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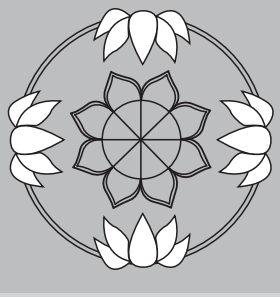

Sakyadhita

International Association of Buddhist Women

10th Sakyadhita Conference participants from 25 countries gather in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, in July 2008

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10th Sakyadhita International Conference On Buddhist Women
Ulaan Baatar, Mongolia

DHARMA RAP

Rotraut (Jampa) Wurst

In July 2008, over 150 international participants from 25 different countries and about 300 Mongolians gathered for the 10th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Together, they shared talks, workshops, cultural performances, trips to nunneries and monasteries, and so on. It was a pleasure to meet old friends from previous conferences, see many new faces, and become acquainted with so many interesting and engaged people.

The participants were picked up at the airport by Mongolian volunteers and presented with blue *khatag*s (traditional scarves for auspiciousness). Hotel Mongolia provided both rooms and Mongolian *ger* (yurts). Staying in a *ger* was a really wonderful experience, especially after the long journey to Mongolia. Luckily for Westerners, they had electricity and bathrooms with toilets and showers.

The opening ceremony was held at the Central Palace of Culture at the Sukh Baatar Square in Ulaanbaatar. Representatives from different Buddhist traditions – from Burma, India, Japan, Mongolia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Tibet, Vietnam, and many countries – opened the ceremony with chanting. Bhiksuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo, president of Sakyadhita International, greeted the participants and thanked the Mongolians for their support in organizing the conference. The Mongolians presented a fantastic musical program, with traditional singing, dancing, and different Mongolian instruments. In fact, the conference was full of music – a language that is understood all around the world.

The conference was so amazing and interesting, it is not possible to recount in detail. Here I will just refer to some of the talks and workshops. Prof. Paula Arai´s talk on "Domestic Zen" explained how day-to-day rituals help women in Japan, especially the elderly, to understand impermanence and enjoy the moment. Rituals at the altar are an anchor, a safe harbor, which help them cope with feelings of loneliness, anger, or helplessness. This talk helped me recognize links between the ritual practices of Buddhists and Christians believers who find rituals empowering.

In "From Our History to Our Future," Sandy Boucher talked about the experiences of Buddhist laywomen in the United States over the last 30 years. Many changes have occurred: nowadays, many temples are run by women, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship is directed by an African American woman,

Rapping Dharma in Mongolia

and lesbian women are questioning Buddhism from a lesbian perspective. Remarkably, the word "lesbian" was mentioned for the first time at a conference on Buddhist women. After 22 years of Sakyadhita, it is probably time to organize a panel about lesbian Buddhist women living, teaching, and practicing Buddhism around the world.

I presented a paper on "Engaging the Younger Generation." As an introduction, I performed a rap called "Engagement," which really got the participants engaged, listening intently and clapping their hands. The text of the rap is included at the end of this article and will soon be available at www.drwurst.de and on youtube.de.

Three workshops were especially interesting to me. Roseanne Freese from Washington DC led a workshop on the topic, "I Became a Nun and Now I Must Manage a Temple? Using the Eightfold Path to Develop Your Community." About 15 people shared ideas about how to improve the organization of their temples, institutes, and centers. Roseanne guided the participants through a meditation and presented many practical, useful ideas. By the time we finished, I think every one of us had gotten many new ideas. A really wonderful workshop!

Sandy Boucher presented a workshop about Kuan Yin. She also led us in a guided meditation, which was very strengthening and went right to the heart. Then she invited us to dance with her in honor of Kuan Yin, accompanied by the chanting of *Kuanyin bosal* (Kuan Yin Bodhisattva). This circle dance with different *mudra*s was both a dance and a walking meditation. Once everyone had learned the movements, they did not want to stop dancing. It was a great pleasure to do the dance again at the concluding cultural program of the conference.

The third workshop was the one that Bhiksuni Lekshe asked me to develop on "Buddhism and Pop Culture." Altogether 13 women, both lay and ordained, from South Africa, Thailand, Myanmar, Nepal, the U.S., Great Britain, Malaysia, and Germany participated. First, we discussed what Buddhism and pop culture might mean. I presented examples of music festivals in the U.S., such as one called "Now and Zen," and items such as t-shirts that use Buddhist ideas and images in advertising. A mother and grandmother asked me how hip hop and rap can help get young people engaged and help them become more patient, less aggressive, and maybe attracted to Buddhism. As we shared our ideas, someone asked whether it would be possible to do a rap together. The Theravada nuns had a wonderful idea: they chanted a text in Newari about taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha; overcoming suffering; and embodying wisdom. After they chanted, they translated the text into English and the other women condensed it into two sentences. In this way, we founded a tradition of chanting Buddhist texts in rap. Happy to say, when participants from other workshops heard us rapping and chanting, they wanted us to perform the rap officially.

At the closing ceremony, after a wonderful cultural program with Mongolian children, singers, dancers, and fashion models, we got a chance to do our rap. People seemed to understand that it was important to found the rap on the traditional chanting, because we did not want to offend anyone. We wanted to be grounded in the tradition and make a modern rap out of it, one that especially young people find very interesting, because they can listen to the words and move or dance to the music or the rhythm. When we bring these different elements together, sometimes for the first time, new ideas can arise and people can become engaged in Buddhism in a new way.

The 10th Sakyadhita Conference in Mongolia was all about tradition, changes, and challenges. We've taken many new steps forward, yet are still grounded in tradition. This way, everyone can live and practice in their wonderful diversity, yet still on the same foundation. The connections between mind and body – engaging talks and also dancing, tai chi, and rap – made a very good combination. We nourished our minds with information and understanding, and also got a chance to move our bodies. The interconnections were empowering. Already, "moving workshops" are planned for the next Sakyadhita conference in Vietnam. Look forward to seeing you there!

Here are the lyrics to the rap "Engagement," by DJ Sausage, and the rap "Refuge," composed by participants at the "Buddhism and Pop Culture" workshop in Mongolia.

Engagement

I´ll tell you something about education.
It´s something that won´t work without motivation.
So, tell me, what´s your consideration:
What do you think about the young generation?

Chorus
Engagement is what you need.
Engagement and you´ll succeed.
Engagement is what you need.
Engagement, that´s all we need.

Compassion should be your attitude,
Empathy and wisdom, yo, that´s good.
R-e-s-p-e-c-t: Respect for you,
Respect for me.
Eye to eye must be the relation.
Then you get an engaged generation.

Chorus

Engagement is important for young and old:
If there is none, life becomes cold.
Let's become partners, whether you´re young or old.
Become engaged or life becomes cold.

Chorus

Yo!

Refuge

Taking refuge in the triple gem,
May we attain *nirvana* soon.

By the merits of giving,
May our greed disappear.
If we give, we will get, in buckets.
Greed will never win.

By practicing morality,
May our hatred disappear.

By practicing meditation,
May our delusion disappear.

World is full of suffering.
Release from suffering.
Embody wisdom!

Dukkha, sukkha... dukkha, sukkha... dukkha, sukkha…
peace, Sakyadhita!

Rotraut (Jampa) Wurst *studied Protestant Theology and Comparative Studies in Religion and received a Ph.D. from the Freie Universität in Berlin. Her dissertation research on Tibetan Buddhist Nuns and the Sakyadhita Network was published as Identität im Exil. In 2001, she founded the Institute for Further Development, Meditation, and Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in Altenholz, Germany. In 2006, she founded Hilfe für Alt und Jung, where she teaches, motivates, and supports young people and disabled adults.*

Right Outreach Begins with Right Inreach:
Reflections on a Workshop in Mongolia
Roseanne Freese

On a sunny marble porch surrounded by the green rolling hills of Mongolia, we gathered to participate in my workshop, "I Became a Nun and Now I Must Manage a Temple? Using the Eightfold Path to Develop Your Community." Our group of 23 Buddhist nuns and laywomen, many of whom are leaders of social welfare organizations, came together from 11 countries. Using guided meditations interspersed with discussion, we explored how to abandon anxiety, divisiveness, egoism, and concerns about profits and loss. We also used guided meditations to discover how to develop confidence, energy, patience, and vision.

Next, we broke the gathering into small discussion groups, (the Oms, Manis, Padmas, Hums, and the Dharmas), each group consisting of "project leaders," "secretaries," and "reporters." Alternating between individual and group efforts, we spent two hours naming and sharing our "Dharma dreams," developing goals, identifying projects, and reporting our action plans for building a more compassionate society. As I listened, I could anticipate many of the practical challenges these women faced. However, the variety of their experience was far broader than anything I had imagined.

While the participants came from countries as disparate as Germany and Mongolia, we found that women from industrialized western countries encountered the same dilemmas as women from rural Asian societies. Focusing on our Dharma dreams, some were astonished to realize that they had never told their dreams to anyone. Others found that, although they were clear about

Amaa, a 103-year-old Mongolian woman Dharma practitioner, at the opening ceremony

their dreams, they were not used to asking for assistance. They did everything on their own and were uncomfortable delegating a project to someone else. For some, the role reversal from caretaker to decision maker was unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Others realized that they expected little support from any direction, including the Bhikkhu Sangha. Regardless of their backgrounds, most of the women were also surprised to discover that their "inner Mara" or critic was as strong, if not stronger, than their "outer Mara" of community inertia, absence of resources, or lack of support.

One nun from Los Angeles realized with a laugh that she had the relatively "happy problem" of too many projects and too many temple board members. Many shared a common difficulty in distinguishing goals from projects. Quite a few were very good at naming their goals, but found themselves at a loss when asked to name their projects, imagine their roles, or identify supporters and potential benefactors. This quandary was quickly overcome when the Padmes began to offer their ideas to the Oms, and the Hums offered to swap their "project leaders" for the Manis' "secretaries." At this point, the participants realized that Dharma dreams are about actions, not objects, and their Dharma relationships are about trust, not form. Dharma flows. It can't be owned; it can only be given away.

Afterwards, I queried the participants on their reactions to the workshop and interviewed a few of them in detail. Several appreciated how the workshop changed their mindset. Bhikkhuni Sujata from Nepal put it this way, "The discussion and the setting up of our own plans helped make me more active. It created courage." Diana Farrell, a highly engaged Buddhist laywoman from Washington State, said the workshop offered a "very systematic approach to discovering your dream and learning how to implement it, offering a practical way to practice in everyday life." Heather May, a university official from Ohio, appreciated that the workshop offered "concrete examples of how to turn the teachings into action."

