

SAKYADHITA NEWSLETTER

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Women and Buddhism: Theravada Nuns of Nepal

by Kimberly Kita

"Women by nature are not powerful, both in body and mind....When women get power they become proud....It's a natural happening for men to have control over women....Buddha's preaching is very fair." (Sayadaw U Asabhacara, Chief Abbot, International Buddhist Meditation Center, November 26, 1991)

I hear these words. And they resound in my head, spiralling echoes bringing forth deep springs of pain. Tears well in my eyes, bitterness in my mouth. My stomach rises to meet my throat, lodging there, threatening to let loose, as if that would release my sadness and bring me respite.

I sit at your feet, nodding, fulfilling your expectation and confirming your words. The air presses down on me and I am small inside myself, struggling to breathe above the blood of my own seared and jagged insides as again I am ripped apart.

I watch my sisters. They bow to you, not with respect, but with fear. On their knees, head bowed, hands clasped at lips in prayer fashion. It could be respect, but for the fear in their darting eyes. Sisters, look at me steady. We can hold each other tall as we should be. Throw off the weigh and come from your knees.

I am left alone for now. My pain and sadness are familiar, and from that acute intensity my strength quietly emerges. There is no escape for me alone. We are in this together, my sisters. Fuelled by the core of our darkness and pain, led by our strength, together we will stand tall and breathe free.

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To learn about the experiences and lives of Buddhist nuns, the functioning of a nunnery, and the interactions between nuns and monks, all of which indicate the position of

women in Buddhism, I spent several weeks in the Kathmandu area working with the Theravada nuns of the Dharmakirti Vihar and living at the International Buddhist Meditation Center (ICBM). In addition to spending much time at Dharmakirti Vihar, I was also able to travel with the nuns to the nearby Theravada viharas of Bhaktapur, the Ananda Kuti Vihar of Swayambunath, Shakyasinha Vihar of Patan, and the Shri Kirti Vihar of Kirtipur.

Dharmakirti Vihar was founded in 1964 by Anagarika [now Bhikkhuni] Dhammawati, who still resides there, although she was absent (on pilgrimage to Bodhgaya) during my stay. The Vihar was created and functions entirely on donations from laity; approximately 30 nuns live and study there presently. These nuns are very actively involved in teaching all members of the community - from young children to old men. In Dhammawati's absence, I dealt mostly with Anagarika Dhammadinna.

One day after attending a monthly lunch for the nuns and monks sponsored by Dharmakirti Vihar, I sat in the common room surrounded by these most delightful nuns, ranging in age from 10 to 80. Although I could not understand their words, I sat watching them, enthralled by their simple beauty, their expressive faces and gestures and voice intonations, and their gentle eyes which would occasionally meet mine as if to include me in their discussions. The nun from Pokhara told me, through Dhammadinna, that my "meditation in Bodhgaya was very good" and invited me to become a nun and live, study, and meditate with her in the mountains near Pokhara. I wanted to ask her a million questions, to get to know her by spending time with her - to see where she lives, to observe her practice. Limited by both language and time, I could only offer a most heartfelt smile. As if reading my mind, Dhammadinna turned to me and began telling me about her own journey as a nun, a story which is a typical one for most older Nepali Buddhist nuns.

Raised in a Buddhist family with seven other children, Dhammadinna's passion for studying the Dhamma began at an early age. In addition to attending school and studying, Dhammadinna had work responsibilities around the house and was not permitted to go to the nearby vihar for teachings. Her awareness of the sufferings in life, particularly as a woman, was intensified when she watched her mother suffer through childbirth. She watched as the male doctor came in with his "big instruments" to deliver this breach birth, and vowed that she would never suffer like that.

