture is the single worst polluter and the worst abuser of energy and natural resources. It uses more water than all other industries and all municipalites combined. Making a single pound of meat requires sixteen to twenty pounds of grain, 2500 to 5000 gallons of water (more than a family of four uses in a month), in addition to pesticides, herbicides, hormones, antibiotics, and large amounts of fuel. By contrast, a vegetarian diet causes none of the suffering, none of the sewage and waste, and little disturbance of ecosystems. In addition, if we fed grains directly to people rather than to animals, there would be enough to feed all the people on earth.

Why eat meat then? This brings us to the second misconception, the one that keeps even Buddhists eating meat: we've been taught from a tender age that we need to eat meat to survive. We were told about the four food groups by authority figures when we were young and malleable. As it turns out, much of this information was courtesy of the meat and dairy industries.

So we tremble even now at the thought of quitting meat. Protein is the big American bugaboo. We were told we need large amounts of it; in fact, the more, the better. We are paying dearly for this. Excess protein is excreted in urine. One doctor has said that Americans have the most expensive urine in the world. But the process is not innocuous; strain is placed on the kidneys. And calcium must be excreted together with the extra protein. That is why Americans are plagued with an epidemic of osteoporosis. Meanwhile the Chinese, who eat little meat and no dairy products, do not get osteoporosis. It is ironic that the dairy industry continues to tout milk as a bone-builder.

Protein is present in almost all foods. Even strict vegetarians get two to three times their requirements. Low-protein diets, such as are ordered for renal patients, are extremely stringent. Even the bread has to be specially made.

But as Buddhists we should seek the truth regarding suffering and do what is compassionate rather than think of our own health. We keep being told that Buddha said it's all right to eat meat as long as it isn't killed for us. I think this is just one of Buddha's expedient means for keeping us from falling deeper into samsara. As long as we do not directly participate in an act of murder, we do not get locked into the frightful murderer-victim cycle, the wheel of sharp weapons that revolves continuously until one day, weary of tears, we stumble into liberation.

But Buddha meant more for us than to just protect ourselves. In the Lankavatara Sutra, he said:

"For fear of causing terror to living beings let the Bodhisattva, who is disciplining him[her]self to attain compassion, refrain from eating flesh..."

Again, there may be some people in the future who...being under the influence of the taste for meat will string together in various ways sophistic arguments to defend meat eating...

But meat eating in any form, in any manner, and in any place is unconditionally and once for all prohibited...Meat eating I have not permitted to anyone, I do not permit, I will not permit...."

And in the Surangama Sutra:

"Unless you can so control your minds that even the thought of brutal unkindness and killing is abhorrent, you will never be able to escape from the bondage of existence... after my Parinivana in the last period different kinds of ghosts will be encountered everywhere deceiving people and teaching them that they can eat meat and still attain enlightenment...How can a Bhikshu[ni], who hopes to become a deliverer of others, him[her]self be living on the flesh of others?"

And in the Mahaparinirvana Sutra:

"The eating of meat extinguishes the seed of great compassion."

Gandhi, a zealous vegetarian, argued thus to a Christian: "Look at Gautama's compassion! It was not confined to [hu]mankind, it was extended to all living beings. Does not one's heart overflow with love to think of the lamb joyously perched on his shoulders? One fails to notice this love for all living beings in the life of Jesus." I hate to think of the disappointment and loss of faith he would have felt had he known many Buddhists routinely eat meat like everyone else.

By boycotting meat we would spare others from committing the act of killing. Slaughterhouse workers are even more to be pitied than the animals, who have already expiated most of their negative deeds in the hells. The earth's collective karma would improve.

Can you imagine a world without factory farms, without slaughterhouses, a world of clean rivers and plentiful food, where people enjoy health and strength into old age? Wouldn't that be almost like heaven? Imagine a world where people never again, like guardians of hell, cut and kill their struggling, trussed up fellow creatures!

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## International News

### Thailand

THAILAND: Maechee Jutimah sent the following report on conditions for Western women wishing to practice meditation in Thailand.

As one of the few Buddhist countries still surviving in this world of impermanence, Thailand has a very real attraction as a place to visit, to practice, to absorb something of what it means to be Buddhist, and to see the effect Buddhism has had on a stable culture over a long time.

Certainly the benefits of the Buddha's teaching are readily apparent in the generosity and goodheartedness of the Thai people, but as a woman in a tradition in which monks and men predominate, it is often difficult to discover places suitable to stay awhile.