Bhikkhuni Pannavati of North Carolina said that, from a Dharma perspective, we need to implement our intentions in words and actions. She said, "The workshop caused us to move from a broad mind to a focused one, to move from dreams to plans. While we are visionaries, it helps to break our plans down into smaller bites." On a practical level, Bhikkhuni Pannavati saw the benefits as "teaching us how to order our priorities." She said, "I had a paradigm shift. Previously I had a fixed view and now I can see that anything is possible – how to optimize people's capabilities

and how to evaluate their potential contributions through recognizing their best qualities." She added, "This workshop brought me back to the true ideals of the Dharma, the motivation and mindset behind right effort. That is where the strength and the clarity come from. For me, the slogan 'Rise to your Buddhist ideal' is about bringing right effort and right concentration to any situation. The workshop grounds projects in the Buddhadharma. Otherwise, we might slip into 'ownership' and 'mine.'"

Dr. Rotraut (Jampa) Wurst, a specialist in motivation training and the manager of a home for senior citizens in Germany, shared her experience, "For me, the workshop opened a whole new way to see the Dharma, not just as an inner effort, but also as an outer effort, one that really is about society. The guided meditations helped me consider my dreams from a place of strength and to take that vitality out into the world." Bhikkhuni Dhammavijaya of Nepal agreed, "It was total Dhamma!"

For me, the workshop offered the chance to see the strength and capacity of Buddhist women in all their variety and vision. As a woman, my own disposition has too often led me to see life in terms of facilitating someone else's dreams or going it alone. I, too, gained courage from this workshop – and two dozen new friends with whom to share the Buddha's path.

Roseanne Freese *is a historian and economist with the United States Government in Washington, D.C. She has done extensive research in Buddhist history and biography, and has a long-standing interest in tracing the history of the bhiksuni lineage in China.*

Mongolian dakinis chanting at the closing ceremony

Calling Council in Mongolia
Beatrice Gassner

The workshop on Calling Council, scheduled for the 10th Sakyadhita Conference, nearly did not happen. In the main hall, Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo was holding a meditation workshop and everyone naturally wanted to be there. Even so, eventually five of us came together on the terrace, sitting in Jetsunma's energetic wake, to hold the workshop. The workshop provided a space to take stock and reflect about why we came to the conference and our most meaningful experience during the conference.

One of the main themes running through our group was "belonging" and our place in this community. Sitting in Council provides a safe space and our sharing was confidential. Still, it was important to hear each others' stories and to find our commonality. It was only "a taster," largely improvised, but one person said it was the most important event at the conference so far, while another realized the importance of slowing down, especially when talking.

Calling Council, a tradition used by Native American people, can be found in various forms all over the world, using similar principles and guidelines. Council is a skillful means for working non-hierarchically and for building consensus. It has been developed and adapted for use in various settings and centers in the modern world. Joan Halifax Roshi uses Council at Upaya Zen Center in New Mexico in a Buddhist setting, for which it is ideal.

Calling Council can be used in many ways. It is a very skillful method for resolving conflicts, of exploring unresolved issues in a non-threatening and safe way, for looking at processes and what might be needed at any given moment, and for personal and communal reflection on any issues that are important at the time. Calling Council begins by sitting in a circle, which is sacred in all traditions throughout the world. A symbol of wholeness, of emptiness and form, a circle reminds us that all are equal. None is more important than another. The whole is the truth of which we all partake. We build a small altar, either in the middle or as part of the circle. This reminds us to invoke the help of our teachers, the Buddhas and *bodhisattva*s, in order to be guided by enlightened energy, rather than by our own ego-centered minds.

Sitting in Council in Mongolia, we lit a candle, offered incense, and declared our intent in Calling Council, to focus our energy and remind ourselves why we had come together. We also reminded ourselves to listen from the heart, to speak from the heart, to be concise and to the point, and to only speak when we held "the talking piece," which was passed around the circle. Holding the talking piece, we spoke spontaneously from the heart, with the full and uninterrupted attention of all. This meant that we had to stay in the moment, not planning ahead to what we were going to say next, not letting our thoughts run away with us, but staying focused and aware. Staying silent is also a way of speaking from the heart, as long as we really allow it to develop and do not use it as avoidance.

To listen from the heart, we need patience – with ourselves and others. There is a tendency to want to respond as soon as somebody speaks. Instead, we notice our tendencies but do not act on them. We need to notice our thoughts and feelings arising, without getting caught up in our own chattering minds. Only when we sit still enough can we hear, not only the spoken words, but that which emerges in the spaces between them, as well as the quiet voice within our own hearts.

In his book *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, Sogyal Rinpoche talks about the "three wisdom tools" – the wisdom of listening and hearing; the wisdom of contemplation and reflection; and the wisdom of meditation – all leading to the "wisdom that realizes egolessness." He says that "...really to listen in the way that is meant by the masters is to let go utterly of ourselves, to let go of all the information, all the concepts, all the ideas, and all the prejudices that our heads are stuffed with." He quotes Suzuki Roshi: "If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind, there are few." Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche said, "The more and more you listen, the more and more you hear, the deeper and deeper your understanding becomes."

In Calling Council, each round of the circle is a deepening of our understanding of ourselves and the object of our inquiry and reflection, like peeling away the layers of an onion. The first round is an introduction, for testing the waters and building trust. I find that truly hearing each other is opens the heart and

compassion often arises quite naturally. This, in turn, allows for a deeper sharing of truth in the next rounds. By the second or third round, things quiet down. We clear away some of the froth and are willing to dig deeper. At the same time, we develop a sense of not being separate, but all part of one body. By the third or fourth round, we are less concerned with a particular outcome and able to hear what is needed at the moment, from which a resolution can organically emerge.

In this way, Council is concerned with process. What is required is that we bring ourselves in as fully and wholeheartedly as possible, while at the same time offering up our personal agendas. We need to come with a beginner's mind, not knowing what the best outcome is, but open and willing to follow where the energy leads. The perspective of "not-knowing," of practical wisdom, is one that is open to all the possibilities of the situation, rather than a position of "knowing," which risks closing or at least limiting the possibilities. Having reached a conclusion, which comes with a sense of completion, we dedicate the merit of Sitting in Council to all beings in general or to something in particular, if appropriate.

I have come to regard Council as a talking/listening meditation. As in meditation, we are asked to observe our thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations, without getting caught up in them. We need to stay in the moment, developing awareness and keeping our focus. We need to let go of our preconceptions, ideas, and wanting things to go in a particular way.

Council is a space where we can gain insight into and firsthand experience of impermanence. Everything changes as we go round the circle. By the time the talking object returns to us, it is quite obvious that we are different people, in a different space. There is no point in holding onto our viewpoints and opinions. It is also quite obvious that we are all motivated by the same wish to be happy and to overcome suffering, even if we voice different views. Seeing this makes it harder to keep up an image of the other as an enemy, separate from ourselves. So often, we express the same things in different ways. Even if we do not agree, it is easier to say "May you be happy, may you be well" and "Let's just see where this is going" – accepting that we all have an equal right to fulfill our aspiration towards happiness, as H.H. Dalai Lama so often points out.

Loving kindness, compassion, and patience are all muscles that get exercised by sitting in Council. This, in turn, leads to an inner equilibrium – the ability to sit through the turmoils and dramas played out in front of us, as well as those experienced within. When our turn comes, we have the opportunity to respond from a different place, rather than from our habitual responses.

We begin with the circle and we end with the circle – the circle is empty. In one form of Sitting in Council, the talking piece is returned to the emptiness of the circle after each time a person speaks. In this way, we remind ourselves more strongly that all emerges from and returns to emptiness.

May all beings be happy! May all beings be well! May all beings be safe!

Beatrice Jutta Gassner *(Jinpa Khandro) took refuge in the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey (U.K.) in 2000, after a career as a psychotherapist. She has received teachings from a number of eminent Buddhist teachers and is also deeply connected to the Native American and shamanic traditions. She currently works as a caregiver for the frail, elderly, and terminally ill.*

Young Mongolian dancers share their culture

MOTHERING AS PRACTICE
Jacqueline Kramer

In the Theravadin tradition from which my practice blossoms forth, it is taught that mothering and homemaking are to be avoided by the serious seeker of enlightenment. Although I was told that mothering is a distraction on the path to enlightenment, all my experiences have said something quite different. There is a Lojong teaching that says, "Of the two judges, trust the principle one." The principle one is our own gut knowing. I knew, from watching friends and from my own experiences, that, rather than being a hindrance, mothering and homemaking are rich, loamy soil in which to plant the Buddha's teachings and practices.

Pregnancy, birthing, and mothering are deeply practical, yet deeply mystical occupations. They drag us down to the depths of despair and raise us up to the heights of joy; they carry us to the gates of death, open our hearts, and make us question what we thought we knew. Pregnancy, birthing, and mothering make us intimate with the wonder of life and require that we become present and mindful in the moment. It is through these gates of presence, attachment, unconditional love, and selfless service that mothers find their insights.

The life occupation of mothering and homemaking has been both glorified and demeaned, but seldom has it been seen as the valid spiritual path it can be. On the one hand, the Buddha said that there are two gifts that are so great we can never repay them. One is the gift of birth, given to us by our mother, and the second is the gift of the Dhamma. On the other hand, being a mother is seen and felt as a deficit by many Buddhist teachers and students when it comes to deep practice. Yet, the practices the mothers engage in, day in and day out – selfless service, generosity, letting go, developing a deep love for all beings, patience, faith, and mindfulness – are the way of practice for monks and nuns of all the world's wisdom traditions. These are the practices engaged in by mothers, monks, and nuns throughout time and all over the world.

Mothers have been engaged in deep spiritual practice for centuries, though this has not always been recognized. Part of the reason the practice of mothers has not been acknowledged is that only nuns and courtesans had access to literacy. Mothers often remained illiterate, making it impossible for them to write down their experiences. Mothers and homemakers have historically been too busy and lacked the power to lend their perspectives to the pantheon of enlightened voices. Another important consideration is that women have not felt the need for recognition. Many have been content to flower and leave no footprints. This is true selflessness. The problem with the selfless service mother's offer is that, since they have not clamored for recognition, their

work has largely gone unnoticed, unrespected, and unsupported. This lack of recognition has led to a demeaning of mothering as a lesser spiritual path. Now it is time to speak out about the day-to-day spiritual value of mothering, including both its beauty and its challenges.

