

Sakyadhita

International Association of Buddhist Women

TABLE OF CONTENTS

New Horizons in Buddhism

Karen Jensen

Wise Hope in Social Engagement

Joan Halifax

What's in a Name?

Sarah Harding

Calm and Content with Love

Priya Jeannie McKinney

Nuns' Himalayan Bicycle Yatra to Raise Awareness of Human Trafficking

Akasha

New Challenges for the Korean Bhiksuni Association: Communication and Engagement for the Future of Buddhism

Eunyoung Kim

Congenial Place to Dwell

Thuc Cong

Reflection

Tobie Tondi, SHCJ

Historical Rains Retreat

Khemmo Drolma

Further Reading



Korean nuns chant at the 16th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women in Australia.

NEW HORIZONS IN BUDDHISM

by Karen Jensen

The Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women hosted its sixteenth conference in late June 2019, gathering over 800 Buddhist nuns and laywomen from 29 countries in Blue Mountains of Australia. This was the first time the event was held outside Asia.

Since its inception in 1987, Sakyadhita has pushed against the injustices affecting lay and ordained women from around the world, organizing biennial summits where women and men from diverse Buddhist traditions meet to present papers, Dharma talks, workshops, meditation and chanting sessions, and roundtable discussions.

In the past, Sakyadhita has hosted its conferences in Asia (the previous four took place in Hong Kong, Indonesia, India, and Thailand). This was partly intended to ensure that the meetings were accessible to as many nuns and laywomen as possible—the majority of whom live in Asian countries.

But this year the Buddhist women's organization had a unique opportunity to hold a gathering in a region with a less-established Buddhist history. Fittingly, the theme of the conference was "New Horizons in Buddhism." As in previous conferences, presentations reflected the major concerns and obstacles that female monastics and laywomen face in the present era.

"I think the idea [behind the theme] was that the Australian venue would encourage new directions for discussion," Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo said. She is one of the founders of Sakyadhita and was a central organizer of the conference from its start through the last meeting in the summer of 2017. "The issue of sexual misconduct [in Buddhist communities and institutions] was raised very openly, for example." Two Australian women spoke about their experiences as members of Rigpa, the spiritual community founded by disgraced Tibetan Buddhist teacher Sogyal Rinpoche, who has been accused of physically and sexually abusing his followers. An independent investigation later confirmed many of the abuse allegations against him.

Artist and former nun Damcho Dyson spoke frankly about the physical violence she endured at the hands of Sogyal, and editor and author Tahlia Newland spoke on her decision to found Beyond the Temple, a blog and forum for former Rigpa students that provided a space to process their experiences.

"Like many others, I met Sogyal at a time when I was yearning for a way to make sense of suffering, after my life was derailed by a series of traumas," Dyson shared. "I didn't want to fall back into the confusion and suffering of my life, and so I reasoned that I should surrender my ego to the teacher and follow him and the lineage of the Buddha's teachings."



Pema Khandro speaks on "Women of the Dakini's Heart."

The speakers' unyielding honesty left a palpable impression, attendees said. "The whole room stood still," said American Zen Buddhist priest Roshi Joan Halifax, who gave a talk on hope and socially engaged Buddhism. "An equanimity and carefulness undergirded Damcho's presentation. This wasn't a person standing up who's morally outraged. This was a person who had done careful work on issues related to the extreme power imbalances and the kind of cult-like behavior of this particular community."

Ven. Dr. Tenzin Dadon of Bhutan and Ven. Dr. Karma Tashi Chodron of Malaysia, two nuns in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, gave a groundbreaking presentation on the sexual abuse of Buddhist nuns in Bhutan. Tenzin Dadon holds an M.A. in Buddhist Studies and a PhD in Religion and Gender, and has participated in eight Sakyadhita conferences, as a presenter, translator, and moderator. Karma Tashi Chodron has a PhD in Environment and Resource Studies, and works extensively as a conservationist.

Halifax hailed their lecture, titled "Silent No More! Critical Review of Sexual Exploitation in Buddhist Practice: A Monastic Perspective," as "uncompromising and brilliant." She recalled, "They delivered their presentation in an extremely intelligent, highly equanimous way. I was shocked—but also informed. One sort of imagines that this is happening, but it is not talked about."

Other speakers and workshop leaders included Buddhist teacher and translator Sarah Harding, environmental researcher and conservationist Dekila Chungyalpa, and nuns' ordination advocate



Indonesia Buddhist women chant at the opening ceremony.

Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron. Ven. Jeong Kwan, whose vegetarian temple cooking was featured on the Netflix series "Chef's Table," taught a workshop on kimchi making. Among other highlights, Jetsumna Tenzin Palmo, the current president of Sakyadhita International, celebrated her 76th birthday.

After 32 years of organizing Sakyadhita conferences, Ven. Lekshe reflected on her role in the formation and achievements of Sakyadhita and the organization's humble beginnings. "We had no grand hopes or dreams. We simply wanted to create a safe and welcoming space for women from different traditions," she said.

The first conference was held in Bodhgaya, India (the site of Buddha's enlightenment), in 1987. The organizers initially thought the conference would be a small gathering of nuns, but the meeting ballooned into a summit, attended by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. "We broke through many boundaries at that first conference. Imagine monks sitting at tables the same height as the nuns! But with His Holiness the Dalai Lama sitting right there with his gleaming smile of encouragement, no one dared to refuse," Ven. Lekshe remembers. "In Australia, I met Bhiksuni Karma Dechen, one of the four nuns who helped me manage that first



Sr. Malia Dominica Wong talks about "Welcoming the Stranger."

conference. We laughed when we recalled all the many difficulties we encountered and how we just blasted through them all. There are times for caution and other times for daring. We felt a bit proud that we were foolish enough and courageous enough to take on such a huge, unprecedented, unpredictable task!"

One of the most dynamic effects of Sakyadhita has been the development of strong alliances and friendships between nuns, scholars, activists, and artists of different Buddhist traditions and backgrounds. The conferences give women access to more information about the Buddhist world beyond their centers or monasteries, a chance to bear witness to the accomplishments of other women, and the opportunity to learn from and appreciate other traditions.

"Not once did I feel the kind of sectarian competition that often comes in an interfaith meeting. People were really curious about how and what other traditions practice, what their aspirations were," Halifax observed. "At one point I turned around and looked back at who was sitting behind me to see almost a 1,000



Sakyadhita past president, Ranjani DeSilva, with Korean friends.

women (and a few men). Most of the women had shaved heads and were wearing robes—grey, brown, orange, white, pink—it was staggering. You know, I'd never been in the same room with so many women practitioners. It was like being in this sea of Guan Yin's [the bodhisattva of compassion who is often depicted as a woman]. It was a truly amazing conference, if one can call it that. More like a happening! The whole thing was beyond my wildest expectations and imaginings."

The next Sakyadhita conference is scheduled to be held in Sarawak (Borneo), East Malaysia, in 2021.

A version of this article originally appeared in Tricycle magazine's online platform, Trike Daily, at <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/buddhist-women-and-metoo/>.