The position of women in Thai monasticism is very poor: the maechee, as a nun is called, is usually from the poor, uneducated lower class and her role is that of cook or housewife. Some places have higher standards, but as a Western woman, be prepared to be outraged. Be prepared to have your cultural prejudices challenged. To be able to step outside one's own familiar environment, to have one's values, attitudes, habits constantly challenged in all sorts of unexpected ways is irritating, frustrating, painful, and marvellously beneficial.

When staying in monasteries in Thailand, it is generally expected that women will wear a black sarong and a white blouse or shirt of modest design. Shoes are never worn inside, so a light sandal that is easy to slip off is best. A torch and mosquito repellent would be fairly essential.

The following places, although quite different from each other and fulfilling different functions, are each suitable for women to visit:

- Suan Mokkh
- Ampoe Chaiya
- Surat Thani 84110
- Southern Thailand

Suan Mokkh is the residence of Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of Thailand's most respected and influential monks and teachers of Dhamma. Now 85 years old, his contribution to revitalizing the interest in Buddhadhamma within Thailand is immeasurable, both through his teaching, and even more through his prolific writings, some of which are translated into English.

At Suan Mokkh, on the first ten days of every month, a retreat is held for Westerners. This is a comprehensive introduction to Buddhist theory and to the practice of anapanasati, recommended especially for beginners. The teaching is always in English, conducted mostly by Western monastic and lay women and men. Again, Buddhadasa gives lectures, health permitting.

It is necessary to arrive at least one day before the first day of the month but please don't write beforehand. Participation is on a first-come, first-served basis. December, January and February are the busiest months. The course ends on the morning of the eleventh day.

Modest behavior is important, bearing in mind that this is a monastery. Other necessities are a torch [flashlight], insect repellent, pen and paper, and a bathing sarong, since bathing is communal. Accommodation is in single rooms. The food is vegetarian, and the cost for the ten days is 600 baht.

There are limited facilities for people to stay on after they have done a retreat here. A few single rooms are available (otherwise dormitory accommodation) and vegetarian food is provided at the rate of 50 baht per day.

Wat Pan Nanachat

Bahn Bung Wai

Ampher Warin

Ubon 34310

This is the international monastery established by and for foreign disciples of the great teacher Ajahn Chah, in the austere forest tradition of Northeast Thailand. Wat Pan Nanachat has a reputation for high standards and the young monks in training here lead very disciplined, restrained lives. Although this is a training monastery for monks, there are limited facilities for guests. Please write beforehand; your courtesy will be appreciated.

All who stay, men and women, are expected to keep to the daily routine of the monastery which includes morning chanting and meditation beginning at 3:30 AM, one meal a day at around 8:00 AM, light work for two hours in the afternoon followed by a hot drink. The evening routine is subject to change, but it usually includes meditation and maybe a talk by the abbot, starting at 7:00 PM. Women guests are expected to help in the kitchen for an hour or so in the morning; men have other duties.

This is an opportunity to experience authentic Thai monasticism albeit with mostly non-Thai protagonists. The atmosphere is very calm, restrained, and collected, with great emphasis on mindfulness throughout the day in whatever activities one is engaged in. There is opportunity to talk with senior monks, but there is not much formal teaching. This monastery is more suitable for people with prior experience in meditation who are self-motivated to use the unstructured time wisely.

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Focus on Thailand



## Spiritual Education Gives New Hope to Young Women

When a poor country boy wants to study, he can become a novice and get free education provided by the temple. Any financial needs that may arise are eased by public donations for the temple while his daily food requirements are met by alms giving. If he is good at it, he can continue studying in monks' universities. He can, as most monks do, quit the robe to work as an educated layman with a certificate equivalent to a bachelor's degree.

But what can a poor girl do in the same situation? Fourteen-year-old Kaejai Suwannajand from a village in Khon Kaen has a ready answer. "My brother is studying as a novice. My sister left the village to work as a maid in Bangkok." While her sister's drudgery helps support her farmer parents back home, many young girls end up in a sweatshop while others are lured into a life of vice.

"I don't want to quit school and work like my sister. I have faith and I want to live a religious life like my brother. To study and train my mind to be a better person like him. But they said I could not be a novice because I am a girl, so I chose to be a nun," says the child nun, 14, head shaven and clad in a white robe.

"I told my parents that it is sinful to stop a person from entering a religious life. So they complied," she reveals, sporting her contagious sweet smile. It is easy to understand her parents' reservations. While monkhood is a merit-accumulating practice, nunhood is still socially looked down upon as a refuge for dead-end women. With the boys of the families gone, either to the temples or to schools, practical needs require the girls to help with the household chores or to work and send remittances home.