When women give birth, they often experience the bliss of insight into unconditional love. This insight is a gift, regardless of whether or not a woman is engaged in spiritual practice. Without the context of a spiritual practice to help us realize our interconnectedness with all things, however, this insight into unconditional love can easily turn into selfish attachment. With intentional spiritual practice, insight into unconditional love can become a gateway to opening our hearts in deep, visceral, heartfelt love towards all beings, not just our birth children.

Mindfulness is another practice well suited to mothers. Mothers have numerous opportunities to develop mindfulness while engaged in their daily activities. Whether driving, making lunches, waiting in line, holding a child, or doing the laundry, we can continually bring ourselves back to the present moment by conscious awareness of the physicality of our activity. We can also consciously practice surrender while loosening the grip of attachment as our children grow. Bit by bit, as our children develop their independence, we release them into the world. When we practice letting go of that which we love most – our children – we receive deep, heartfelt insight into non-attachment. Surrender and impermanence become, not concepts, but a knowing deep in our marrow.

This year, I went on a hunt for stories about women who became enlightened while engaged in mothering and homemaking. I found stories of women who became enlightened after losing their families or after leaving their families, and also about women who chose not to have families, but I found no stories of women who found enlightenment while working in the kitchen, nursing their children, or cleaning the floor. The question arose: Where are the stories to nourish and inspire those of us who give our bodies and our time to sustain future generations? To think that there are no mothers throughout history who have become enlightened is beyond logic or belief. This concerns almost half the world's population. Whatever reasons may explain why these stories have not been passed down, it is now time to gather stories of mothers' enlightenment experiences for our daughters and sons.

Householders can use the challenges of everyday life to develop loving kindness (*metta*), mindfulness (*sati*), and ethical conduct (*sila*). What better circumstance than the midst of attachment and activity to develop patience (*khanti*), insight into impermanence (*anicca*), and an understanding of unsatisfactoriness (*dukka*)? What better time to release the three poisons of anger, greed, and ignorance? Maybe the many "distractions" we mothers face everyday *is* our practice. Zen looks at "distractions" as gates to enlightenment. Maybe when mothers finally have the opportunity to sit down on the meditation cushion, they will be so developed in their practices of generosity, ethics, and mindfulness that they will easily be able to concentrate their minds. Maybe they will be so openhearted and present in the moment that they will fall gently into enlightenment.

Jacqueline Kramer *has been studying and practicing Theravada Buddhism for over 30 years. Her root teacher is Anagarika Dhamma Dinna who taught in the Sri Lankan tradition. She also studied with Bhikkhu Ananda Maitreya, Achan Sobin Namto, Bhikkhu Punnaji Mahathera, and Ayya Khema. Jacqueline is the author of two books:* Buddha Mom: The Path of Mindful Mothering *and* 10 Spiritual Practices for Busy Parents. *She is the director of the Hearth Foundation, which offers online lay Buddhist practice classes on subjects such as creating a home practice, the three refuges, the five precepts, the Buddha's advice to householders on relationships, and issues for families, such as illness, death, and dying. These classes are offered freely, in keeping with Buddhist tradition: www.hearthfoundation.net. Jacqueline received an Outstanding Women in Buddhism award in 2008 for her work with mothers. She lives part-time in Sonoma, California, and part-time with her daughter and granddaughter in Los Angeles, California.*

Mother and child in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh

MOTHERS, CHILDREN, AND DAILY LIFE: THE QUICK PATH TO AWAKENING

Sabine Hayoz Kalff

The Buddha's mother passed away seven days after his birth. He abandoned his wife and child, declared children impediments on the spiritual way, and his stepmother had to beg repeatedly for acceptance into his order. Though he finally relented and accepted her, it was only reluctantly and under degrading conditions.

The example that Buddha gave and his early pronouncements demonstrate no recognition for women and mothers and certainly not as disciples of his teachings. The mother appears in his teachings more as an antithesis of the propagated ideal of the male monk.

Nevertheless today, in our culture, more women than men listen to the Buddha's teachings and hope, through understanding and practicing them, to achieve liberation and enlightenment. But how should this happen, particularly for the mothers among us? How is it possible to reconcile the contradictions between freedom and motherhood, spiritual and physical achievement, concentration and distraction, worldly duties and Buddhist renunciation? How should a mother achieve a goal that Buddha himself accorded only minimal chance of success?

Again and again, as a woman and mother on Buddha's path, I ask myself: Why do I wish to follow this path? What does it mean to me? At the beginning, I thought the Buddha's path was not suitable for me. If I wanted to follow this path without denying my motherhood, I would encounter significant difficulties, resistance, and contradictions within myself. Motherhood is often associated with cyclic existence (*samsara*), which is full of suffering and attachment. It represents a world of conflicts and senselessness that is to be renounced. By having a child, I extend the cycle of birth and death unnecessarily – the very cycle that is to be overcome.

All Buddhist followers, both women and men, are taught to avoid *samsara* and to escape from it. But how can I avoid myself or escape from myself? Sometimes it appears to me as if the depth of this question lies hidden in mothers, who carry the entire weight of the dark shadow behind the Buddha.

A New Reality

Mountains of cute clothes, both freshly washed and sullied, are piled before me. Buckets of used pampers and huge packs of new ones cover the floor. Soft wash cloths and a special ointment for the red baby bottom are carefully arranged. A floating yellow plastic duckling floats in gently warm water in the light-blue baby bathtub, as I pull a new pair of play-pants over kicking baby-legs.

The door bell rings. The postman is at the door and I am still in my pajamas. While I sit comfortably on the sofa, the little one contentedly drinks milk from my breast. I take a deep breath and am stunned by this new reality.

This new reality is concrete and immediate. I feel an intense sense of presence and purpose, beyond comparison. However, this reality is also filled with nearly unsupportable contradictions. A world of feelings race by: fulfillment, dissolution, and exhaustion. The changes that occurred in my body and mind during pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding continue to happen. They are the deepest experiences I have ever had. My whole being is completely immersed in it. At the same time, I am surrounded by a flood of things to deal with and put in order. Demands are put on me to train for completely new programs, observe tight rhythms, and to submit to countless requests of varying importance. I am thrown to and fro between deep soul searching and a variety of chores, depth and banality, chaos and order, peaceful rest and hectic stress, overwhelming joy and deep anxiety, exhaustion and power, wisdom and a futile search for answers.

Possibly I could overcome all these tribulations without this screaming! My child's cries completely overwhelm me, throw me totally off my imaginations, illusions, and concepts. They put me on high alert and represent an ultimate demand on my attention. They tear me from my sleep and disrupt all activities. The intensity of the screams stand in complete contradiction to the sweet, soft little being that my baby should be.

Three Ways of a Mother's Awakening

After the first cries of birth, the screaming literally awakens me all the time. Does my awakening as a mother have something to do with the awakening of enlightenment? By itself, the question appears insolent, off the path, or at least unusual. The teachings and the teachers say nothing about it.

The first awakening of a mother is followed by a second, which is much more enjoyable and similar to a revelation. I participate with immediacy in the wonder of life. In my own body, I experience the basic truths of life. Answers to long-hedged questions appear spontaneously and playfully. Sometimes I have the impression that I have been handed the book of solutions to all the riddles of life. Such joy! Such happiness!

Young students at Khachöd Drubling Monastery in the Himalayan region of Zangskar

Thinking about Buddhism, I am able to conclude: If the Buddha's teachings are the method, then being a mother must be the ideal path. Besides, as a mother, I have no choice. On the spot, I develop the qualities of a *bodhisattva*: devotion, generosity, patience, selflessness, never-ending energy, loving attention, open mind, and wisdom. These qualities develop with breathtaking speed. It is no longer a question whether I can do it or want to do it. I have to do it.

Is there any better practical demonstration of my daily progress along the path of Dharma realization? What could be a better and more direct measure of the results of my actions? Where are there more demands on my creative intuition? Where could I be forced more often to awake again and again from my dreams? Where would I have to develop more patience? The power of the practice and the insights that arise are absolutely compelling.

The third awakening as a mother is a shock, however. Nobody realizes how ideal this situation is. Nobody mentions the great potential for enlightenment gained through motherhood. Nobody links ordinary motherhood with advanced spiritual development.

Questions

How come? Why do the experiences and wisdom of mothers receive so little attention in the Buddhist teachings? Where are the heaps of enlightened mothers and teachers? Why are mothers so unconscious of our own experience?

As a mother with a fidgety child, carrying a bag full of things, I am anything but a true revelation in the Sangha. Nobody is waiting for us. We only disturb the peace, quiet, and order. At best, we are tolerated, as long as I am able to keep the brat quiet and motionless – a torture for both my child and myself.

"The child is now your practice" was the well-meant advice of a Tibetan *lama*. But neither he nor any other Buddhist teacher takes interest in this particular practice. Until this very day, most Buddhists consider children to be fetters that obstruct the spiritual path and delay access to enlightenment. I have never heard that a child could be an advantage or that a mother's path can be especially spirited, fast, and efficient. Instead, I have heard

Kuan Yin, bodhisattva of compassion, as she appears in East Asia

much about the great suffering of motherhood, the dangers of attachment, and the obstacles family life poses to liberation from the senseless cycle of rebirth.

The Buddhadharma is not alone in this. A sincere regard for motherhood is also lacking in other spiritual traditions and also in feminism. Simone de Beauvoir, for instance, cautioned about the trap of motherhood. People in my everyday environment react similarly. They find my specially gifted child quite ordinary, even boring, and sometimes disturbing. They typically consider me hyper and crazy about my child. Even some psychotherapists speak about the psychosis of motherhood.

The writing is on the wall. If I subscribe to these opinions, depression cannot be far away. I sit in a trap without escape, a place of spiritual nothingness, confined in a vicious cycle, abandoned in a swamp of daily banalities. Paradoxically, spiritual paths that profess to lead to freedom suddenly seem to be restrictive. To me, their attitudes create or accentuate the problem.

This discovery is necessary and painful. The Buddha and other good masters have abandoned me. If I want to remain a mother, I have to turn away from them. But where can I turn? Who gives me concrete assistance? Who can help me when my child doesn't stop crying? Who helps me understand and absorb all the unexplained phenomena that take place within me?

The World of Mothers

Eventually, it is other mothers who come to my support and give me advice. My own mother suddenly appears in a new light. Mothers become my most important companions. It is no longer important where they come from or what they believe. The fact that they are mothers and have children, hopefully similar in age to my own, is much more important. A world that was always there appears to me now as if viewed from a cloud. I am unceremoniously introduced to the world of mothers. To this day, this world is inhabited almost exclusively by woman. Seldom does a man err into it.