WISE HOPE IN SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

by Joan Halifax

A good part of my life has been spent relating to situations that might be deemed hopeless—as an anti-war activist and civil rights worker in the nineteen sixties and as a caregiver of dying people and teacher of clinicians in conventional medical centers for fifty years. I also worked as a volunteer with death row inmates for six years, continue to serve in medical clinics in remote areas of the Himalayas, and served in Kathmandu Rohingya refugees who have no status, anywhere. Ending gender violence and feminism have also been a lifelong commitment.



Vietnamese nuns chant the Heart of Wisdom Sutra.

You might ask, why work in such hopeless situations? Why care about ending the direct and structural violence of war or injustice, as violence is a constant in our world? Why have hope for people who are dying, when death is inevitable; why work with those who are on death row... redemption is unlikely; or serve refugees fleeing from genocide, and no country seems to want these men, women, and children? Why work for women's rights? What does it mean to hope in our fraught world?

Wise Hope

I have long been troubled by the notion of hope. It just did not seem very Buddhist to hope. The Zen master Shunryu Suzuki Roshi once said that life is "like stepping onto a boat which is about to sail out to sea and sink." That certainly brings conventional hope up short! But some time ago, in part because of the work of social critic Rebecca Solnit and her powerful book *Hope in the Dark*, I am opening to another view of hope – what I am calling "wise hope."



Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo and Roshi Joan Halifax.

As Buddhists, we know that ordinary hope is based in desire, wanting an outcome that could well be different from what might actually happen. To make matters worse, not getting what we hoped for is often experienced as a misfortune. If we look deeply, we realize that anyone who is conventionally hopeful has an expectation that always hovers in the background, the shadow of fear that one's wishes will not be fulfilled. Ordinary hope then is a form of suffering. This kind of hope is a nemesis and a partner with fear.

We might ask then: what more specifically is hope? Let's begin by saying what hope is not: hope is not the belief that everything will turn out well. People die. Populations die out. Civilizations die. Planets die. Stars die. Recalling the words of Suzuki Roshi, the boat is going to sink! If we look, we see the evidence of suffering, of injustice, of futility, of desolation, of harm, of ending all around us, and even within us. But we have to understand that hope is not a story based on optimism, that everything will be ok. Optimists imagine that everything will turn out positively. I consider this point of view dangerous; being an optimist means one doesn't have to bother; one doesn't have to act. Also, if things don't turn out well, cynicism or futility often follow.

Hope, of course, is also opposed to the narrative that everything is getting worse, the position that pessimists take. Pessimists take refuge in depressive apathy or apathy driven by cynicism. And, as we might expect, both optimists and pessimists are excused from engagement.



Sakyadhita translators like Eunkyong Kim work round the clock, with a smile.

So, what is it to be hopeful and not optimistic? The American novelist Barbara Kingsolver explains it this way: "I have been thinking a lot lately about the difference between being optimistic and being hopeful. I would say that I'm a hopeful person, although not necessarily optimistic. Here's how I would describe it. The pessimist says, "It's going to be a terrible winter; we're all going to die." The optimist says, "Oh, it'll be all right. I don't think it'll be that bad." The hopeful person says, "Maybe someone will still be alive in February, so I'm going to put some potatoes in the root cellar just in case." ... Hope isa mode of resistance.... a gift I can try to cultivate."

If we look at hope through the lens of Buddhism, we discover that wise hope is born of radical uncertainty, rooted in the unknown and the unknowable. How could we ever know what is really going to happen?! Wise hope requires that we open ourselves to what we do not know, what we cannot know; that we open ourselves to being surprised, perpetually surprised. In fact, wise hope appears through the spaciousness of radical uncertainty, of surprise, and this is the space in which we can engage. This is what socially engaged Buddhist Joanna Macy calls "active hope," the engaged expression of wise hope.

It's when we discern courageously, and at the same time realize we don't know what will happen that wise hope comes alive; in the midst of improbability and possibility is where the imperative to act rises up. Wise hope is not seeing things unrealistically but rather seeing things as they are, including the truth of impermanence...as



Nuns of the Tibetan tradition gather from around the world.

well as the truth of suffering—both its existence and the possibility of its transformation, for better or for worse.

Through another Buddhist lens, we can see that wise hope reflects the understanding that what we do matters, even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can really know beforehand. As Rebecca Solnit points out, truly, we cannot know what will unfold from our actions now or in the future; yet we can trust that things will change; they always do. But our vows, our actions, how we live, what we care about, what we care for, and how we care really do matter all the same.

Yet often we become paralyzed by the belief that there is nothing to hope for—that our patient's cancer diagnosis is a one-way street with no exit, that our political situation is beyond repair, that there is no way out of our climate crisis. We might feel that nothing makes sense anymore, or that we have no power and there's no reason to act.

I often say that there should be just two words over the door of our Zen temple in Santa Fe: *Show up!* One might ask why would



Yeshe Dechen performs a contemporary Tibetan dance.

I want these words over the door of our temple, when despair, defeatism, cynicism, skepticism, and the apathy of forgetting are fed by the corroding effect of conventional hopelessness. Yes, suffering is present. We cannot deny it. There are 67.3 million refugees in the world today; only eleven countries are free from conflict; climate change is turning forests into deserts. Japan's population is declining. Suicide rates for children are up. Violence toward women is increasing. Many feel no connection to religion or spirituality, and countless people are deeply alienated and take refuge in their digital devices. We also see that economic injustice is driving people into greater and greater poverty. Racism and sexism remain rampant. Our medical system is deeply challenged. Globalization and neo-liberalism are putting the planet at great risk.

The peacemaker Daniel Berrigan once remarked "One cannot level one's moral lance at every evil in the universe. There are just too many of them. But you can do something; and the difference between doing something and doing nothing is everything." Berrigan understood that wise hope doesn't mean denying the realities that we are confronted with today. It means facing them, addressing them, and remembering what else is present, like the shifts in our values that recognize and move us to address suffering right now. Seven hundred years ago, in Japan, Zen Master Keizan wrote: "Do not find fault with the present." He invites us to see it, not flee it!



Nuns from diverse Theravāda traditions chant in Pāli.

Returning to the difference between hope and optimism and why hope makes sense in our fraught world, the Czech statesman Václav Havel said, “Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.” For many of us, it is an imperative to march for peace, to work for the ending of nuclear proliferation, to put pressure on the US government to re-sign the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. It makes sense to shelter the homeless, including those fleeing from war and climate devastation; it makes sense to support compassion and care in medicine in spite of the increasing presence of technology that stands between patients and clinicians. It makes sense to educate girls and vote for women. It makes sense to sit with dying people, take care of our elders, feed the hungry, love and educate our children.

In truth, we can’t know how things will turn out, but we can trust that there will be movement, there will be change. And at the same time, something deep inside us affirms what is good and right to do. We move forward in our day and sit at the bedside of the dying grandmother or teach that third grade class of kids from the poor neighborhood. We bear witness to the young woman who wants to take her life. We hold our CEO’s and politicians accountable. Barbara Kingsolver put potatoes in her root cellar, as we recall! It is exactly at this point of not knowing that our vows come alive ... in the midst of seeming futility or meaninglessness.