Kaejai's nunhood, however, by no means guarantees the same educational opportunities her brother has. To start with, there are no schools for nuns, let alone colleges. And if she wants to study, she must struggle on her own since most nunneries emphasize a spiritual life cut off from the outside world. Even with the seminar's approval, Kaejai still has to spend her own money for the education. If she does not have the means, she has no choice but learn to accept it - as most nuns do.

## Nunnery

For the time being, the young nun does not have to worry about her education prospects. At least for another year. She is among 35 nuns, aged 12-20, who are attending the two-year course at Dhammajarinee Wittaya which is part of a nunnery in Ratchaburi Province. Their classmates include 22 girls, aged 12-16, who are from poor and broken families.

It is the country's first Buddhist convent school run by nuns.

"I want to make things easier for younger nuns. And to give some poor girls the chance to learn what they might find useful in easing their troubles ahead in their life," says Mother Superior Pratin Kwangaew, 48, in her soothing voice.

The two-year courses at Dhammajarinee Wittaya - meaning school for religious women - offer a combination of adult education and rigorous spiritual practices, aiming primarily to equip the students with the spiritual tools to steer their lives. "They are the girls with few opportunities," says the serene Mother Superior Pratin. "Life won't be easy for them in the future. We just hope that these two years may help them somehow. To give them the ability to distinguish from good and bad, and the necessary strength to resist bad influences."

The pioneer project marks a big venture for Buddhist nuns who, unlike their Christian counterparts, do not receive social recognition as part of the clergy. Charity work is not part of the Thai nuns' traditions either. The public image of nuns, or maechee, is that of poor, old ladies who want to practice Dhamma in the temples during their last days and help with the temples' chores in return for free abode and food. The younger nuns are viewed as the heart-broken who take temporary refuge in the white robes.

Lack of education and inferior social status make nuns feel unconfident and incapable of undertaking social work. And mainly because people do not donate to convents as they do temples, nuns lack necessary funds to start any causes. They cannot expect leadership from the educated or wealthy women who later opt to live a religious life as nuns either. "They are already weary from the hustle and bustle of the outside world. They leave their old lives to concentrate on mind training. They want peace. They don't

want to be bothered with the kind of work which will bring headaches and problems," explains Mother Superior Pratin.

Until a year ago, this spacious nunnery, hidden on a back road in Ratchaburi, was like any other. It provides a quiet retreat for the group of nuns who, shunning what society thinks of them, live a relatively isolated life to practice Dhamma. Their only link with the neighborhood is their morning alms round. At dawn, barefooted nuns leave the seminary, walking serenely in a long line for three kilometres to receive food from nearby villagers. The practice attests to the villagers' rare respect for this group of maechee, apparently because of the nuns' strict discipline. These days the line of the alms round is doubly long with a number of student nuns. Trailing serenely behind are "temple girls" in their white blouses and grey uniforms.

Mother Superior Pratin knows well the difficulties nuns have to go through to get education. She has experienced it all herself. Despite little encouragement, she persisted. Using family funds, she left for India and returned with a master's degree in History. Her conclusion from those difficult years: a degree is not the answer if one's quest is to stem the causes of suffering. An ideal education, she says, should help save oneself both in worldly and spiritual matters.

"I've long contemplated giving education to needy girls. To give them spiritual immunity and sense of purpose in life. But we lacked opportunities, funding and personnel. When we had all the necessary factors, we just went ahead," she says. The chance came when a senior monk promised to support the project financially and another group of active nuns from Wat Pak Nam volunteered to take charge of the teaching. "Reverend Sakdiworaprasart of Somanat Temple said he once saw a girl crying, asking to go with her brother who had entered novicehood. Since then, he said he wants to do something to give similar chances for girls to have a religious life," says Panthita Yanyongyut who acts as Dhammajarinee School Project Co-ordinator.

Maechee Yupin Duangjand, 40, whose brisk movements contrast with the Mother Superior's calmness, is in charge of teaching and recruiting nuns from Wat Pak Nam as teachers. She was among the first batch of Pak Nam Temple nuns who persisted to get an adult education and is among the few nuns active in volunteer work. "Breathe in slowly," she guides the Dhammajarinee during a meditation class in a vast praying hall

which is brightly illuminated by shafts of afternoon sunlight. "Watch it move carefully....Then breathe out."