Here, through all the ages, resides knowledge that is transmitted in a very practical way from mother to daughter, from older mother to younger. Learning happens through imitation, observation, and communication. All of a sudden, I realize the importance of endless discussions about diapers, baby food, and detailed descriptions of how a baby learns to crawl or sit. What used to sound to me like senseless babbling suddenly takes on the meaning of survival. In very concrete terms, we exchange ideas about how to hedge life and how to prosper successfully.

Insecurity is also significant, however. Will I be able to feed the baby properly, to protect it, to support it? Can I be a good mother? The baby is an extremely vulnerable being. Since I brought it to life, it is my responsibility. What may be quite boring for others takes on great importance to me, as a mother. I am the center of my child's well-being and danger is never far away. Although I am not omniscient, I am now expected to be an expert on life.

The Buddha's Example

Tradition tells us that the Buddha, when he was still Prince Siddhartha, made a decision to renounce worldly life just after his wife gave birth. Why did his decision come just at this very important time in his wife's life? Was he unable to stand the screaming or the fact that he was no longer the center of everything? These may be impudent questions, but maybe they are not so far from the truth.

In fact, many men leave their wives when they get pregnant. Some young men take on heavy work schedules or have love affairs just as their wives are about to give birth. Many fathers have difficulty accepting that their cozy twosome has come to an end and they are now just a third of a trio, no longer the center of their partner's attention. The same event that deeply moves, even overwhelms, a woman is experienced by her partner from outside the immediacy of experience, often leaving him shaken, even frightened. The fact that many escape, like the Buddha, is nothing extraordinary. But the Buddha's attitude reveals itself as

Young student at Yangchen Chöwling Monastery in the Spiti region of the Himalayas

typically male and not especially enlightened. In fact, the Buddha's renunciation began from this starting point.

The renunciation of a woman and mother is quite different. For me, this recognition is of central importance, since it prevents me from separating myself from my own nature. As a woman, I might have succeeded to more or less abstract myself from my gender, to walk along the (male-centered) spiritual path with less conflicts. As a mother, however, I can't manage that anymore. More than ever, I am intimately associated with my body, my gender, my child, and my love for life. This is my cross to bear and it is also my strength.

My Experience

This insight allows me to situate myself and my experience and to recognize all views as relative. I am fulfilled by the birth event and want to stay with it. The Buddha's point of view is different and he decides to leave. My experience is not wrong; it is simply different from his. My experience must be very strong; otherwise, it could not succeed in contravening his accepted norms. By taking my experience seriously, I am able to represent my point of view and to become the subject of my experience. If my inner wisdom is strong enough, I am able to trust my experience, even when it differs from prevailing opinions. I am capable of representing an opposing view.

What is really surprising is that, as a result, I do exactly what the Buddha himself did and what he recommends us to do. Here, the mother and the Buddha meet – and also the feminist. All three take their own experience seriously. All trust their experience and value it in others. Experience is the recognized foundation of all theories. For example, my experience allows me, the mother of small children, to recognize that the Buddha was a genius, but he was obviously clueless about small children. My small child is like an angel, yet it eats like a piglet. It has the sweetest smile, yet it has just broken my favorite vase.

Within me, the mother's view has matured. I am able to see strengths and weaknesses and evaluate them accurately. After all, I learn with my children on a daily basis. This view grows from the ability to be distant and close at the same time, and closeness is ideally preponderant. It is also the ability to differentiate between my view and others' views and to recognize them all as valid. It is an ability that grows from love and is the source of love. Surprisingly, the mother and the Buddha agree that loving awareness is the right attitude towards life, although their commonality often ends there.

The Ultimate Test

To be a mother and to practice the Buddhist teachings at the same time, again and again represents the ultimate test for me. The collision of two basic, yet opposite concepts of life, seems pre-programmed. The two concepts often seem totally incompatible.

Both a mother and her children want to enter life fully; the Buddha recommends renunciation. As a mother, I teach children how to deal with worldly affairs; the Buddha teaches us how to avoid them. I experience the value of relative reality; the Buddha points us away from it, toward absolute truth. I experience the closeness between child and mother as true love; the Buddha uses that closeness to exemplify the consequences of powerful attachment, a source of suffering.

The Buddha teaches us to let go of attachment to the ego; I support the development of a stable ego in my child. And how can I teach my defenseless child nonviolence? How can I relate to all

sentient beings, when one of them requires my full attention? The Buddha loves thoughtful training and takes time to think things through. As a mother, I must teach and learn directly and immediately. Often there is no time to reflect; I must act on the spot. The Buddha incorporates complete perfection. Daily, I learn to deal with the incomplete and the imperfect. The realm of the Buddha is of dreamlike beauty. I learn how much time and energy is required for every action; every small translation of the ideal into daily reality exacts a price. The Buddha's path is concentration and quietude. As a mother, I learn to live with the defects and distractions of everyday life.

Magic Moments

Sometimes my life is like a *koan*, a paradox. It becomes so crazy that I simply have to let go, especially of all concepts about how things should be. As I let go, the contradictions dissolve suddenly and mysteriously, giving rise to a happiness that defies all description. Whether sparked from inside or out, the question dissolves into the fulfillment of the living moment.

Magic moments occur when a mother and a Buddhist nun reach out happily to each other. Or when the Buddha within me starts to listen to the wisdom of his mother. Or when the mother recognizes

the Buddha in her child. Suddenly, everything falls into place and I realize that there is no real separation. The Buddha in me is one with the mother in me – they are linked and interdependent: "Form is emptiness and emptiness is form." This realization protects me from my own one-sidedness.

Tara, an enlightened being in female form, represents virtuous activity

Good Enough

Most mothers develop a certain ability to deal with the contradictions and are able to live efficiently and effectively. They become experts at bringing order into chaos. They develop structures and strategies that prove worthwhile in everyday life. As time goes by, things fall more or less into place. Nothing is perfect, nothing is complete, but it works well enough. Expressed in Buddhist terms, most mothers manage to create for themselves a place of refuge. Though this refuge is limited to just a few beings, it is better than no refuge at all. A Zen Buddhist might say that most mothers manage to solve an intricate *koan*. At least, it's a start.

The achievements of mothers are seldom recognized at full value, though they may be acknowledged to some degree. In every society, mothers are accorded a certain undisputed status. In patriarchal cultures, motherhood may be the only legal status for women. All, without exception, happily take advantage of the respect mothers receive.

The public recognition of mothers poses a new danger: idealization. After initially having been condemned to hell with her yelling kids, she is now sent to heaven with her well-behaved children. Neither scenario corresponds to a mother's reality.

The Bodhisattva Ideal

The beneficent qualities of motherhood are extolled in the Buddhist teachings. In the Mahayana tradition, the ideal of the compassionate *bodhisattva* is likened to a mother's care for her children. It is not actual motherhood that is intended here, but an idealized, spiritual motherhood. The intense, exclusive love a mother feels for her only child is expanded to all sentient beings. The *bodhisattva* virtues – selflessness, boundless compassion, all-embracing love, eternal helpfulness, and endless generosity – are called motherly virtues.

This ideal cuts both way, however. The pure Mother Mary stands as a model to inspire and direct Christian women, but it is an unattainable ideal for the average, errant mother. Similarly, the *bodhisattva* stands as a model of wisdom and compassion to inspire and direct Buddhist women, but this ideal is so far from everyday life that it is impossible for the average mother to reach. As a result, the model can be more crushing than encouraging, more alienating than inclusive.

*Bodhisattva*s know no limits; they give incessantly. The word "no" is not in their vocabulary; they never refuse anything. If I want to emulate these mother-like *bodhisattva*s, I will undoubtedly exceed my limits and exhaust myself. I will quickly bake a cake, even though I am dead tired; always offer an ear, even when I would love to slam the door; do the laundry, even when I know that grown children can do their own.

*Bodhisattva*s never rest. As a real mother, I need breaks or I'll collapse. In either case, I soon feel like a failure. Not only am I incapable of the *bodhisattva* ideal, I'm not even an ideal mother. Motherhood is a 24-hour-a-day job; in real life, breaks are not part of the program.

Letting Go

To resolve this dilemma, I have no choice but to think about myself and let go of a thousand things. I need distance in order to look at myself from another perspective and reevaluate my activities and role. Such an undertaking requires time and space, but as a mother, that's exactly what I most lack. If I somehow find time, I encounter a new problem: Who will replace me during my absence? Few mothers are so irresponsible as to leave without satisfactorily allocating their tasks. While seeking a reliable replacement, we become aware of all the myriad tasks we accomplish everyday. We learn to call them by name and discover their worth in society. What's the cost of a babysitter? A cleaning woman? A cook? A housekeeper? A secretary? A therapist? A gardener? A manager? A decorator? A teacher? A driver? Who can really afford a mother?

Leaving is demanding for both mother and child. The mother needs to trust herself, her child, and life in general to be able to let the child go, to entrust it to others, to let go, and go.

When I am finally alone, at a friend's place, or on a meditation cushion, I have already accomplished much preparatory work. With great pleasure, I leave all chores and tasks behind me, let go of everything, and, for once, simply "do nothing." I am fully aware of this precious time, this precious chance I have, and use it to the best advantage. According to the teachings, I thereby fulfill the best conditions for the path to enlightenment. But nobody is around to tell me that.

Insight

Finally, I find the peace needed to better examine the role that I play as a mother. It feels like leafing through a script. The script is ancient and nobody knows who wrote it. One thing is certain: it wasn't me. Or was it? We would all like a mommy who is always gentle and kind, never says "no," never gets angry, and fulfills all wishes. But mothers learn that it would be unwise to proceed along these lines. Every mother is familiar with this syndrome; she has learned from her own children. Children want to eat seven ice creams at once, never want to go to bed, and want all the toys in the Christmas catalogue. If we fulfill all these wishes, the child – and ourselves – will become a real catastrophe.

Experience teaches us that children are perfectly happy when they get one toy or one ice cream. Experience teaches us that children are often tired, even when they insist they are not. As

mothers, we learn to recognize and fulfill the real needs that lie behind the child's impossible demands. The overflowing energies of the child evoke our limits.

To continually readjust the limits to the child's stage of development and be protective and supportive, but not inhibiting, is one of the most demanding tasks of a mother. Why is this essential skill absent in the selfless *bodhisattva*, the immaculate Mary, and other ideal images of motherhood?