With great clarity and sobering seriousness, Dhammadinna's tone changed as she explained to me the life of most Nepali women. A woman in Nepal must marry by age 16 to 20; otherwise she is a disgrace to her family. Once she marries, she is forced to leave her home and go live with her husband and his entire family. Dhammadinna emphasized that this move is particularly unfair and traumatic for a woman; she enters and new house and comes under the control of her husband. The woman must be available to her husband sexually, must suffer through childbirth, must take care of the children, and must live with less sleep. These are some of the problems Nepali women face. According to Dhammadinna, men have no problems: "Men are free because they don't get pregnant." Also, "Women in Nepal cannot go anywhere without husband's permission."

Determined to avoid this fate, Dhammadinna decided to become a nun and skipped school whenever possible in order to receive teachings from the monks. After she finished grade 10, her father would not permit her to continue studying. Prohibited from attending school and nearing the age for marrying, she decided to go to Burma to become a nun. Without her family's knowledge, she walked from Patan to Kathmandu and got her passport. Through the local vihar in Patan and with the help of donations from laity in Burma, it was arranged that she could make the journey to Burma to study Buddhism and become a nun. All that was required was her father's permission and his signature. Thus began the ordeal to convince her father, who was opposed to it all and refused to give permission for quite awhile.

After much begging by Dhammadinna, her father finally gave his permission for her to go to Burma and signed her passport, but still withheld his permission for her to become a nun. Recalling this small victory as if it were yesterday, Dhammadinna looked at me, clasped her hands together and exclaimed: "Oh, I'm very lucky!" Although she made it to Burma, it was still "very difficult to take permission." After one month, a Burmese layperson travelled to Patan to seek permission on her behalf, assuring her father that if he gives permission he will no longer be responsible for her, that the Sangha will support her complete. After literally pleading for permission to live her life as she wished, Dhammadinna became a nun in 1960.

She studied in Burma for six years, returning to Nepal to live in Dharmakirti Vihar, the newly founded by her teacher, Dhammawati. Since then, she has studied Thai language in Thailand for two years, spent five months in the United States (leaving due to visa problems), traveled to Taiwan for one month and receiving full ordination as a bhikkhuni

there, then studies in Thailand for another two years. When I questioned her about her interactions with Theravada monks, she did not understand my question, but continued to talk about the Dhamma teaching she does everyday and her desire to learn English. "There are two kinds of English, simple English and Dhamma language. I want to learn Dhamma language." She seems to cherish her freedom to study and teach Dhamma. The common thread in the lives of Nepali women is male control - by fathers, husbands, doctors, and monks. Dhammadinna, living with her sister nuns, is happy to be free. The existence of monks does not seem very relevant to her.

All of the nuns are very different - they are of different ages, sizes, personalities, educational backgrounds....Yet there are significant similarities. Every one of them is extraordinary simply in her decision to study Buddhism, to reject the fate of marriage, children, and subordination to a husband, and to become a nun.

I spent considerable amounts of time with a 32-year-old nun named Sujata. She spends some nights at Dharmakirti Vihar, but prefers to live with her family in Patan because having her own room is more conducive to studying. Sujata and her family of 13 welcomed me into their home for several days, so I was able to get to know Sujata not only by talking with her, but by watching her with her family and in public. When I first met her, I didn't know that she spoke some English, so I was just sitting quietly, enjoying the company of three nuns. After 30 minutes or so, Sujata turned to me and asked if I wanted to go with her to Patan. From that moment on, she took complete care of me, holding back nothing and offering everything in her own somewhat reserved way.

Sujata decided to become a nun for reasons similar to Dhammadinna - to be able to study Dhamma and to escape marriage - but the circumstances surrounding her decision were very different. Her family was very supportive of her wishes. Her father even established Shakyasinha Vihar, the Theravada monastery in Patan for monks and nuns. Sujata explained that her father was a Theravada Buddhist at that time, although now he is Mahayana. Her aunt is a Tibetan Buddhist, while Sujata is a Theravada nun. She explained that "Theravada and Mahayana communicate in Nepal." When I asked her why she chose Theravada, she replied that she went to Burma and Burma has only "Theravada-type" Buddhism. For ten years now she has been following nine precepts: the five precepts for Buddhist laity; not wearing ornaments, sleeping on high beds, or taking food after noon; and maintaining compassion toward all. Although she became a nun to study Buddhism, most of her time is spent doing Buddha pujas, visiting houses and nearby viharas, and teaching local children about Buddhism.