She cannot conceal an indulgent smile when she sees one girl dozing off. "They are tired. The girls have to get up so early in the morning. Three hours' walk during alms in the morning. Then classes. And sewing training. Then vegetable tending in the afternoon. No dinner in the evening, only milk or fruit juice. They have to observe the Eight Precepts and follow a life only a bit less stringent than nuns. "But they are still girls after all. We cannot be too strict, can we?" she muses. She proudly reports, however, the apparent changes in the girls in only one year. "When they came here, they were small and not so clean. Look at them now. They've grown so much. Their manners. And their thinking. This goes to show the potential of these girls if only they have a chance."

The daily life of a Dhammajarinee, as the student is called, revolves round the religious life of the nunnery. Classes fit in between praying and meditation classes. Sewing is aimed to enhance the girls' job prospects. Vegetable plots are for their own meals due to limited funds. Isn't it hard for teenagers to adapt to the strict religious life? to forego dinner, laughter, fun and games, and TV?

### Empty Stomach

For Ladda Sae Lim, a teenage girl with sad big eyes, those problems are trivial at best. Coming from a broken home family of eight in a Bangkok slum, she says Dhammajarinee has given her for the first time the taste of life without quarrels, beatings and sleeping on an empty stomach. "My father is a construction worker. He beats us when he's drunk. My mother could not stand the beating and she left. Father wouldn't let me live with her. I worked since I was 10, washing dishes. My stepmother often made me sew all night. I frequently missed school. I wanted to run away. But I was afraid. I had nowhere to go. This place is much better than home," Ladda says, eyes cast downward.

Her recent visit home has convinced her all the more. She told Mother Superior she wants to stay at the nunnery during the school's next recess, although all her friends will

leave. "I don't mind the quietness. I like the peace," she says. "The only thing I miss is my mother." She bites her trembling lips.

Like Ladda, 14-year-old Duangjai Duangchuen says if it were not for Dhammajarinee, they wouldn't have any opportunity to continue studying beyond the six year compulsory education period. Duangjai's four brothers are all novices. Ladda's brother is in secondary school and, being a student, he is allowed to forego household chores which is Ladda's work. "We were told that girls do not need to study. Girls must help with household work, taking care of the younger ones. Or work to help support the family," says Ladda. Duangjai nods in agreement. Despite family bitterness, Ladda's voice is free of any resentment.

"Before, I used to be angry with my father and hate my stepmother. Now, I've come to realise that it is no use. I think of the nun's teaching about Khanti, the need for self-control and endurance. It helps. It makes me see that anger is a waste of time." It is probably this very change Mother Superior notices in Ladda and other students that keeps her determined to continue the school despite being plagued with financial problems.

The senior monk of Somanat Temple has stopped the funding due to his other projects' needs and the nuns are left on their own to struggle with meeting expenses. Initially, the nunnery was planning to extend the project and receive new batches of nuns and girls every two years. Now, the challenge is to complete just the first two years.

The nunnery plans a fund-raising pa pah ceremony in August. But the Khun mae are not very optimistic. "People do not make merit with nuns. That's a fact," says Maechee Yupin. "Besides, people generally like to make merit by building things - temples, religious monuments, artefacts. "It is not a practice to make merit by 'building people,' by giving the less fortunate a chance to develop themselves."

Like protective mothers, the senior nuns keep their problems to themselves. The girls' duties, as they see it, are to concentrate on school. The Dhammajarinee and nun students seem unaware of the school's problems. That is probably why they talk about the future with optimism, full of "if's:"

"If we nuns have a better education, spiritually and academically we can serve our communities better," says Maechee Sutham Samano, 30, from Chiang Mai. "A lot of women have problems and they do not have anyone to turn to. Some problems they cannot talk to monks about. If we have training, this is the gap nuns can help fill.

"If there are more schools to give girls a chance to enter religious life or to have religious training, fewer northern girls will be lured into prostitution.

"If there is a college for nuns, the doors will be open wider to nuns' work."

Ladda thinks of her friends from broken homes in the slum. "Some of them slip into theft. Some into drugs. Some even take heroin injections. I don't want them to be like that."

"If only there were more schools like this, my friends would have the same chance."

For Mother Superior Pratin and Maechee Yupin, there is only one big if: if they can find the necessary funds. "We don't aim high," says Mother Superior in her gentle tone. "It doesn't matter if the students leave the nunhood later, or the girls will ever be serious enough to consider nunhood. If we are able to help foster some good people in society, it is enough. It's our way of giving something back to society."

Note: This school is the result of a series of consultations and meetings among nuns from different parts of the country. The Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development (TICD), the YMCA of Chiangmai, and a few other NGO's have been supporting this sort of activity for about 5 years.

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