Generally, these ideal images of a mother begin to correspond to the needs and expectations of a small child or an adult stuck in childhood. The ideal fulfills its purpose simply by representing a valued object. As subjects, however, the ideal always appears incomplete. To be honest, who would like to constantly be helping and giving? Aren't both giving *and* receiving, helping *and* accepting help what lends us wings and keeps us physically alive? Isn't this the process that we experience daily with our children? Isn't it also what we experience again and again during meditation, when we observe our breathing?

The Feminine Creative Principle

Fortunately, there are some role models in the range of Buddhist traditions that confirm this insight and can effectively support mothers on the spiritual path. We just have to look for them. The Tibetan tantric tradition provides many such models. Tantra deals with the reconciliation of opposites, which is exactly the challenge that confronts mothers daily.

Mongolian singer Sarangya exemplifies the creative principle in spreading Dharma

The female principle of Tibetan Buddhism corresponds to open space that give rise to phenomena. This basic pattern of life is called the great mother or the mother of all creation (Tibetan: *yum chenmo*). In her womb, all created things potentially reside and all reality is born.

The original emptiness of the mind has the potential for fundamental insight. This is called the origin or womb from which all Buddhas arise. All Buddhas are born from Prajnaparamita, the perfection of wisdom in the image of the enlightened feminine. The encounter with this independent, potent, creative feminine principle of wisdom, in its totality, has an enormously liberating and inspiring effect.

One of the most popular Buddhas in the tantric tradition is Arya Tara, the noble liberator. She appears as a woman of completeness and totality – an image often lacking in western culture. She is a role model suitable for women of all types. She appears is many varied forms, so every woman can identify with her. She appears in all colors, all emotional states – peaceful, angry, powerful, and tender. Sometimes she stomps on the earth till it shakes, sometimes she tames gods and demons with great laughter, and sometimes she just rests peacefully in *nirvana*.

Mothers and women without children can identify with her equally well. She personifies the virtuous activity of all Buddhas. She acts while resting and rests while in action. It is exactly this ability that mothers so badly need. Arya Tara helps me during my daily chores as a mother and is particularly supportive. Sylvia Wetzel, one of the best known western teachers of Buddhism, communicates a contemporary, practical method of accessing this ancient, liberating, enlightened female energy through meditation training for women.

Women of Wisdom

Machig Labdron, a woman who lived in Tibet during the 11th century, acquired great fame as a tantric master. In many ways, she was a superwoman, an absolute exception in Tibetan Buddhism, which is dominated by monks and men. She founded one of the best-known tantric rituals, called *chod*, the practice of "cutting through ego clinging." This practice deals with disturbances, interferences, dark powers, temptations, and other impediments on the spiritual path. Instead of avoiding these interferences, the *yogini/yogi* addresses them through peaceful means. Demons, gods, peaceful beings, and angry ones are invoked in one's imagination. These beings are then fed and given gifts, according to their needs, until they are completely satisfied. On a deeper level, *chod* is similar to a mother's experience with her children. Children don't stop screaming when we push them away, but only when we completely acknowledge them, recognize their real needs, and satisfy those needs.

In my opinion, Machig Lapdron's spiritual and motherly experiences come together in her practice of *chod*. In her biography, there are some interesting hints about how she, as a spiritual practitioner, dealt with being a woman and a mother.

The biography of Machig Lapdron can be found in the book *Woman of Wisdom* by the American Buddhist teacher, Tsültrim Allione. The book includes the biographies of five other female masters from Tibet's past, too. Most of these women were also mothers. They overcame many outer and inner conflicts that their male colleagues did not encounter. Tsültrim Allione's research and writing not only helped her overcome isolation and depression as a mother, but it also helps many other women, particularly mothers, in their search for spiritual identity and orientation.

Dakinis and Dreams

Dakini (Tibetan: *khandro*) means sky dancer, one who walks through free and empty space. A *dakini* is difficult to describe and even more difficult to grasp. She knows how to escape from

and through the rational mind. She dances through our lives as everflowing energy. She acts as a medium through which formless energy can mysteriously take shape. Her gift to us is intuitive insight, inspiration, and dreams. She is called a spiritual midwife, because she helps us gain realization and accompanies us during the birth of our Buddha nature.

The *dakini* awakens in me the taste for more freedom and allows me to meditate with good conscience. My little loved ones may benefit greatly from spending time with their father and other trusted persons. My beloved husband may not want to miss daily life with our creative children. And from time to time, I may visit the children's room. Surely, Buddhist lore needs a woman who reaches enlightenment while changing diapers.

With meditation as my training and daily life as my practice, my spirit of enlightenment does not fade when my child starts screaming, the phone rings, or the milk boils over. Padmasambhava, the famous master who established Buddhism in Tibet during the ninth century said, "Once women have understood what it is all about, it goes very fast." Jack Kornfield, a well-known meditation teacher who is the father of a daughter, said, "It's sometimes more difficult to be a father than it was to be a monk with strict practice in the forest monastery." As Buddhist practitioners, my husband and companion Martin Kalff and I are repeatedly challenged to coordinate parenthood and Buddhist practice. It's one of the most intriguing tasks we face.

Mothering and Spiritual Wisdom

Mothers learns from experience that attending and feeding a screaming child can be satisfying. Mothers learns that, through conscious parenting, a small, totally dependent being can develop into a capable, independent adult. Mothers also learn how their defiant, jealous, greedy little monsters can, through proper nurturing, be transformed into helpful, loving, happy children. The principles of care, bonding, and the secrets of transformation and healing are basic. On the spiritual path, this manifests in a positive attitude toward emotions, for example. These emotions are appreciated as valuable raw material that can, through knowledge and skillful means, be purified and converted into healing energy. Suffering is not totally rejected, but converted through trust in its healing potential.

In the Buddhist tradition, the basic error and source of all suffering is ego attachment. The recommended cure, as a rule, is clearly to cut it off. Cut it, tear it off, dissolve it, destroy it, in many different stages. No doubt, nothing good or constructive can be derived from it. Ego attachment is like a weed; if it is not completely eradicated, it arises again and again.

While meditating as a mother, I had a very different experience. When I observed my ego attachment, I immediately thought of a small child. The child is completely self-centered, screams with alarming intent, and wants immediate gratification. The method that works so well for my child also works very well in dealing with my ego attachment. Through full attention and loving care, it can become transformed. Just like a little child, my self-centered nature gradually learns to grow above itself, calm its raging emotions, and relate in a friendly, generous way to others. The child wakes me up with its screaming and its needs, and brings me into the present moment. My so-called ego functions similarly, to wake me up out of my beautiful dreams and bring me back to daily life.

Through accepting my selfishness, my raw greed for life, I find a way to develop love for myself and other beings. The way is very long but, just as a baby develops into an adult, every stage of the way is meaningful and fulfilling.

Exercises

1. Imagine that you are a mother and you hold a Buddha, like a baby, in your arms.

2. Imagine yourself as a baby lying on the Buddha's lap.

3. Imagine that the Buddha is a mother. How does she feel?

English translation by Peter Kalff

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Dakinis at Narohajid Monastery welcome Sakyadhita conference participants in, Mongolia

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EMERGING FROM THE SHADOWS: NUNS OF THE TIBETAN TRADITION

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

The red and yellow robes of Tibetan monks are a familiar sight, recognized as symbols of peace and transformation in almost every corner of the world. Only recently have Tibetan nuns come to popular attention, however. Historically, Tibetan nuns wore the same robes and lived the same lifestyle as monks, but they were never as numerous or as visible in Tibet. This is rapidly changing. As Tibetan Buddhist women gain new educational opportunities and confidence, they are entering monasteries in record numbers and taking their place in the world's religious imagination.

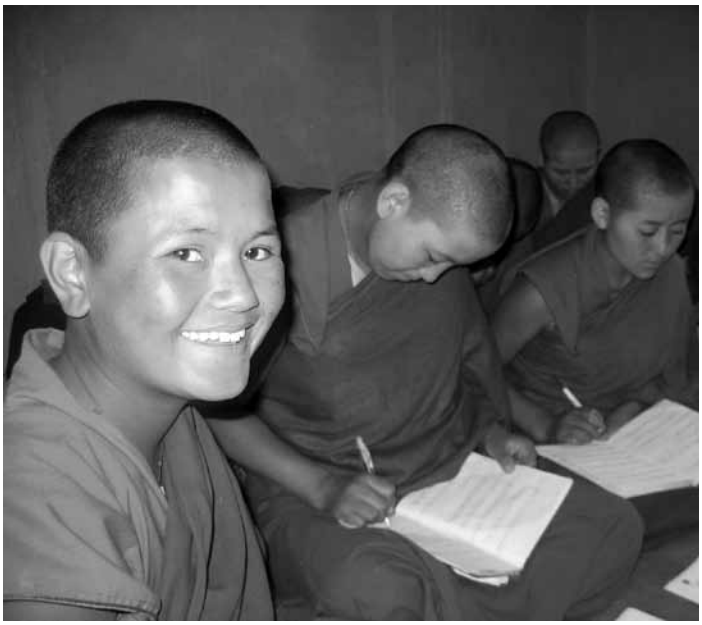
Today, most of the nuns in the Tibetan tradition take the 36 precepts of a novice (*sramanerika*), just like novice monks. Yet nuns retain that novice status indefinitely, since there is currently no lineage of fully ordained nuns (*bhikshuni*) in the Tibetan tradition. The lineage of fully ordained monks (*bhikshu*) was transmitted to Tibet in the eighth century and has flourished from that time until today, but it appears that a parallel lineage of nuns was never established. Without equal access to education or full ordination, nuns in the Tibetan tradition have remained quietly in the background, doing retreats, reciting prayers, performing rituals, and sharing the Dharma with those who come to them for counsel. In recent years, especially in India and Nepal, nuns have begun receiving greater educational opportunities. As a result, they have been able to take new roles and seek new opportunities that have occasionally put them in the spotlight.

After 1959, some nuns emerged as leaders of popular resistance to the Chinese communist occupation of their country. Many were arrested, while others fled to India and Nepal in search of religious freedom. The video "Satya: Prayer for the Enemy" documents the hardships that Buddhist nuns have endured under communist rule. The feature film "Windhorse" is a dramatization of these tragic events. Because nuns have no families of their own to support and protect, they have courageously voiced their opposition to religious oppression and have frequently been jailed for their efforts. As a result of political and religious restrictions, many nuns have attempted the long treacherous journey from Tibet into exile in India and Nepal. The heartbreaking stories they tell are a testament to their heroism and their devotion to their Buddhist beliefs. Many suffer lingering, long-term psychological and physical effects and post-traumatic stress disorders as a result of the rape, torture, imprisonment, harassment, and surveillance to which they have been subjected during the communist occupation of their country.