Sujata's days are indeed exhausting, yet she rose before me and cooked breakfast and told me to "take rest" while she went to teach. Never does she complain, or look tired or annoyed. Though she has only 30 minutes to herself daily to meditate (15 minutes morning and 15 minutes evening), she maintains her balance in every situation. In addition to letting me stay in her home, feeding me mounds of delicious Nepali food, and taking me with her everywhere she went, this bodhisattva in disguise made me robes of my own for my week as a nun because the ones available would have been too short. She also bought me a sweater, so I wouldn't be cold.

Some Nepali nuns are fortunate to easily have the opportunity to become Buddhist nuns. However, due to the lack of resistance they faced, they are not so aware of the position of other women in Buddhism and in Nepali society. Nepali nuns accept male authority. I saw this clearly by watching their interactions with both nuns and monks. In all situations, the nuns would maintain and enforce the Theravada hierarchical system of authority. Yet when they bow to other nuns out of respect and hierarchy, one senses an underlying equality. The tone of their dealing with monks is entirely different. When they spot a monk on the street, they stop and wait, bowing as he passes by.

On one occasion, a nun and I were preparing to board a very crowded bus to Kirtipur, with one monk and one nun already on board. Suddenly we discovered an empty tempo nearby and jumped in. The nun exclaimed, "Bhante!" and ran to get the monk off the bus. The nun on board the bus followed, but the concern was for the monk. On another crowded bus, returning from Kirtipur, a woman with a baby boarded. After some delay, a younger woman offered her seat. Two minutes later, when a Theravada monk boarded, my companion jumped up and bowed, telling the monk to take her seat. The sense of respect in these interactions does not seem to be mutual; the stoic monks seem to expect that their authority be reinforced. Initially it seemed that this nun uncharacteristically altered her demeanor to a more subservient one around monks. However, eventually I understood that it was actually a mark of her great discipline and commitment to the Theravada tradition. More than revealing the subservience of a particular nun, such behavior clearly reveals the subordinate position of women in this tradition overall.

I spoke at length with one nun, who was perhaps the most aware and well-educated nun I met. She stated up front that "In Theravada Buddhism women are down." Just 20

years of age, she has been a Theravada nun for 11 years. Two years ago she became a fully ordained bhikkhuni in Taiwan. Education is very important to her, and she has already spent time studying in Burma, Taiwan, and the United States. For serious Buddhist scholarship, the nuns of Nepal must travel to these countries and must rely on sponsors in these countries to send air tickets for their travel. Still, there are problems with expenses and visas.

We talked about the eight rules instituted to keep nuns dependent on monks, particularly the rule requiring a nun of even 100 years standing to bow to a monk of one day. This nun saw this as an obvious example of the inequalities between women and men in Buddhism. Personally, she is not that particular about bowing to monks; sometimes she does and sometimes she doesn't. Although she is herself a fully ordained bhikkhuni, she is not acknowledged as such by the monks. She explained that, "Bhikkhus don't want to recognize bhikkhunis because they would have to treat them equally." I questioned her on ordination procedures. Her only answer was that the position of women in Theravada Buddhism is unequal. Bhikkhus must be present for a bhikkhuni ordination and have the authority to deny bhikkhuni status to a nun, though bhikkhunis play no role at all in the ordination of bhikkhus. She feels that the solution to the inequality is not to change the Vinaya, but to follow it less strictly and adapt it to contemporary need. Even more important is the education of nuns and monks, particularly the younger ones. "The older nuns are not educated and don't even recognize their [subordinate] position, and the older monks are very set in their ways and won't change," she says. She gives credit to Bhikkhuni Dhammawati, the founder of Dharmakirti Vihar, for the higher levels of awareness and education among the nuns there. When I asked my friend why she chose to remain with the Theravada tradition when she so clearly feels that it is oppressive to women, she replied that it was the only choice she had when she became a nun. Then, with a sideways glance and a laugh, she expressed a hope to become a Mahayana nun after a few more years of study.