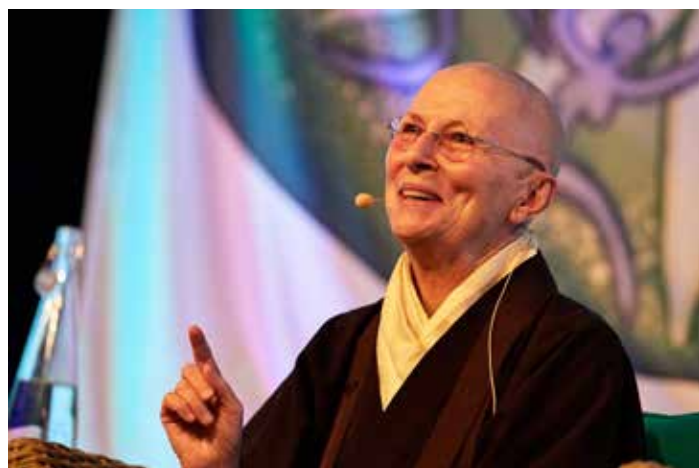


Korean Buddhist Women’s “Healing Chorus” performs a song.

The American Benedictine nun and social activist Sister Joan Chittiser writes: “Everywhere I looked, hope existed - but only as some kind of green shoot in the midst of struggle. It was a theological concept, not a spiritual practice. Hope, I began to realize, was not a state of life. It was at best a gift of life.” This gift of life that I have called “wise hope” is rooted in our vows and is what Zen Master Dogen means when he admonishes us to “give life to life,” even if it’s just one dying person at a time, one refugee at a time, one prisoner at a time, one life at a time, one ecosystem at a time.

As Buddhists, we share a common aspiration to awaken from our own confusion, from greed, and from anger in order to free others from suffering. For many of us, this aspiration is not a “small self” improvement program. The Bodhisattva Vows at the heart of the Mahayana tradition are, if nothing else, a powerful expression of radical and wise hope and hope against all odds. This kind of hope is free of desire, free from any attachment to outcome; it is a species of hope that is victorious over fear. What else could be the case as we chant: Creations are numberless, I vow to free them. Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to transform them. Reality is boundless, I vow to perceive it. The awakened way is unsurpassable, I vow to embody it.

Our journey through life is one of peril and possibility—and sometimes both at once. How can we stand on the threshold



Roshi Joan Halifax speaks on “Wise Hope.”

between suffering and freedom, between futility and hope and remain informed by both worlds? With our penchant for dualities, humans tend to identify either with the terrible truth of suffering or with freedom from suffering. But I believe that excluding any part of the larger landscape of our lives reduces the territory of our understanding. This includes the complex landscape of hope and futility.

When I began my work in the end-of-life care field nearly fifty years ago, dying in Western culture was often considered a failure of medicine, even a failure of life. At the time, I did not even consider hope as anything relevant. What motivated me to do the work was that it felt like an imperative to do the best I could to address the deficits of compassion that I witnessed in modern medicine and to serve those who were suffering, including dying patients, family caregivers, and clinicians.

At the same time, I could not be attached to any outcome, as I intuitively knew that futility might paralyze me. I learned that I had to do my best by moving away from the story that working for peace, justice, or an equitable and compassionate society, including medical culture, would turn out well, was too big a job,



Korean bhikkhunis chant before the Buddha.

or was hopeless. I had to “just show up” and do what I felt was morally aligned with my values, my principles, my commitments, regardless of what might happen. Much later, I came to understand that this work was an outcome of the gift of wise hope, springing from not-knowing and as well from the sense of meaning it gave my life.

I also somehow understood that being with dying was sacred work. For most people, confronting death brings into focus existential dimensions of our lives. I knew that I too was mortal; I too would face my death one day; I too would confront loss and sorrow. What happened was that I was unwittingly drawn into the strong current of the end-of-life care field without having the conscious intention to do this work. I only knew that I had to turn toward and serve dying people, because it felt aligned with who I was and who I was learning to be.

Living by Vow

In Zen, this is what I believe is called “living by vow.” I have come to understand that wise hope is in fact living by vow, and a powerful expression of fundamental integrity and respect.

As my Zen practice matured over the years, I came to understand that living by vow reflects our ability to be guided by our deepest values, to be conscientious, and to connect to who we really are. Living by vow also points to our capacity for moral sensitivity, our ability to identify morally relevant features in our interaction with others, in how we choose to live our lives, and in the organizations in which we work and those whom we serve. Living by vow also reflects our capacity for insight and our ability to manifest moral nerve to deal with issues of harm, no matter how egregious or seemingly insignificant.

I came to see that our vows are a grammar of values reflected in our attitudes, in our thoughts, in our hopes, and in how we are in the world. The promises and commitments reflected in wise hope are fundamentally about how we are with each other and ourselves, how we connect, and how we meet the world. Practicing our vows, embodying them reflect our integrity and help give us ballast and meaning as we confront the inner and outer storms of being human. And what we come to realize is that our vows are a bigger landscape than most of us realize, and they support integrity in our lives and protect our world and give hope gravity and momentum.

The most powerful vows are those that point us toward living a larger identity, of being Buddha, of being a Buddha now. These vows support us in recognizing impermanence, interdependence, unselfishness, compassion, and wisdom. I believe that these kinds of vows are essential practices that support integrity and the development of moral character, and they are the fuel of wise hope.

Living by vow with the spirit of wise hope shines through the decisions that we make every day of our lives. Our vows are strengthened and actualized through the medium of wise hope. If wise hope is not present, we might be afraid to take a stand and choose to ignore or back away from situations of harm. We might be in denial or willfully ignorant over the suffering experienced by others when transgressive situations arise. We might be morally apathetic, or paralyzed by hopelessness, or living in a bubble of privilege and be blind to suffering. But if we aren’t trapped by these defenses, we might step forward and meet harm with the determination to end suffering, even when our actions might appear futile; and we do so without a “gaining idea,” to quote Suzuki Roshi. We can also remember that Barbara Kingsolver said that hope is a form of resistance, and by using the word resistance, I believe that she means being resistant to apathy.

I have learned from my long experience of being with dying that what keeps us upright in our aspirations and vows is our moral nerve, the courage to stand in principles of goodness and non-harming. What keeps our integrity on track is our moral sensitivity, our ability to see the contours of reality that make harm and futility visible and also point past suffering to a larger and deeper identity. We need both a strong back and a soft front, lived equanimity and compassion, to keep ourselves aligned with our values and abiding in the strength of wise hope.

We also need to have the kind of heart that is wide enough to accept rejection, criticism, disparagement, anger, and blame, if our views, aspirations, and actions are against the mainstream and what we do is seen by others as without meaning or even a threat to the social order of the day. Furthermore, it is important to remember that our vows support us in staying aligned with our deepest values and remind us of who we really are.

Sitting with a dying person or a dying planet, we show up. We all know that indifference kills. In service to peace, in service to non-violence, in service to life, we live by vow, and we live in the embrace of wise hope.

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Professor Sarah Harding's talk is titled "What's in a Name?"

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

by Sarah Harding

The theme "Buddhist Women Rising to Challenges" struck a chord with me since I have definitely felt the challenge of being a woman in the Buddhist world. But since that experience is certainly not unique, it never occurred to me to write about it. Then, way down at the bottom of the Sakyadhita's call for papers, it said "More personalized perspectives based on one's own experiences will be welcome." So, for the first time ever, I will try that.