Since 1976, despite dire poverty and dislocation, a few monasteries for women have been established in India and Nepal. The hardships of adjusting to a new climate and cultural environment have been offset by the opportunity to meet and receiving teachings from His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other renowned Buddhist teachers. In exile, nuns not only have the opportunity to practice their faith freely and without fear, but they have also gained access to educational opportunities that were previously rare. Since the 1980s, whenever border restrictions relaxed, Tibetan refugees have traveled on pilgrimage to India to seek teachings from distinguished lamas and attend ceremonies, such as the Kalachakra empowerment, conducted by H.H. Dalai Lama.

In addition to those who became nuns in Tibet, many young laywomen have also become nuns since arriving in exile and meeting H.H. Dalai Lama. For many of these young women, the search for a religious vocation is a natural response to their newfound religious freedom and the lessons learned through hardship. After seeing how fleeting human life can be, the Buddhist teachings represent a profoundly meaningful way of life. Other young women, growing up in India, have come to the same realization through their encounters with modern secular life that promises happiness, but does not always lead to fulfillment.

For these women, the decision to enter the monastery is usually not the result of encouragement from their families or communities. Instead, the choice to devote their lives to Dharma practice is an affirmative choice to make the best possible use of the human opportunity. The decision to seek ordination reflects a deeply felt dedication to sustained Dharma practice and to helping preserve Tibetan Buddhist culture, now facing the threat of extinction in its homeland. Their commitment is spurred by the sad reality that the precious Tibetan Buddhist cultural heritage may ultimately be preserved outside of occupied Tibet. Buddhism is the core of their Tibetan identity.



Young students at Yangchen Chöling Monastery in the Himalayan region of Spiti

More than 1,290 Tibetan nuns now live in exile in India and Nepal. Since the 1970s, these nuns have been joined by sisters coming from all over the world to study Buddhism with Tibetan teachers. The expanded global interest in Tibetan Buddhism and greater opportunities for women have accelerated the creation of Buddhist studies programs for Tibetan and Himalayan nuns. With international assistance, several nunneries have been established to house the influx of refugee nuns from Tibet. Since 1987, the Tibetan Nun's Project, Jamyang Foundation, Ganden Relief, and other organizations have worked to provide food, housing, education, and medical services for refugee nuns from Tibet and others from the Himalayan region.

As in all cultures and societies where monastics have primarily been monks, the road to ordination for Tibetan women has been arduous. Many fundamental disparities between conditions for monks and nuns remain and efforts to equalize these disparities are ongoing. While Tibetan nuns born in India and Nepal have had the benefit of public education, many nuns born in Tibet had little or no formal education prior to escaping from Tibet and have struggled to make up for lost time. In the past 20 years, Tibetan nuns have made significant strides academically, particularly in the area of philosophical studies, a pursuit that was previously not open to

nuns. Several nunneries now offer intensive educational programs focused on logic and philosophy. Other nunneries offer Buddhist studies programs that incorporate ritual studies and intensive retreats, in an effort to integrate Buddhist studies, contemplation, and ritual practices. Tibetan nuns now have the opportunity to hone their intellectual reasoning skills by competing in intramural debate tournaments held annually since 1990. These tournaments were modeled after the famous Jang Kunchö, held every winter at Tibet's most prestigious monastic universities.

Having access to Buddhist studies is a key factor to be considered when assessing gender equality among nuns and monks in Tibetan culture. For centuries, the curriculum in philosophy taught at monastic universities such as Drepung, Ganden, and Sera produced great Buddhist scholars and teachers. However, nuns were traditionally excluded from these study programs, which were open to students affiliated with all Tibetan Buddhist traditions, but reserved for males. Since these were the institutions that granted the *geshe* degree, Tibet's highest scholastic achievement, that distinction went only to men.

Since 1987, the situation has changed dramatically. New opportunities for philosophical studies and debate have enabled women to excel academically and several are now qualified to take the *geshe* exams. When women's educational achievements are publicly recognized by awarding the *geshe* degree, this will mark a major step in achieving gender parity in Tibetan society. Women will finally have the chance to demonstrate their equal capabilities in higher religious studies in an environment that has rarely recognized women as *lama*s (religious teachers) or *tulku*s (recognized reincarnate lamas). The one remaining obstacle rests on a technicality. A thorough study of Vinaya is necessary for passing the comprehensive *geshe* exams, yet the nuns are forbidden to study the texts on Bhiksuni Vinaya, because they are not fully ordained *bhiksuni*s. If nuns are unable to receive *bhiksuni* ordination, they are effectively blocked from receiving highest academic honors. Resolving this dilemma is critical for ensuring the religious rights of Buddhist women.

Tibetan nuns have made significant progress toward gender equity in the field of education, both secular and religious, but limitations remain for laywomen as well as nuns. As recently as the 1980s, the highly regarded Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies did not admit women students and even now a quota is imposed on the number of female students admitted each year. Because the Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies is an accredited institution of higher learning that offers academic degrees and prepares students as teachers and university professors, it is important to open up opportunities and encourage more laywomen and nuns to study there.

The trend toward greater educational opportunities for nuns is paralleled by the increasing availability of secular education for girls. These new possibilities have raised standards for girls and women across a broad spectrum. The establishment of educational institutions such as the Tibetan Central Schools, the Tibetan Children's Village, and Tibetan Homes have made education available to thousands of Tibetan girls and young women in India and Nepal. Today, young women are seeking higher education in increasing numbers.

Buddhist education need not be a formal pursuit, of course. Many Tibetan nuns devote themselves to ritual studies on a private basis, in retreat centers and small monasteries throughout the Tibetan cultural diaspora. Many nuns also pursue meditation and ritual practices in solitude, in caves and isolated locations throughout the Himalayan region. Although nuns who practice quietly in the mountains receive little attention, their religious practice is an equally significant contribution to women's empowerment and to peace in the world.

Nuns are now able to participate in ceremonies and events previously reserved solely for monks, such as constructing sand *mandalas,* performing sacred dances (*cham*), attending the Great Prayer Festival (Monlam Chenmo), and participating philosophical debates, yet full ordination for women remains a controversial matter. The controversy centers around the validity of ordination procedures and the unbroken continuity of the *bhikshuni* lineage. Because no evidence exists that the *bhikshuni* lineage was ever transmitted from India to Tibet in an officially sanctioned way, there is currently no lineage of fully ordained nuns in the Tibetan tradition. Although Tibetan nuns receive the ten precepts of a novice nun (*sramanerika*) and are considered part of the Sangha, their status is decidedly lower than that of a fully ordained monk (*bhiksu*).

Solutions for introducing the *bhiksuni* lineage are now being considered seriously. According to the Vinaya texts, at least ten *bhiksu*s and ten *bhiksuni*s are required to confer the *bhiksuni* precepts. In the Mulasarvastivada Vinaya lineage followed by Tibetans, ten *bhiksu*s and twelve *bhiksuni*s are required. Technically, Tibetan *bhiksu*s alone cannot conduct a full ordination ceremony for *bhiksuni*s. However, it is possible for nuns ordained as novices in the Tibetan tradition to take *bhiksuni* ordination in the Chinese, Korean, or Vietnamese traditions. A number of nuns have already done so, with permission from their Tibetan teachers, and their *bhiksuni* status is accepted in the Tibetan community.

Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo and Myeong Seong Sunim, exemplars of the Bhiksuni Sangha

Currently, three possible means exist for establishing a Bhiksuni Sangha in the Tibetan tradition. One possibility is for Tibetan nuns to travel to China, Korea, or Vietnam to receive *bhiksuni* ordination from nuns ordained in a lineage that was transmitted to those countries centuries ago from India and Sri Lanka. Another possible solution is for Tibetan nuns to be ordained by Tibetan *bhiksu*s alone, a procedure that has been used in Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam without much controversy. In this case, the presiding *bhiksu*s incur a small transgression, but the *bhiksuni*s receive a valid ordination. Yet a third possible solution is a combined approach in which nuns from Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, or perhaps a combination, participate in a *bhiksuni* ordination ceremony alongside Tibetan monks. With the backing of H.H. Dalai Lama and senior *bhiksu*s,

any of these solutions could be justified. Enthusiastic discussions on the *bhiksuni* issue held in gatherings around the world indicate that support is growing for establishing a lineage of *bhiksuni*s in the Tibetan tradition.

The Tibetan government has yet to officially sanction any of these solutions. H.H. Dalai Lama has expressed his personal desire to see the *bhiksuni* lineage established within the Tibetan tradition. However, he states that the issue must be put before a senior Sangha council and that he lacks the authority to make the decision alone. To help resolve this issue, H.H. Dalai Lama has repeatedly called for international conferences with representatives of all the major Buddhist traditions to examine the fine points of Buddhist monastic law and work toward a consensus on the matter. He has donated funds to the Committee of Western Bhiksunis and tasked them with forging a solution to the dilemma.

Recently, several comparative studies of Chinese and Tibet texts have been undertaken to compare the *bhiksuni* precepts and the procedures for receiving the *bhiksuni* ordination in the Chinese and Tibetan traditions. Others are investigating whether the existing *bhiksuni* lineages have been transmitted in an unbroken lineage from the time of Buddha Shakyamuni until today, a daunting task. Meanwhile, opinion is divided. On one side, opponents assert that the ordination of nuns cannot be conferred, because the requisite quorum of fully ordained Tibetan *bhiksu*s and *bhiksuni*s is unavailable. In fact, already more than enough nuns have received full ordination in the Chinese, Korean, or Vietnamese traditions to constitute a quorum. On the other side, proponents assert that the ordination can proceed, on the grounds that Buddha Sakyamuni initially ordained Mahaprajapati without a full quorum of *bhiksu*s and *bhiksuni*s and thus set a precedent of this type of ordination.

While the controversy awaits resolution, Tibetan nuns continue to establish new monasteries and retreat centers in exile. Tibetan nunneries remain largely autonomous, with the nuns responsible for their own governance, maintenance, and support. Financial support from local communities and abroad is critically important in helping nuns establish and maintain these monasteries and retreat centers. This is a tremendous challenge, since the laity prefers to support monks, believing they accrue greater merit by donating to *bhiksu*s. Despite these discriminatory attitudes, which nuns constantly face, they remain dedicated to Dharma practice and to preserving their precious Tibetan cultural heritage.