In addition to speaking with nuns and monks, I spent considerable time attending Buddha pujas and vihar lunches, observing the behaviors of nuns, monks, laypeople and the interactions among them all. Three occasions in particular illustrate the trends I observed.

The first was a Buddha puja and lunch held in Bhaktapur, on the outskirts of Kathmandu. When we arrived and took our seats, the Buddha puja was already underway. The first observation I made concerned the seating arrangements. The

monks were all sitting in chairs, facing the "audience" as they led the ceremony. The nuns sat a few feet away on the ground, facing the, and the laypeople, mostly women and children, sat behind, also facing the monks. When the ceremony finished, the dana [offerings] began, with the laypeople offering donations of rice and money to the nuns and monks. For this, the monks rearranged their individual cushioned chairs in a semicircle, while the nuns sat squeezed together on a single stone bench at the rear of the clearing. Donations were offered first to the monks and then to the nuns. After this, the monks were ushered into a carpeted Buddha hall and serve the meal that had been prepared by the female laity. The nuns were shown into a less comfortable room to be served, while the laity ate in the courtyard where the ceremony had been held.

The second occasion followed a visit to Pragyanda Maha Thera at Shakyasinha Vihar in Patan, when one of the nuns invited Sujata and me to stay for lunch. We proceeded to the rooftop of an adjoining building, home to six nuns, where the meal was being prepared. I was immediately welcomed by the nuns and laywomen, who began giving me tea and food. I spoke with a woman who knew a bit of English and watched as the nuns and women hustled about preparing the lunch. I had expected a casual rooftop lunch - in fact, I thought that my "tea" was lunch - but presently we moved downstairs to the Buddha hall.

Already seated were about 15 monks, two of whom sat in chairs at a table in front facing the room, while the remainder sat on mats. On the other side of the room, on parallel mats, I sat with the seven nuns. The laypeople joined us when the monks performed prayers both before and after the meal. The food was served by the laywomen, beginning with the monks seated at the table, then to the other monks, then to the nuns, and then to me. At the conclusion of the meal, the laypeople followed the same order in giving data. Before the closing prayers, the nuns jumped up and, alongside the laypeople, cleared away the dishes.

The third occasion was a gathering at Shree Kirti Vihar in Kirtipur for the purpose of uniting and establishing dialogue between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist. The event took place on a Saturday and the lay audience consisted of equal numbers of male and female devotees. Although I could not understand the speeches, as they were in Nepali, I took note of the what happened around me. The occasion, which I initially perceived as a positive gathering to foster good relations and mutual respect between the Theravada and Tibetan traditions, soon became a painful testament to the position of women within monastic Buddhism. There were approximately 15 Theravadin monks

present, 30 Tibetan monks, two Theravadin nuns, and no Tibetan nuns. Roughly 15 monks of each tradition sat on the stage facing the audience, with the remaining monks seated at the front in the center. The two nuns sat far to the left in the corner. The Theravada monks chanted first, followed by a similar presentation by the Tibetan monks with musical accompaniment. All of the speakers were men. The nuns of Dharmakirti Vihar were not even invited to this event.

Communication among Buddhist groups means communication among the important members of the groups. The absence of nuns is a clear and, to me, painful statement about the significance of nuns within the tradition and the respect they are shown. The monks have full visibility and authority, as well as the representative voices. The nuns are denied opportunities to speak and to assert their equal intelligence and capabilities. At this event, they were not even given fair representation in terms of numbers.