I met my teacher Kalu Rinpoche at his monastery near Darjeeling, India, around 1972. I immediately entered his program of practice through daily teachings in his room with a small group of Westerners in the midst of the usual life of an all-male monastery. One event that struck me was the sudden "liberation," as it is called, of a three-year retreat that had been going on there unbeknownst to me. I was extremely impressed by the monks that emerged. Later, when Rinpoche announced the first such retreat for Westerners, I immediately applied and was not-so-immediately accepted. I learned Tibetan, did the preliminary practices, accumulated the money, and helped to build the retreat facilities at a center in France.

In 1976, I entered retreat with seven other women. There was only one nun among us. The men were ensconced a short distance away. Rinpoche had not been deterred by criticism from other *lamas* for assigning women the same practice program as the men, but he did truly wish that everyone would ordain as monastics, and never gave up trying. On his visits to the retreat, he liked to regale us with true, if somewhat exaggerated, stories from his travels of marriages gone terribly wrong. Still, no one decided to take up a permanent ordination, and most of them gave back the temporary vows that we took for the retreat immediately afterwards. As of now, not a single woman or man from that retreat retains their monastic vows. In the highly monastic Kagyu and Shangpa traditions, laypeople participating at this level of Vajrayāna practice in extended,

cloistered, group retreat was virtually unknown. Enlightened or not, that left quite a dilemma for an elderly Tibetan master from a different era, culture, and experience to sort out.

When the retreat ended in 1980, the first thing that happened was that Rinpoche had each of us give a Dharma talk there at the center in France. The message was clear: we would be teaching, even though no one had that in mind when they entered retreat (At least not the women. I can't speak for the men.) The next thing was that we were all to accompany him on a tour of centers around France, sitting on stage with him in our maroon robes, advertised as "the first thirteen occidental *lamas*." Rinpoche was clearly very proud of his achievement, and we basked in the glory.

After the glory tour (mine was cut short by being sent to rescue a Sikkimese *lama* who had run away in Los Angeles), we were all assigned to various posts. I was already in Los Angeles, translating for the runaway *lama*. I noticed that all the other women were also sent to translate or attend Tibetan *lamas*, while all the men were sent to *be lamas* in various centers. So that was interesting. When I had a chance to inquire, there was some talk about how that was more skillful, since in Western culture men were dominant and would be listened to. Right - well, as a translator I can say that people might *think* they were listening to a man, but in fact they were listening to the invisible female voice beside the throne occupied by a monk. Doesn't that just resemble the history of the modern world? After my first child was born and I wouldn't wear Rinpoche's new fashion for lay teachers of maroon with white stripes, Rinpoche seemed to give up on me. I had totally failed.

Around 1982, Kalu Rinpoche was preparing for another retreat in Canada, and I decided to attend the empowerments. Somewhat surprisingly, I was the only one of the earlier retreat graduates who was required to pay the attendance fees, which I could not afford. Perhaps due to that injustice, I confronted Rinpoche over the whole issue. Were women doing the retreat the same as men? Yes, but the word "*lama*" is for men. (Funny, since it is a feminine gendered word in Tibetan.) What about Jetsun Lama Kushola? She's called *lama* because she's the sister of Sakya Trinzin. What about Lama Palden? If someone calls *themselves* a *lama*, it is polite to address them as they like. And so on. Later, in a public talk, Rinpoche actually said "You can't call a cow a bull" and "If someone has qualities, they will automatically shine forth like a rainbow appearing when gold is under the ground" and so forth. I was so devastated that Rinpoche thought I was trying to stake a claim for myself, I slunk away that very day, definitely *not* rising to the challenge.

An important Kagyu lama tried to prescribe the word *naljorma* (Sanskrit: *yogini*) for lay female retreat graduates, but this didn't really stick. However, Kalu Rinpoche's successor, Bokar Rinpoche, had no trouble at all addressing and respecting lay women who completed the retreat as *lamas*. Perhaps it is no longer an issue. But my experience with my own *guru*, in whom I never had a moment's doubt, spawned a series of questions for about thirty years that I will try to describe in two minutes.

I have always disdained titles. So, why bother? But, at the same time, is it fair if men get it and women do not? Is this even my fight? I don't even like the job description of "*lama*," since I don't want followers. But if I don't stand up to it, am I abandoning women? If I do stand up, will it seem arrogant and assertive? Aren't claims and titles a male thing anyway? Why should a woman have to act like a man? Do I even want to buy into titles bestowed or withheld by men? So, "thanks but no thanks." (Or something a little more rude.) Do I want a title in a foreign language that no one really understands? Would I rather be called "professor," since that's clear? If the power of women is communal and not hierarchical,



Indonesian Buddhist women chant the Dharma.



Theravada Buddhist nuns from many countries chant in Pali.



Buddhist women of China chant the Heart of Wisdom Sutra.



Sr. Malia Dominica Wong chants a Hawaiian blessing.



Mira Hoeng conducts a workshop on tote bag painting.



Dharma friends share the "Taichi greeting" after a taichi workshop.



Expressing appreciation with indigenous Australian art.



Vietnamese nuns generate sincere aspirations.



Jeong Kwan Sunim, featured on "Chef's Table," teaches the secrets of kimchee.



Panna Theri speaks about Buddhist nuns in Myanmar.



Suzanne Franzway, professor of sociology and gender studies, speaks about her research.



Tibetan Australians perform a traditional Tibetan dance.



A nun strikes a gong in the early morning at Nguyen Khong Nunnery.

why set ourselves up for reverence based on a name? Is all this my neurosis or my wisdom?

This last one is the burning question. In the Tibetan Buddhist teachings, we are taught that the *kleśas* or toxic emotions are actually a kind of wisdom when they are not distorted by ego-clinging. Thus, desire is the wisdom of discernment, anger is mirror-like wisdom, and so forth. This is a fundamental teaching of the Vajrayāna. Usually it is described as the wisdom present *after* those poisons are purified. But what if they co-exist? If desire exists alongside the wisdom of discerning that those specific desired phenomena are intrinsically empty; that anger is permeated by the mirror-like wisdom that reflects equally the merely superficial images of infuriating situations; that pride actually *is* the wisdom of equality that recognizes our interconnectedness, and so on?

And what if the wisdom of the noncompetitive nonassertive female power coexists in me along with the scourge of female low self-esteem? That not rising to the challenge of female equity in the Buddhist ranks or stepping up to the role of *lama* is both a kind of humility and resistance to egomania and at the same time a shrinking acquiescence to male dominance? I don't know.

I will just share a few observations from my research regarding female titles. While many Asian lineages have mostly kept the traditional titles in the west, occasionally sharing them with women, the Tibetan lineages use all kinds of titles, mostly deriving from Tibetan or Sanskrit terms taken out of context. So there are *mītras*, *shāstris*, *loppōns*, *āchāryas*, *naljormas*, *ngakmas*, *yoginis*, *jetsunmas*, *khandromas*, and so on. In a nod to the English, one group uses “vicar” and the hilarious “brevet *lama*,” borrowed from the British military.