As Tibetan nuns continue their practices and studies, they gradually chip away at earlier restrictions, outdated stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes toward women. They have become role models for women in Tibet and throughout the Himalayan region. Their struggles are a testament to their faith in the egalitarian teachings of the Buddha.

For further information, see www.sakyadhita.org and www.jamyang.org.

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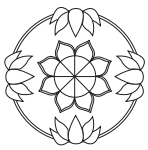

HISTORIC BHIKKHUNI ORDINATION IN NAGPUR, INDIA

Bhiksuni Chuehmen

From January 9 to 15, 2009, ten years after the historic full ordination ceremony (*upasampada*) in Bodhgaya in 1998, which successfully transmitted and restored the *bhikkhuni* order to Sri Lanka, the All India Bhikkhuni Sangha organized the first *bhikkhuni* ordination ceremony in Maharashtra State. It is a great joy to see Indian *bhikkhuni*s now attaining their *theri* status. Despite protests from some *bhikkhu*s, the nuns are finally summoning the capability and courage to conduct a *bhikkhuni* ordination in their hometown.

On the morning of January 15, 2009, the ordination was conducted accordingly to the Theravada tradition by Indian the Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni Sanghas at a specially erected ordination platform (*sima*) on the Kanhan River, about 20 km north of Nagpur. The *bhikkhu* preceptor was Sanghanand Mahathera of the Bhadant Dhammakirti Mahasthavir Temple. The *bhikkhuni* preceptor and *karmacaryani* were from Taiwan and Sri Lanka: Ven. Chuehmen from Taiwan Fo Guang Shan, Bhikkhunis P. Sumithra, Dhammaraksani, and Sumanapali from Sri Lanka. Ten Indian *bhikkhuni*s ordained at the 1998 Bodhgaya ordination were witnesses (*acaryani*). The average age of the fourteen *sramaneri*s who received full ordination was 37.6 years. One is pursuing a Master's degree, three are studying at the college level, three have no formal education, and the remainder have some primary or secondary education.

The ordination and meal offering (*sanghadana*) were coordinated by Ven. Bhadant Nagdipankar and financially supported by the Buddhist Society of India (Bharatia Buddha Mahasabha), Samata Sainik Dal (Nag Vidarbha), Lokpriya Babu Hardas L. N. Smruti Samiti (Nagpur Region) Mahamayawati Sarvajanik Upasika Sangh (Kamptee), Stribhushan Ramai Ambedkar Vichar Manch (Nagpur), and Pradnyaputra Prakashan (Nagpur).

Presently there are over 50 Indian *bhikkhuni*s, including another group of 18 ordained by Sri Lankan *bhikkhu*s and *bhikkhuni*s at the Burmese Temple in Bodhgaya in February 2009. There are also currently around 600 *bhikkhuni*s living in Sri Lanka.

Why Ordination in Nagpur?

Acting as a liaison with Theravada Buddhism for my monastery, I had the opportunity to visit Theravadin nuns in Sri Lanka, India, and Nepal who had received *bhikkhuni* ordination with the help of Fo Guang Shan, so that we may gain a better understanding of their situation.

In September 2008, I received an email from the secretary of the All India Bhikkhuni Sangha saying they plan to organize a *bhikkhuni* ordination in Nagpur and were seeking help to conduct the ceremony. The secretary informed me that eight Indian *bhikkhuni*s and *sramaneri*s were preparing for *bhikkhuni* ordination. They received rainy season retreat (*vassa*) training in Bodhgaya, conducted by Bhikkhu Pragyadeep, secretary of the All India Bhikkhu Sangha. However, one of the trainers was creating some problems among the Indian nuns. Responding to the claim that they were uneducated, the Indian *bhikkhuni*s said that, althrough they have no college degrees, they follow the teachings of the Buddha and recite the Pratimoska twice a month. Finally, the Indian *bhikkhuni*s bravely decided to conduct their own Indian *bhikkhuni* ordination in Maharashtra State, despite protests from some *bhikkhu*s.

When Bhikkhuni Shamavati returned from Sri Lanka, she contacted me. She informed me that the All India Bhikkhuni Sangha was organizing a *bhikkhuni* ordination in Nagpur and requested

my presence at the ordination. Later, Bhikkhu Pragyadeep also wrote asking me to help the Indian *bhikkhuni*s.

In the beginning, I hesitated to attend the ceremony, but after verifying the candidates' training, the knowledge of the Pratimokha, the construction of the *sima*, and the organizers' understanding of the ordination procedure, I agreed. I flew to Chennai with three Sri Lankan *bhikkhuni*s and proceeded to Nagpur in the early morning of September 9.

On the morning of September 10, we arrived in Nagpur and were well received by the local *bhikkhuni*s and *sramaneri*s. We then proceeded to Mahaprajapati Gouttami Mahavihar Temple, where the postulants were receiving *bhikkhuni* ordination training. On the morning of September 11, I interviewed the postulants, taking note of their monastic background and motivation for taking the *bhikkhuni* ordination. This was followed by teachings on the Bhikkhuni Vinaya. From September 12 to 14, the postulants received teachings on the behavior of a nun and rehearsed the ordination procedure. Twice in the evening, we went to inspect the *sima* to ensure that it had been constructed according to the Vinaya guidelines.

Early in the morning on January 15, we arrived to purify the *sima* before the ceremony began. The *bhikkhuni* ceremony followed, first conducted by the Bhikkhuni Sangha. The three Sri Lankan *bhikkhuni*s and ten Indian *bhikkhuni*s who conducted the ceremony were ordained in the 1998 ordination in Bodhgaya. All now have the status of *theri*, meaning that they have passed ten rainy seasons and are qualified to conduct ordinations. At 11am, the Bhikkhu Sangha conducted the full ordination (*upasamapada*), led by Bhanta Sanghanand Mahathera of the Bhadant Dhammakirti Mahasthavir Temple in Vade. About 40 young monks came to lend their support for ordination. Nearly 500 lay supporters sponsored the ordination expenses and the *sanghadana* at the event – the first of its kind in Maharashtra.

11th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women

Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
December 28, 2009,
to January 3, 2010

Conference Theme: "Eminent Buddhist Women"

Sakyadhita is pleased to announce that the 11th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women will be held in Ho Chi Minh City from December 28, 2009, to January 3, 2010. Temple tours in the vicinity of Ho Chi Minh City will be arranged on January 4 and 5. Optional tours to Hue and Hanoi are available from January 6 to 10. For more information and registration, see www.sakyadhita.org.

NEWSLINE
BUDDHIST WOMEN IN INTERNATIONAL NEWS
Compiled by Heidi Virshup

Aun San Suu Kyi Marks 13th Anniversary in Prison[1]

October 27, 2008 marked Aun San Suu Kyi's 13th year under house arrest in Myanmar, formerly known as Burma. She is the only Nobel Peace Prize winner in detention.

Suu Kyi, age 63, was first arrested in 1989 and has remained in virtually continuous house arrest in her home in Yangon since her party won Myanmar's last elections in 1990. As leader of the winning National League for Democracy party she had earned the right to be Prime Minister. However, her detention by the military junta, which has ruled the country since 1962, has prevented her from assuming that role.

Reprinted from Intellasia News Services, October 27, 2008.

Woeser Sues People's Republic for Passport to Leave Tibet [2]

Unlike many of her fellow Tibetan activists, Woeser (42), a poet, dissident, and blogger, doesn't flinch from publicly criticizing the Chinese government. Twice this summer, Woeser, who like some Tibetans goes by only one name, has openly confronted the Chinese authorities.

For Tibetans, it is nearly impossible to get a passport. Many risk their lives trying to flee across Himalayan mountain passes into Nepal and India. For the past three years, Woeser has been denied a passport and, as a result, was unable to personally accept the Norwegian Authors' Union's Freedom of Expression Prize in Oslo earlier this year. Hoping to bring attention both to this issue and to the repressive treatment of the Tibetans in their homeland, Woeser sued the Chinese government in July in order to obtain a passport.

In August, while visiting Lhasa, Woeser was arrested after accusations that she had taken photographs of military installations. She was held for questioning for eight hours by several officers who said that they were acting on a tip from someone. Woeser's husband, Mr Wang Lixiong, commented: "I can't say whether their intention was to intimidate. But if they can do this to an influential writer who has done nothing more than take photographs, then one can only imagine the kind of threat that ordinary people in Tibet must feel every day."[3]

Expelled from the official Chinese literary association several years ago and with her published works banned, Woeser blogs on issues rarely discussed in Tibet: AIDS, prostitution, environmental damage and the devastating effects of Chinese governmental policies on the Tibetan people. Woeser's current blog, *woeser.middle-way.net* (in Chinese) is a popular site for many Tibetans. It has recorded three million hits since she launched it on an overseas server early last year.

Based on an article from Times Online, August 26, 2008.

Ouyporn Khuankaew Honored in Thailand[4]

As a child, Ouyporn Khuankaew rarely experienced a peaceful night's rest. Her father, who professed to be a devout Buddhist, regularly made his family the object of his violent temper. Ouyporn never knew when they would be wakened from their sleep and threatened with an axe.

Shaped by her traumatic childhood and deeply troubled by the violence against women and children she witnessed growing up

in rural northern Thailand, Ouyporn, now 45, turned to social activism in order to work for equality for Thai women. Honored for her achievements, she gave this year's prestigious Kothom Keemthong annual speech in Bangkok, in which she described how Buddhist spiritual practice transformed her life and career.

Ouyporn was labeled "aggressive" as an activist because of her outspokenness. She became disillusioned when she saw that sexism permeated even academia and social work. Frustrated and angry at the pace of change, Ouyporn turned to Buddhist practice. Through meditation on compassion and impermanence, she experienced insights that allowed her to let go of her anger at her father and society. With newfound peace of mind, her life and work ventured in a different direction.

Returning to the village where she was born, she now shares the gift of self-healing by hosting unconventional workshops on gender-based violence for "change makers": grassroots women leaders, peace activists, people with HIV/AIDS, ethnic minorities, gays, nuns, and monks. Through mindfulness practice, sharing of experiences, deep listening, and living close to nature, Ouyporn empowers others to heal themselves through Buddhist practice.

More information about Ouyporn Khuankhaew, her retreat center, and her organization, the International Women's Partnership for Peace and Justice, can be found by visiting the IWP website: www.womenforpeaceandjustice.org.

Reprinted from The Bangkok Post, September 30, 2008.