These three gatherings revealed that the status of nuns within the Nepali Theravada tradition is unquestionably lower than that of the monks. Because these nuns are not fully ordained bhikkhunis and because the few bhikkhunis that exist there are not recognized as such, it is not a violation of Vinaya for them to wait on and serve the monks. The culture accepts that women cook, clean, and wait on men, even when the women are nuns and the men are monks. It is significant also that the laypeople attending Buddha pujas are largely women. The result is that the monks not only lead prayers and ceremonies, but are fed, served, and supported almost entirely by women. The nuns receive secondary treatment in all cases. They are seated at the feet of the monks, facing the, or in uncomfortable, crowded conditions. They are served food only after all monks have been served, and receive donations from the laity after the monks. In public situations, the position of nuns relative to the monks is clearly apparent.

An important phase of my research was experiential - for one week I lived as a Theravada nun in the IBMC. Sayadaw U Asabhacara ordained me temporarily. Sujata shaved my head with the help of another nun. For one week I lived in retreat at the center, alongside three nuns and two bhikkhus. During this week, I was able to live as an anagarika [renunciant] to participate in the daily activities of the center, to interview the chief abbot, and to observe the daily interactions between the monks, nuns, and laity.

The Center functions entirely through donation from the laity. It offers a 10-day vipassana meditation course monthly, with meditation sessions and Dhamma talks given by monks on Saturday mornings. These are attended by both children and adults. In addition to opening its gates to laypeople for daily meditation, the center attracts the laity through its men's association which is responsible for groundskeeping and its women's association which prepare meals during retreats.

U. Asabhacara has been a monk for 24 years, 18 of them as a bhikkhu, and has been Chief Abbot of the Center for three years now. By far the most interesting and revealing moments of my week's stay occurred during my interviews with him. My questions focused on ordination procedures, Vinaya rules, and the position of nuns within Theravada Buddhism.

Regarding the bhikkhuni issue, he said that according to the Vinaya stipulations, there is now no bhikkhuni ordination in Theravada Buddhism, but there is bhikkhuni ordination in Mahayana Buddhism and it is available in Taiwan and Korea. He did not clearly answer my question about whether the bhikkhuni ordination in the Mahayana tradition was acknowledged as valid within Theravada Buddhism, but seemed to affirm that it is valid. He added that it is "very difficult for women to obey the Theravada Vinaya," implying that there are few Theravada bhikkhunis because many women are incapable of keeping the precepts.

The line of questioning concerning Vinaya rules and hierarchy of power was revealing because each successive step brought us closer to what is actually happening in the tradition. This led naturally to issues concerning nuns within Theravada Buddhism. As the questioning progressed, the abbot seemed to become more at ease, offering exposition without being asked. His lack of defensiveness, his good humor and good will in helping me, led me to believe that these are his true opinions and that they are representative of Theravada Buddhism. He explained that different levels of authority correlated to different levels of experience and had nothing to do with chronological age. He reported that even a bhikkhuni arhat of 40 years standing must obey a novice monk and that novices hold 75 precepts, whereas nuns like Sujata hold only eight [sic]. He asserted that there is scriptural authority for this claim. [Both assertions are at variance with other Vinaya traditions. Ed.] He expressed the opinion that the Buddha established this rule because women with power become proud and because their minds change easily. Nevertheless, he said, "Women are pressed down by men in all religions. They don't have a lot of freedom. Women have more freedom in Buddhism. Women have

freedom to become enlightened." He explained Vinaya as a good way to overcome defilements, saying, "Women also can cut off desire. Some women can even succeed."

At the International Buddhist Meditation Center, the monks are in charge of finances, public relations, teaching the laity, and conducting retreats. The nuns do cooking, cleaning, washing, sewing, and shopping. Since the nuns are anagarikas and not bhikkhunis, it is not a violation of Vinaya for them to cook and clean for the bhikkhus. The laity generally respect the bhikkhus more than the anagarika, prostrating on the ground three times in front of bhikkhus, while offering one standing bow to the nuns. Living as a nun in this environment, I found that unquestioned scriptural authority can be used to oppress and keep women in a non-threatening, powerless position, supporting men by cooking and cleaning for them, all in the name of Buddhism.