The important pattern to notice is that, aside from the word “*lama*” when it is used for graduates of the three-year retreat, almost all the titles do not indicate any specific achievement. Titles are bestowed solely at the discretion of a teacher at best, or at worst claimed by the person themselves in what is a very literal “sense of entitlement.”

The former requires us to have confidence in the clairvoyance of the preceptor that granted the title, and the one that granted that one, and so on, back into the past. But this makes it quite difficult to research the background of any teacher, the way the Dalai Lama has recommended. I found that the majority of title grants were more about promoting the teacher's sphere of influence than the spiritual realization of the disciples, which in any case is difficult to assess. Needless to say, the self-entitled teachers greatly add to the befuddlement of us mortals.

Ideally, titles should indicate something specific that anyone could understand. For instance, a PhD doesn't guarantee wisdom, but at least we know that those people did their homework, usually. That is why “Venerable” and “Venerable Bhiksuni” for fully ordained nuns works so well. Someone who takes and keeps vows is worthy of veneration for that alone. The title is clear and universally understood. But for there to be an equivalent term for lay female teachers would require agreement on teacher training programs, levels of achievement, names, and so forth, across Buddhist schools and lineages or even within one lineage. I don't think that is going to happen. It would be nice to do away with titles altogether, but that's not going to happen either. I guess each person has to figure it out alone.

Anyway, it's too late for me now: my five-year-old grandson already calls me “grammalama.” I'm going to have a lot of explaining to do.

CALM AND CONTENT WITH LOVE

by Priya Jeanine McKinney

After a year of teaching English in Thailand, my physical and mental health started to decline, with long bouts of depression. No matter how much I practiced, my meditation sessions were full of tears and sadness. Then I broke my wrist and had to have the bones relocated, with my hand in a cast for weeks. My depression and sense of loneliness hit rock bottom. A familiar sense of longing arose to live in a community again with other practitioners.

Just then, I heard about a Zen Buddhist monastery and orphanage called Chua Nguyen Khong, in Dalat, Vietnam. Twenty years before, I had met Karma Lekshe Tsono and went on the first of many trips to India to volunteer at Jamyang Foundation monasteries in India. When I updated her on my life and aspiration to work with children in Southeast Asian, she recommended this monastery.



Nuns and children at Nguyen Khong Nunnery in Vietnam.

The sparkling clean, strictly vegetarian monastery is home to many orphan children – a dream come true!

Chua Nguyen Khong is located in the hills near Dalat. At an elevation of almost 3,000 feet, the weather is cool and comfortable. This not only sounded like a great adventure, but also a great escape from the fierce heat of Southeast Asian summers. So, with Venerable Lekshe's introduction, I headed off to Vietnam.

When I arrived at the monastery, the abbess, Bhiksuni Tam Hanh and all the nuns and children greeted me with beaming smiles. The genuine joy on their faces made me feel very welcome. That very first day, I sat in the meditation hall while one of the *bhiksunis* chanted. For the first time in a very long time, I was able to drop into a deep meditation. The *bhiksuni's* chanting felt magical and familiar. It reminded me of being in the jungle with an Amazonian medicine woman. [Photo of 2 pm chanting by Sr. nun]

From my very first days at the monastery, I felt very calm, relaxed, and well loved. The monastery is surrounded by lush gardens and fruit trees. The gardens provide fresh organic fruits and vegetables for our meals.

In the early morning, we awaken to the sweet sounds of gongs and bells. No need for an alarm clock here! The musical sounds are a 4 am wake-up call for morning prayers. When we hear the gongs and bells, not only do we open our eyes, but we also awaken our awareness. We tune in to our breathing and become aware of the present moment.

At 11 am, we gather together for the midday meal. As soon as everyone is seated, all the children sing prayers in their magical voices. Without any reminder, they all remain quiet while eating with delicate hand movements. Whenever we make eye contact, I always receive a tender smile. It is impossible to describe how



Priya Jeanine McKinney and a young friend during playtime.

delicious the meals are. The nuns make their own tofu and every meal has new flavors.

After lunch there is a rest period and at 2 pm, there is time for showering, cleaning, and washing clothes. Every action is done in a restful, careful, unhurried way. Around 3 pm in the afternoon, the young nuns join me for a walk around the beautiful Guanyin Pond. They like to hold my hand as we saunter mindfully around the immaculate grounds. The children, delighted to speak English, cheerfully run up to say "Hi!"

At 4 pm, play time begins! The children have plenty of space to play games, fly kites, and run freely through the fields. They play happily, with no electronic devices anywhere to be found. Even so, they are always happy to have their photo taken and love to take photos of each other!

In the evening, around 6 pm, we gather in the meditation hall for prayers. Imagine forty children sitting as still as a rock during the chanting. At first, it was hard to believe that young children could be so calm and attentive. The nuns take care of toddlers and newborns, some of whom are abandoned the same day they are born, and raise them with love.

Our days are full of walking meditation, prayers, chanting, and sitting meditation. Three days a week, we also do yoga. I teach classes a few hours a day and the children receive love and care 24/7.

The questions Bhiksuni Tam Hanh asks me reveal her compassionate heart. Are you happy here? Is your mind okay? Do you feel calm? Are you feeling any pain in your wrist? Is everything okay? Is the food okay? The nuns' concern for each other's well-being seems quite rare in the world today. The compassionate care of the nuns makes me feel hopeful again. I also feel quite guilt-free and open about how much or little I choose to attend the daily practices. Not a nun? No problem! We can wear clothes similar to the nuns, which are so comfortable and much easier to launder!

As I sit writing, overlooking an image of Guanyin and a huge gong, I hear crickets and birds singing, surrounded by beautiful, well-maintained gardens and refreshed by a cool breeze. It's been a long time since I've stopped to feel the wind on my face and listen to the trees and the birds. By 8 o'clock, I am in bed with the lights out. My schedule now runs from 4 am to 8 pm, whereas it used to be 9 am to midnight!

When I arrived at the monastery, there was just one other lay practitioner there. One evening at 8 pm, my lights were already off, when I heard a little knock on my door. I turned on the dim light and opened the door to see a young nun there. She was left at the monastery when she was a baby, weighting on 1.5 kg. Now she's 11, but appears more like a four- or five-year-old. She doesn't speak English and I don't speak Vietnamese, so after sitting for a few seconds, I pulled a book from my shelf and read her *Rainbow Fish*. After I finished reading it, she delicately put the book back on the shelf and left my room. It was a sweet moment.

I had almost fallen asleep, but instead of being grouchy at being woken up, I felt really good. It was exciting to see that the energy and kindness of the monastery is rubbing off on me. It feels really good to get out of myself. Finally, after 60 years in this world, thinking about others is becoming a natural response. Gradually, feelings of thoughtfulness and kindness are becoming less of a contrived effort.

Again, this morning meditation was magical. Actually, the most magical part was the *bhiksuni's* chanting. Hearing the sounds of the bell, drum, and chants is like feeling the pulse of the natural world – not separate but permeating, within and without. Perhaps the separation between our inner world and the natural world is one cause of depression.



A young novice cuddles a newborn with a heart full of love.