Mae Chee Sansanee Sthirasuta Opens Savika-Sikkalai, a New Buddhist Women's University in Bangkok [5]

Like dead bodies, a group of Thai nuns and laywomen lie perfectly still on the floor. These women, deep in corpse pose, are graduate students in a class on living and dying at Savika-Sikkalai, a new Buddhist women's university in Bangkok that uses Buddhist practice to train its students as spiritual counselors.

The mission of Savika-Sikkalai is to produce "Dharma ambassadors" to serve humankind, the environment, and the world, says chairwoman and Buddhist nun Mae Chee Sansanee Sthirasuta. By focusing on "practicality, not philosophies or debates… our students should be able to help and counsel people in real life." Inspired by His Holiness the Dalai Lama's remarks to her in 1999 – that the true purpose of education is to benefit and change people's lives – long time social activist Mae Chee Sansanee Sthirasuta decided to start a Buddhist university to train counselors to use Buddhist practice as a way to nurture the well-being of women and families.

Assembling a team of experts to help draft a curriculum, she subsequently gained endorsement from Mahachulalongkorn Raja Vidyalaya, a public Buddhist university in Bangkok. Savika-Sikkalai opened its doors to its first students this year. While the university remains under the umbrella of Mahachulalongkorn Raja Vidyalaya, it runs independently in both management and funding. Currently offering a master's degree program in Buddhism and the Art of Living, it plans to open a doctorate program and English-language program four years from now.

By freeing minds to serve the world, Mae Chee Sansanee hopes Savika-Sikkalai's alternative education based on Buddhist spirituality will provide a practical way to ease social problems while helping bridge the gap between the secular and monastic worlds.

Reprinted from the Bangkok Post, September 30, 2008.

Sister Chan Khong Establishing School in India for Sakya Decendants [6]

Although many children in a village near the city of Mainpuri, India, carry the surname Sakya, they know very little about their famous ancestor's teachings. But Sister Chan Khong, a Vietnamese peace activist and long time student of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, is seeking to bring the Dharma home to these descendants of the sage of the Sakyas.

Sister Chan Khong, in India this October on a Buddhist pilgrimage with more than 300 members of the International Order of Interbeing, is planning a new school for this impoverished village in Uttar Pradesh. The village is so poor that it has neither water nor electricity, and children must walk two km to go school – if they go at all. In addition to regular studies, the children will learn skills to overcome anger through role playing and mindful breathing. Teachers will be given an incentive, a monthly bonus equivalent to one third of their salaries, if effective anger management is taught in class.

Sister Chan Khong has a long history of making use of Buddhist teachings through social work. Starting her social activism as an undergraduate in Vietnam, she became a student of Thich Nhat Hanh in 1959 and helped him set up social programs during the Viet Nam (American) War until they were forced into exile for their anti-war activities. In 1982, Chan Khong was instrumental in helping Thay (as Nhat Hahn is known to his students) establish the main center for mindfulness retreats, Plum Village, in the south of France. Now allowed back into Vietnam, Sister Chan Khong has helped create 1,078 Schools for Progress of Understanding and Love for young children throughout south and central Vietnam. Says Sister Chan Khong: "We have to bring the spiritual dimension to children; we call it peace education."

Reprinted from The Times of India, October 31, 2008.

Bhiksuni Lyan Shih and the Pure Lotus Hospice [7]

A mother of two young children, deserted by her husband, her face completely eaten away by cancer. An eight-year-old boy with an amputated arm, abandoned by his parents, whose metastatic cancer had pushed out his left eye. These are just two of the many destitute end-stage cancer patients who have found respite at the Pure Lotus Hospice in Penang, Malaysia.

Bhiksuni Lyan Shih, age 68, founder and director of the hospice, was former a nurse tutor with government hospitals in Malaysia.

Taking early retirement after 30 years in the nursing profession, she ordained as a nun in 1992 and started Pure Lotus in 2001. Funded entirely by donors, Pure Lotus provides free care for terminally ill patients of any age, race, or religion who are the homeless and poverty-stricken.

Volunteers from all walks of life staff the hospice. Laypeople from charitable clubs and associations raise funds and visit with patients. Medical and nursing students come to learn about both palliative care and the medical aspects of end stage care. The success of the Pure Lotus Hospice has inspired Bhiksuni Lyan Shih to further expand her charitable activities. In 2004, together with Mr. Yap Peng Huat, she started an HIV/AIDS outreach program that provides food, services, medication, and other necessities to AIDS patients and their families. In 2007, she created the Pure Lotus Bodhi Home for Children to take in children between the ages of 5 and 10 who were orphaned or who came from families unable to care for them. The home will provide care until these children are age 18 and seek out scholarships for higher education for those who have excelled in school.

Striving to free the world from suffering, Bhiksuni Lyan Shih feels blessed by the patients who spend their last days at Pure Lotus and deeply touched by the dedication of volunteers who have helped create a place "where the sick and suffering find solace, the poor are not denied care, and the dying find peace of mind."

Pure Lotus Hospice of Compassion is located at 73, Jalan Utama, Penang. For more information about the hospice, phone: 04-229 5481; email: plotus@streamyx.com, or visit: www.purelotushospice.com.

Reprinted from The Star, October 22, 2008.

***Heidi Virshup** is a western Buddhist who, in July 2007, embarked from Salt Lake City, Utah, on a journey to Asia to live, paint, and practice Dharma. She currently lives in an old shophouse in a gritty neighborhood in Little India, Singapore, with her scientist husband, a teenaged son, two lazy cats, and one very bewildered* dog.

Traditional ger (yurts) under Mongolia's eternal blue sky

CLOSER TO THE BUDDHA'S PATH, AS WOMEN

Chao Hwei Shih

Sakyadhita International does not have the rich resources and support from temples, Buddhist communities, or monasteries that male-dominated international Buddhist organizations receive. As an international Buddhist women's organization, Sakyadhita receives almost no support from members of the privileged socio-economic class and hence has very few resources for its work. Instead, it relies on individual donors and the few organizations that support all Buddhist traditions ecumenically and address the concerns of all Buddhist women. I would like to especially acknowledge Bhiksuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo and her dedicated team. They have been outstanding voices for Sakyadhita and have tirelessly dedicated their energy to assist less-privileged Buddist women in the developing world for the past 22 years. We can only imagine how tough a task it has been for Sakyadhita to operate with so many restraints. Nevertheless, these respected daughters of the Buddha have truly remarkable achievements to their credit. They have been able to reach out and successfully demonstrate what it means to share unconditional support for others.

For the past two decades, Sakyadhita's leaders have selflessly and tirelessly devoted themselves to a variety of projects, such as educating Buddhist women in the Himalayas and other parts of Asia. Their volunteer work has required extensive travel to Asia for networking and social service. During the 10th Sakyadhita Conference in Mongolia, their gentle voices and bright laughter remained the same, but I could not help but notice traces of exhaustion. What surprised me the most, however, is that their eyes seem to have become even clearer and more spirited. Generally speaking, busy lives and exhausting mundane chores tend to speed up the aging process, yet intuitively I felt that all the exhausting experiences of the Sakyadhita organizers have been transformed into *bodhisattva* deeds.

What I also found to be very impressive at the Sakyadhita conference in Mongolia was that all the participants were able to break through the language barrier and communicate with not much difficulty! Even though these hundreds of Buddhist women came from the different parts of the world, East and West, and despite their different skin colors, ethnicities, and nationalities, they were able to engage in genuine communications, exchanging their experiences as practitioners, researchers, or Dharma supporters.

At many international conferences, I have personally observed that, although most participants can leave aside their biases and discrimination toward different races or nationalities, few people show a genuine interest in communicating with those who are not fluent in English. Most of the time, less fluent English speakers are either neglected or treated with great impatience. The message seems to be, "If you don't speak English well, you are not qualified to be here." Asian participants at these conferences who speak better English may also discriminate against those who do not speak as well. Faced with fellow Asians struggling to express themselves, these more fluent English-speaking Asians may even feel proud or superior. Because they are competent in the language of Caucasians, they may even, consciously or unconsciously, rudely interrupt less fluent participants.

During the Sakyadhita Conference in Mongolia, however, I found that, despite the very limited resources available, the planning committee did everything it could to help overcome the language barrier among conference participants. They recognized that, naturally, some people speak better English than others and worked to ensure that no one was excluded due to language. They tried to identify bilingual speakers among the conference participants and

engage them in volunteer interpretation throughout the conference. These volunteer interpreters facilitated the panel presentations, small group discussions, during breaks, and even over meals. Whatever was expressed was simultaneously interpreted in all the different languages spoken by the conference participants. Consequently, despite all the different languages we spoke, we were able to closely engage in exchanges together and found ourselves touching each other's hearts. Through this sharing, we found our experiences echoed in each other's lives.

Two university professors and Dharma friends from Taiwan, Christie Chang and Yuchen Li, served as volunteer interpreters for Mandarin Chinese speakers. Even without professional training in simultaneous interpretation, they have developed a high degree of competency through years of practice at similar conferences. Their outstanding performance and excellent partnership certainly impressed us all. Professors Chaneung Park and Hyangsoon Yi provided excellent translations into Korean, as did Nguyen Thi Toan Ngoc, who translated into Vietnamese.

A dedicated team of Mongolia translators – Daria, Dolgor, Enkhmaa, Gantuya, Hana, Hulan, Khaliun, Khatanbaatar, Khishigt, Khulan, Kunjima, Lhagvademchig, Munguu, Nergui, Oyuna, Tungalag, Tuya, Zoloo, and others – ensured that local participants were able to communicate easily with new friends from around the world. Thanks to the efforts of all these fine translators, people throughout Mongolia were able to learn more about Buddhism and about Sakyadhita's work.

Dharma friends from around the world gather for the opening ceremony

Such considerate and thoughtful service is rarely found at international conferences other than Sakyadhita's. Generally speaking, even those who provide simultaneous interpretation are usually constrained by resources; at best, they only provide simultaneous interpretation between English and the language of the host country. The fact that Sakyadhita provides simultaneous interpretation for all participants shows its spirit of equity, respect, compassion for minorities, and its selfless devotion.

As a new member of Sakyadhita, I felt proud and my faith was also strengthened. Women can never be categorized as "the second sex" in the Buddhist community. In fact, as women, we may even come closer to understanding the Buddha's teachings. If we practice accordingly, women may actually be closer to the path to Buddhahood.

Chao Hwei Shih *is a professor of Buddhist Studies at Hongshi Buddhist Institute and at the Graduate School of Religious Studies of Hsuan-Chuang University in Taiwan. An outspoken social critic, she is well known as an advocate of human rights, women's rights, and animal rights. She is the author of numerous books.*

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