I observed that all monks older than 18 years are bhikkhus, while there are only four Theravada bhikkhunis in all of Nepal. All of the bhikkhus spoke English very well, whereas only a few of the nuns spoke English well enough to converse. All the monks had the opportunity to study in Sri Lanka for five to eight years, while many of the nuns had not yet had the opportunity to study for two years in Burma.

It is difficult for nuns to find enough time for their own spiritual practice. This is ironic, since time for spiritual practice was often a prime motivating factor in their decision to become nuns. To get more time for practice, a nun must either live with her family (assuming the family is financially able to support her) or live with monks in a setting such as IBMC. Both options require that she enter an environment where she is dependent on men. It is very difficult for nuns to support themselves and have time for their own practice and studies.

In spite, or perhaps because of, the difficulties nuns face, I found them incredibly strong. Every nun I talked with expressed a clear preference for living only with nuns, not monks. The space created by nuns living and working together felt very friendly and open, dynamic and growing. Each nun held very strong opinions about marriage and being controlled by a husband; each cherished the freedom of being a nun and living with women. The limitations and oppression these women face seem to inspire them to action. Their courage is apparent in their creativity and ability to surmount obstacles.

Some claim that the Buddhist path to enlightenment is equally accessible to men and women, that gender is not an issue, and that to focus on gender is to remain fixed in duality while missing the big picture of Buddhism. I feel that this is merely a rationalization which protects the status quo which on many levels - from the eight rules to the lack of female role models and authoritative leaders - oppresses women and keeps them in roles which are nonthreatening to patriarchal power.

At first glance, the position of nuns can be divided into outer and inner spheres of development, the outer sphere being restricted by social, political, and economic contexts, while the inner has complete freedom to get enlightened. Even the inner sphere of development, however, is severely restricted by outer circumstances. In the case of the nuns of Dharmakirti Vihar, so much time must necessarily be devoted on teaching and activities that bring in donations that only about a half hour per day is available for meditation. This contrasts with the situation of monks, whose daily needs are taken care of by nuns and laywomen.

A close look at both the history and the present situation of nuns and monks reveals that nuns face definite obstacles and inequalities. Their social, political and economic context of their situation cannot be ignored. Women in Buddhism, especially, cannot afford to disregard this very concrete, if relative, reality.

The present realities for Theravada nuns and Buddhist nuns in general need to be examined and addressed. Some stipulations of the Vinaya are outdated and need to be reinterpreted in light of the contemporary situation. As long as bhikkhus are required for bhikkhuni ordinations, as long as the eight rules subordinating nuns to monks are in place, as long as the laity views monks as spiritually superior to nuns, as long as nuns wait on monks and lack equal time for spiritual practice, women in Buddhism will remain oppressed, as they are in every major religion.

Buddhist nuns continue to face manifestations of the patriarchal and misogynist cultures which house and affect Buddhist practices and institutions. However, far from being victimized by these circumstances, those choose to become nuns and devote their lives to practice are truly women warriors.

Report on the Fourth International Conference

August 1 - 7, 1995 in Leh, Ladakh

The Fourth International Conference on Buddhist Women, held in Ladakh from August 1 to 7, 1995, was a significant leap forward for Sakyadhita, the International Association of Buddhist Women.. The Conference attracted larger numbers of both local and international participants than ever before. There were 108 registered delegates from abroad, plus additional numbers who attended as observers. Local Ladakhi participants, including laywomen, men, nuns, and monks, also numbered several hundred. The range of topics presented and the meaningful discussions that ensued demonstrated the steady and mature development of the Buddhist women's movement over the eight years since its inception. Buddhist women began actively organizing on an international scale for the first time in history at the first Sakyadhita conference in Bodhgaya, India, in 1987. This conference began a global networking of people concerned about the past and future role of women in Buddhism, ending centuries of isolation. Sakyadhita, the International Association of Buddhist Women, was established at the conclusion of this first conference with the aim of improving conditions for women's Buddhist practice, education, and ordination, and training women as teachers of Buddhism.