Suddenly, I noticed that I was narrating the whole experience to myself. So, I sat in non-judgmental awareness of my narration and returned to watching thoughts and feelings come and go. I remembered that one of my teachers, during a teaching on Yeshe Tsogyal, had said that remembering is awakening. Remembering, I relaxed again into watching thoughts and feelings come and go.

Some beautiful, quiet moments passed. Then the bliss of awareness was rudely interrupted by the stinging of mosquitoes biting my feet. Reminder to self: never leave the room without a shawl to cover your feet! Remembering and awareness continue to come and go, come and go.

NUNS' HIMALAYAN BICYCLE YATRA TO RAISE AWARENESS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING *by Akasha*

Arriving on a cool September day in 2016, a group of 500 Drukpa Kagyu Buddhist nuns on bicycles rode into Leh, the capital of Ladakh, altitude 11,500', in northern India. Their arrival was the culmination of several months of travel from Kathmandu, Nepal, altitude 4,593'. Their journey covered more than 2,485 miles (4,000 km) through precarious Himalayan topography and inhospitable weather, camping out in the open. Their cause was to raise awareness of the tragedy of human trafficking and its staggering rise in these remote mountainous areas. This was accomplished by meeting local people, government officials and religious leaders to spread messages of gender equality, peaceful co-existence, and respect for the environment as well as human trafficking.¹

Twin earthquakes in Nepal in 2015 became a turning point for the nuns as they went on foot to small villages to help the survivors. More than 40,000 children lost their parents and kidnapping was

out of hand.² Across the whole Himalayan region, the devastation also accelerated the trafficking of girls, boys, women, and men for slavery, prostitution, factories, etc. in southern Asia. Homelessness and dire poverty created extreme conditions of vulnerability for adults to sign work contracts that are equivalent to indentured slavery and for the selling of children. The tragedy of human beings being trafficked and losing their freedom and their homeland cannot be overestimated.

The number of nuns of this Drukpa community has grown from 30 to 500 in the last 12 years. Founded by Gyalwang Drukpa, the spiritual foundation of this lineage is described as championing gender equality, physical fitness, environmentally-friendly ways of living, and respect for all living beings.³ To develop inner and outer strength, the nuns began their fitness program by learning kung fu and meditation. Their zeal was often met with unkindness from traditional monks communities, as the definition of nuns quickly evolved from one of marginalization to dynamic active participation in Buddhist communities. The growing physical fitness and clarity of these nuns allowed them to become cyclists in order to carry their message not only through the Himalayas, but also throughout the world via news media. The nuns seem well on the way to achieving their goal of raising awareness.

1. Nita Bhalla, "Prayer is not Enough," *Business Insider*, September 19, 2016. <http://postsfromthepath.com/published-work/prayer-is-not-enough.html>
2. <http://www.kungfununs.org/home-1>
3. Ibid.



Vietnamese children at Nguyen Khong Nunnery.

NEW CHALLENGES FOR THE KOREAN BHIKSUNĪ ASSOCIATION: COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT FOR THE FUTURE OF BUDDHISM

by Eunyoung Kim

This year, an election was held to select the twelfth president of the Korean Bhiksuni Association. Bongak Sunim was elected as the president through a direct election held at the association's headquarters in Seoul on September 18, 2019. This was the third time that the president of the Korean Bhiksuni Association has been

selected by a vote of the membership and this election drew the largest number of people ever. In the final tally, Bongak Sunim was elected with 1,064 out of 1,880 votes. This signals a new beginning in the history of the Korean Bhiksuni Association.

The Beginnings of the Korean Bhiksuni Association

In Korea, many *bhiksunis* are greatly respected today. Even though these *bhiksunis* have arisen within a difficult, male-dominated environment, they have been very brave and wise. *Bhiksunis* uphold even more precepts than *bhiksus* and they have done a magnificent job in the history of the *bhiksuni sangha* in Korea. Their wisdom has been startling.

In the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, the *bhiksu sangha* and the *bhiksuni sangha* have existed side by side since Buddhism entered the country. Sadly, in some countries, the *bhiksuni sangha* (the order of fully-ordained nuns) no longer exists, while in some countries, such as Sri Lanka, the *bhiksuni sangha* has been reestablished. In other countries, such as Korea, the *bhiksuni sangha* has either been solidly supported by the *bhiksu sangha* (the order of fully-ordained monks) or it has been allowed to develop independently since its formation.

In Korean secular law today, men and women are considered nearly equal, but this does not necessarily translate to society in general. In the *sangha*, in fact, males and females enjoy greater equality than in the general population. In the *sangha*, one's abilities are more important than gender. This is due to the efforts of the *bhiksunis*.

The Korean Bhiksuni Association has its beginnings in the Korean Buddhist Bhiksuni Udambara Association established in 1968. Although Korean Buddhism became debilitated during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945), contemporary *bhiksunis* began to stand out even in that harsh environment. The founding of the Bhiksuni Udambara Association revealed that the *bhiksunis* were excellent, well-trained practitioners. By the 1980s, the *bhiksunis'* organizational abilities had gained further acclaim and, in 1980, the organization was renamed the Korean Bhiksuni Association. In 2002, construction on the association's national headquarters was completed. In no other country have nuns been so well organized and achieved so much.

Introducing Bongak Sunim

Bongak Sunim was born in 1952 and became a novice when she was six years old. In 1976, she graduated from Dongguk University with a degree in philosophy. In 1979, she graduated from Bongnyeongsa Sangha College and went on to study in Japan. There, she earned a Master's degree from Rissho University in 1986 and a PhD from Komazawa University in Tokyo in [year?]. From 1991 to 2017, she was a professor in the Department of Buddhist Studies at Joong-Ang Sangha University. Her scholarship focused on educating and nurturing monastic students. She also served as a member of the Assembly Member of the Jogye Order, president of the Institute for Korean Bhiksunis, and vice-chair of the Korean Bhiksuni Association. Since retiring, she has served as the abbess of Geumnyunsa Temple and filled various other positions.

Bongak Sunim has paid special attention to environmental issues and women's human rights. Her temple, Geumnyunsa, was the first Korean temple to abandon using disposable products, and other temples followed suit. Geumnyunsa Temple and many other temples are currently preparing for a Green Temple Convention. She has also worked for equality between bhikkhus and bhiksunis, arguing that it is a fundamental Buddhist idea. She has expanded on the idea of gender equality as she steadily tries to improve

the unequal status of men and women in Korean Buddhism. She founded the Bhiksuni Research Institute and held the 8th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women in Korea. As the president of the Korean Bhiksuni Association, she is expected to persevere in these activities.

Bongak Sunim has proposed the idea of creating an association to promote communication and practice. She made the following pledges to over 6,000 *bhiksunis*:

- To establish a realistic welfare system;
- To make efforts in human resource development and utilization;
- To create an open, nationwide alliance of *bhiksunis*;
- To actively engage with social issues; and
- To provide leadership in an era of globalization and the fourth industrial revolution.

She pledged to support 23 detailed tasks focused on these five major tasks, expressing her aims thus:

The Korean *bhiksuni sangha* has long preserved its pure and beautiful traditions and spiritual practices. However, the rapidly changing social situation requires a clear vision and a new spirit for the future of society. It is time for us to actively embrace fresh ideas and increase our momentum toward a new vision for the future of Buddhism. We will do our best to create a strongly supported association, so that each *bhiksuni* can display her potential and capabilities.

The Appeal of Monastic Life for Korean Buddhist Women

In South Korea, women comprise more than 60 percent of the lay Buddhist population. This may be true of other countries as well. This data indicates how important *bhiksunis* are, both in positions of responsibility and as socially engaged participants. As we escort Buddhist seekers along the path of the Buddha, we may be their teacher, their grandmother, their mother, sister, or aunt. We laugh from our hearts when they are joyful. We spill tears when they feel sad. We are always together with them, whenever or wherever they may be.

Each year, Buddhists in Korea are opening more and more social welfare centers, infant care facilities, shelters, and homeless centers. They are also opening schools and hospitals in India and Cambodia. Many temples and Seon (meditation) centers have opened around the world. Therefore, more and more well-trained *bhiksunis* and Buddhist laywomen are needed.

If we open our eyes and look around, we see so many places where help is needed. We must go everywhere and extend our hands, because many people are shedding tears of grief and sorrow. We must give them hope and help them smile. We must work continuously until their sadness disappears. This socially-engaged action plan is a natural outgrowth of awakening the *bodhicitta*, the wish to free all beings from suffering. We look forward to seeing the new executive committee [Is this correct?] of the National Bhiksuni Association actively playing these roles.

Acknowledgments

This issue was compiled and edited by Rebecca Paxton and Karma Lekshe Tsomo. Design by Allen Wynar. Photos by Olivier Adam (pp. 1-9) and Priya Jeanine McKinney (pp. 10-12). Painting (p. 16) by Sandra Davis.

CONGENIAL PLACE TO DWELL

by *Thuc Cong*

Moving to Toronto from Vancouver Island, I was really overwhelmed. For me, Toronto appeared more like a country than a city. Even after several months of living in my new environment, I still feel like a three-year-old kid getting lost at a zoo.

One cold morning in January, I had to make a trip downtown to exchange my driver's license. It was not a good idea to travel during peak hours, as the subway is usually packed with busy commuters, mostly workers and students. However, I knew that the process would take at least two hours and I wanted to get in line as soon as the office opened.

As I boarded the train, of course there was no seat. Among the lucky travelers who got seats, some had their eyes closed to ease their tiredness or to catch up on sleep, while some were bent over books, cramming for classes or exams. A great number were busy looking at their phones. My small physique makes me a "visible minority senior," hard to notice. Therefore, nobody offered me a seat. As an active woman, I don't mind standing for several stops. I knew that the long wait time at Service Ontario would be tiring, but figured that would be fine. I like to practice meditation in any posture: lying, sitting, or standing. I can focus on the in-and-out of my breathing while standing.

After the usual announcement – "Please stand clear of the doors" – went out via the PA system, the train moved on. When it stopped at St. Clair station, a woman in her late thirties got on and stood next to me. Spotting a fragile senior trying to maintain her balance on a moving train, she nicely asked, "Would you want me to get you a seat?" I thanked her and responded, "No, thank you. I will get off at College station." "That's still a journey," she replied. I smiled at her and was about to go back to my in-and-out breaths. At that moment, I heard her ask someone in a nice but firm voice, "I am sorry to ask but would you mind giving your seat to this lady?" and opened my eyes. In response to her request, a young man kindly stood up and she cleared the way for me. With an inviting gesture, she said, "Please sit down."

After making sure that I sat down safely, the woman disappeared in the sea of the commuters. I felt the Dhamma right there. The women did not even realize that she was practicing the Buddha's teachings, yet she clearly proved that as long as we have a wish to give, we always have something to give. She didn't have a seat to give me, but she could ask someone else to do so. She was practicing generosity and respect for the elderly.

The woman's kindness warmed up my day and brightened my mind. I was not able to steer my mind back to *satipatthāna* (mindfulness of breathing) practice. I let my thoughts go in all directions heedlessly for a good reason: to enjoy the Dhamma practiced by a young woman. I let my mind wander to New York, where a hateful assault recently occurred on a subway. The video recorded a Caucasian woman violently hitting a young Asian woman with her keys and her umbrella, kicking and yelling at her as commuters on the train tried to stop her. By contrast, that morning, on a busy subway in the peaceful country of Canada, an Asian senior was treated with great respect and loving kindness (*mettā*) by a White woman who may not be a Buddhist.

That morning's incident was one example of my good fortune. Due to merit created in the past, I now live in a congenial place. As the Buddha taught in the *Mangala Sutta* (Discourse on Great Fortune):



Living in a civilized country,
having made merit in the past,
Directing oneself rightly:
This is the highest good fortune.

*Patirūpadesaṅgāso ca
Pubbe ca katapuññātā
Atta-sammāpanidhi ca
Etam mangalamuttamam.*

According to commentaries by Buddhist scholars, *patirūpadesaṅgāso* means "residence in a suitable and pleasant locality." For life to be pleasant, one's dwelling place must be comfortable, secure in construction, tidy and clean in appearance, and properly maintained. In addition, it is helpful if there are agreeable people in the neighborhood. Indeed, I am living among agreeable people who practice generosity and loving kindness, even without knowing they are practicing the Dhamma.

The joy I experienced as a result of the kindness of an unknown woman helped me get through the morning easily. Despite a two-hour wait, I felt at ease, peaceful, and happy. No longer did I feel like a three-year-old kid lost in a zoo. Instead, I generated the wish, "May all beings be well, happy, and peaceful."

REFLECTION

by *Tobie Tondi, SHCJ*

Earlier in the summer, I decided my much neglected car needed some repair. I took it to a local shop called Presidio owned and operated by a Vietnamese couple here in the Linda Vista section of San Diego. I had been there many times. Frank (obviously his American name) told me it would need two days to get all things right; he had lots of work and needed to order a part. "Two days!" I said, thinking of being car-less for that time. Well, there was no other choice and he was my car repair guy so I agreed, and he took me home.

At noon the following day I got a call from Frank's wife, Sophia, who is the bookkeeper and office person. "Car is ready. Frank will come. OK?" "Oh, yes," I said happily.

Frank came and picked me up and we went back to the rather messy garage and office. Sophia showed me the bill and I gave her my credit card. As always, I was aware of the little shrine that sat on the floor behind Sophia's desk, with candles burning and fresh oranges piled neatly in front.

Frank came in and I started to shower him with gratitude for doing the work so quickly. "I am so grateful to you, Frank," I said, "for doing the work so quickly. I am saying 'thank you' to Frank and Sophia and to God," I exclaimed as I waved my arm to heaven. Frank smiled. "And," I said, motioning to the shrine, "thank you to your god, too!"

"That's not my god," said Frank. "The shrine was there when I bought the place 22 years ago!" "And you've kept it there all these years?" I asked. "Yes," said Frank, "respect." "And every day you light the candles and place fresh oranges before the shrine even if it isn't your god?" "Yes," said Frank, "respect. I don't really know who god is," he said, now waving his hands to heaven. "But I want to show respect to whoever god might be."

I sat there in the small office with Frank, amazed. What a wonderful message in such an unexpected place, from the lips of Frank, the car mechanic.