Three successive Sakyadhita Conferences have been held in Bangkok, Colombo, and Ladakh, attracting women and men, lay and ordained, from 27 countries. Considering that there are perhaps 300,000,000 Buddhist women in the world, representing a variety of cultures, traditions, and institutions, this movement has enormous potential. As one of the few truly pan-cultural developments on the international Buddhist scene, the movement is helping ensure a significant role for women in Buddhism's increasing global significance.

The Fourth Sakyadhita Conference in Leh, Ladakh, centered on the theme "Women and the Power of Compassion: Survival in the 21st Century." The traditional and modern, religious and secular blended together in harmonious, interpenetrating waves. The Conference opened in traditional style with a grand procession of the delegates led by Ladakhi musicians in full costume - all videotaped with the latest technology. The conference was inaugurated with a prayer by H.E. Chetsang Rinpoche, followed by words of welcome by Rani Sarla Tsewang, chair of the local organizing committee, and Bhk. Sanghasena, director of Mahabodhi Meditation Center. His Holiness the Dalai Lama was unable to attend in person, but sent an inspiring message which was read by

Bkni. Karma Lekshe Tsomo. Words of encouragement were also given by H.E. Chetsang Rinpoche and Ven. Tokdan Rinpoche. The opening address was delivered by the chief guest of honor, Ms. Diskit Angmo, Her Excellence the Queen of Ladakh. Votes of thanks were presented by Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, retiring president of Sakyadhita, and Ms. Ranjani de Silva, the newly elected president. Hundreds of local Ladakhis then joined the delegates for refreshments and a delicious lunch.

Certain difficulties are inherent in organizing a conference in such a remote region of the world. Altitude sickness, plane reservations, visas, communications, and unusual rains were challenging. Accustomed only to the lightest of showers, the mud roofs of the Ladakhi houses simply dissolved as rain poured steadily right into the rooms. Yet stalwart of heart, delegates survived admirably, making good friends and learning much from their experiences. A staff of 20 nuns travelled from Jamyang Choling Institute in Dharamsala to help with arrangements. Representatives from many other monasteries in Ladakh, Nepal, and other parts of India attended, too, linking up with Buddhist sisters in other lands.

Meditation instructions in English and Tibetan were given the first day and group meditation began every morning at 7 AM. At noon, intercollegiate philosophical debates and Tai Chi classes were held. Evenings were filled with chanting of the Buddhist traditions, cultural presentations, and video presentations.

People from many different backgrounds met together on an equal footing, presenting talks on a vast array of topics and joining in lively discussions. Women, men, lay, ordained, scholars, practitioners, sophisticated people from the towns, simple people from remote mountain regions, from nearby and abroad - all expressed a strong interest in increasing their knowledge of Buddhism and improving the quality of their practice.

Talks on women in Buddhist cultures included "Tibetan Women Practitioners: Past and Present" by Dr. Janice Willis; "A Nun of Myanmar" by Sr. M. Carudassini; "The Loss of the Bhikkhuni Order in the Theravada Tradition" by Kusuma Devendra; "Nuns of Ladakh" by Dr. Jamyang Palmo; "Women in Tibetan Buddhism: Potential and Contradiction" by Dr. Elizabeth Napper; "Life in a Zanskar Nunnery" by Kim Gutschow; and "Comparing Western and Asian Buddhist Women's Experiences" by Sara

Shneiderman. Representatives from farflung Buddhist women's projects shared news of their plans and progress.

Presentations on women and social issues included "Buddhism and Prostitution" by Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh; "Buddhist Women, Ecology, and Justice" by Helena Norberg Hodge; "Economic Position of Buddhist Nuns in Burma" by Dr. Hiroko Kawanami; "Tradition and Adaptation: The Western Acculturation of Buddhism" by Bkni. Karma Lekshe Tsomo; "Promoting the Welfare of Women in Developing Countries" by Anagarika Sujata Sakya; "A Tibetan Nun's Experience" by Sra. Lobsang Dechen; "Tibetan Buddhist Women in Tibet and in Exile" by Sra. Thubten Norzin; "Women's Rights and Women's Role in Religion in Modern Society" by Bhk. Sanghasena; "Challenges for Tibetan Culture" by Lobzang Molam; and "Tibetan Buddhist Women in Tibet and in Exile" by Sra. Thubten Norzin.

Other talks focused on issues of Buddhist philosophy and culture, such as "Harmonies in the Dharma" by Dharmacarini Punyamegha; "The Impact of Buddhism on Secularism" by Tashi Rangias; "Compassion" by May Chan; "The Influence of Buddha's Teachings on Ladakhi Women" by Jamyang Gyaltsen; "Preserving Buddhist Identity in a Changing World" by Dr. Lobzang Tsewang; and "Preserving Ladakhi Culture Through Women's Organization" by Dr. Tsering Norbu.

In workshops on Women and Empowerment, Nel Willekens spoke on "Empowerment Strategies" and Dr. Ram N. Singh presented "Women's Empowerment for Social Transformation." In workshops on Buddhism and Women's Health, Dr. Geetha Mendis, a psychiatrist from Australia, discussed "Mental Health: Meeting of Buddhism and Psychotherapy" and Dr. Lhadol Kalon, a gynecologist from Ladakh, presented "Women, Health, and Buddhism." Both stressed the value of the Buddhist teachings in their personal contacts with patients. This workshop was followed by discussion groups on First Aid; Buddhism, Women, and AIDS; Buddhism and Birth Control; Buddhism and Mental Health; Buddhism and Domestic Violence; and Living and Dying in Buddhist Cultures.

The meditations, chanting, talks, discussions, philosophical debate, cultural performances, and pristine Himalayan environment provided a rich feast of experience that was informative, inspiring, and empowering. In informal chats over meals and tea,

participants shared their knowledge and their experiences. At a Tibetan offering ceremony, over 200 women joined their voices in prayers for the enlightenment of all living beings. The distribution of offerings to poor Ladakhi nuns made this occasion especially joyful.

After the conference, four buses took delegates on pilgrimage to many famous monuments of Ladakh. These included Shey Palace and Thiksay, Dakthok, Stakna, Chenday, Hemis, Matho, Piang, Likir, Alchi, and Rizong Monasteries. These cultural treasures are evidence of the unique cultural heritage the Ladakhi people are struggling to preserve.

The response of participants to the conference in Ladakh was very heartening. Members, including many new ones, showed a strong commitment to helping further Sakyadhita's work. Dr. Jan Willis and Nancy Barnes will help with publications, Edith Burch with accounting, Nancy Rudolph with development, Gabriele Kustermann with membership, and Sister Agganyani with planning for the next conference. New Sakyadhita officers included Ranjani de Silva, President; Koko Kawanami, Vice-President; Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Secretary; Edith Burch, Treasurer; and Murup Dolma, Ouyporn Khuankaew, and Rotraut Wurst as officers at large.

The warm-hearted cooperation of these talented women will enable Sakyadhita to develop at a new level of efficiency. The Buddhist women's movement is growing stronger and more mature with each international conference.

Drawings by Sra. Isia Osuchowska

A presentation by the Women's Bookshop in Milan

The Women's Bookshop in Milan, Italy, presents:

EAST: The 4th International Conference on Buddhist Women, Leh, Ladakh, August '95, in Isia Osuchowska's Drawings and Notes.

This commemorative booklet is available for US\$10, inclusive of mailing costs, payable by check. Please send your order to: Libreria Delle Donne, Via Dogana 2, Milano 20144 Italy.

Video of the Fourth International Conference

by Marlies Bosch

A video of this historical conference is now available and may be obtained by contacting Marlies Bosch, Brilweg 44, 9805 TE Briltil, The Netherlands.

Membership

A reminder

Your membership is essential to the growth and development of Sakyadhita. Please be sure to send in your 1996 membership today!