Nun on Pilgrimage.

HISTORICAL RAINS RETREAT

by Khenmo Drolma

We are pleased to announce an extraordinary opportunity for *bhikshunis* in the Dharmaguptaka tradition. Next year, for the first time in centuries, a rains retreat (*varsā*) for *bhikshunis* will be observed in Shravasti, the place in northern India where the Buddha is said to have stayed in retreat for 25 rainy seasons.

H.H. Drikung Kyabgon Chetsang Rinpoche, the current throne holder of the Drikung tradition, will sponsor this rains retreat for the Mahāyāna Bhikṣunī Sangha from July 3 to August 19, 2020. The main purpose is to bring together Dharmaguptaka *bhikṣunīs* to live harmoniously and learn from each other. On this occasion, the rains retreat will be observed for 6.5 week – a “half-*varsā*,” as allowed in the *vinaya* (codes of monastic discipline). Chetsang Rinpoche will fully sponsor 64 nuns to attend the retreat, including travel expenses.

The retreat will be divided into three sections: ethical conduct (*śīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*prajñā*). The retreat will include *vinaya* teachings and study as well as periods of silent meditation retreat. At present, four teachers are scheduled to teach *vinaya*: Bhikṣunī Wu Yin of the Luminary Temple in Taiwan, Bhikṣunī Gao Kai from Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan, Bhikṣunī Thubten Chodron from Sravasti Abbey in the U.S. Bhikṣunī Heng Ching of National Taiwan University is a curriculum adviser. We are still seeking teachers, especially senior *bhikṣunīs* from the Vietnamese and Korean traditions.

The retreat aims to bring together nuns from diverse traditions to study and practice the *vinaya*, including the central procedures of monastic life. Admission is open to applicants from all Mahāyāna traditions. Further information and the application form can be found by clicking the Shravasti 2020 tab on the Vajra Dakini Nunnery website. The deadline for applications is December 31, 2019.

WOMEN ARE NOT SECOND-CLASS BUDDHISTS

by Karma Lekshe Tsomo

Gender inequality is difficult to rationalize in a tradition that supposedly proclaims enlightenment for all. When questioned by his faithful attendant Ananda, the Buddha assured him that women have equal potential to achieve the fruits of the path, including liberation, the ultimate realization. This definitive statement should have been sufficient to clear the path for women’s equality, but social realities rarely match theoretical ideals.

Even though countless women have reportedly achieved the ultimate goal of liberation—becoming arhats—women’s status has consistently been subordinate in Buddhist societies. Being born male automatically elevates a boy to first-class status, while being born female universally relegates a girl to second-class status. Wealth, aristocratic birth, or opportune marriage may mitigate the circumstances, but the general pattern of social status remains in full view. Although Buddhist societies may have overall been more gender egalitarian than many others, stark gender discrimination persists even today.

Nowhere is the subordination of women more evident than in the Buddhist sangha, the monastic community. After some hesitation, possibly based on his concern for women’s safety, the Buddha gave women the opportunity to live a renunciant lifestyle. According to the story, however, it was not on equal terms with the monks. It is taught that the Buddha’s foster mother Mahapajapati, who became the first bhikkhuni, or fully ordained nun, was required to observe eight weighty rules that continue to this day to make the nuns dependent upon the monks.

Although the language of the texts shows that these passages were added much later, nuns’ subordinate status, and a prediction that the nuns’ admission would decrease the lifespan of the Buddha’s teachings, have contributed to the perception of women’s inferiority. The teachings have far outlived the prediction (which was adjusted over time!), but the misconception has endured.

The situation of nuns today varies by tradition. In the Theravada traditions of South and Southeast Asia, the lineage of full ordination for women came to an end around the eleventh century, and many followers believe that it cannot be revived. Women who renounce household life observe eight, nine, or ten precepts, including celibacy, yet they are not considered part of the monastic sangha. Until recently they received far less education and support than monks.

In the Mahayana traditions of East Asia, the bhikkhuni lineage of full ordination was brought from Sri Lanka to China in the fifth century and flourishes today in China, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Chinese diaspora. In these traditions, nuns are well supported by the lay community and have opportunities for education roughly equal to the monks.

The bhikkhuni lineage was never established in the Vajrayana tradition of Inner Asia, but women may receive novice ordination from monks and are considered part of the monastic sangha. In the last three decades, nuns have worked hard to improve their living conditions and educational opportunities. Many of them hope that the Dalai Lama will find a way to establish a lineage of full ordination for women in the Tibetan tradition.

Ideas about how to redress the gender imbalance, both for monastics and lay women, widely differ depending on the situation. For those Buddhist women in remote areas of Asia, better nutrition, health care, and education are top priority, while for those in urban areas the concerns are about gender parity in juggling work, family, and practice. Women everywhere are oppressed by sexual

harassment and unequal representation.

Many Buddhists feel that it is time to take a fresh look at how Buddhist texts and teachings address gender. With the Buddha's declaration of women's equal potential for liberation, things started off very well. After his passing, however, patterns of male domination again became the norm in Buddhist societies. The plot thickened about five centuries after the Buddha's passing, with the appearance of the Perfection of Wisdom (Prajnaparamita) texts. These texts replace liberation from cyclic existence with the perfect awakening of a buddha as the goal of the path—a quantum leap in commitment that requires the aspirant (bodhisattva) to accumulate merit and wisdom for three countless eons.

Among the thirty-two “special marks” of a buddha, the most surprising to many modern Buddhists is a sheathed penis “like a horse.” This mark has been taken to mean that a fully awakened buddha is necessarily male. Exactly what the advantage of such an appendage might be is unclear, especially alongside other fantastic marks such as a spiral between the eyebrows that stretches for legions.

Are buddhas shown with male genitalia because men are presumed to be superior to women? Does the mark verify that the buddhas are sexual beings who have sublimated sexual desire? Are men more apt than women to achieve the fully awakened state because they must work harder to overcome sexual desire? Or is the presumption of maleness simply another patriarchal move to maintain superiority?

In addition to taking a fresh look at Buddhist texts and teachings, it is time to reexamine Buddhist institutions, which are almost all completely under male leadership, and reassess Buddhist social realities. Rather than blithely swallowing the meme that everyone is equal in Buddhism, or naively believing that gender is irrelevant to awakening, Buddhists need to reevaluate the way women are treated.

For example, even today in the Tibetan tradition a three-year-old boy can be honored with the title “Lama” (meaning “guru”), whereas a highly educated seventy-year-old nun is typically demeaned with the title “Ani” (meaning “auntie”). Donations—even by women and even in supposedly enlightened Western societies—are routinely channeled primarily to male teachers and monks' monasteries. Discriminatory attitudes have become unconsciously internalized by people in ways that are damaging to both themselves and others.

Buddhists today need to wake up to this fact and transform their habitual tendencies, equally embracing all beings with compassion. In the Buddhist traditions, the ultimate concern for women, especially nuns, is awakening—either the achievement of liberation from cyclic existence or the perfect awakening of a buddha. The fact that women are now working to achieve full representation in the Buddhist traditions and are openly voicing their aspirations reflects their compassionate concern for the well-being of all sentient life.

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Film

“Ruth Denison: The Silent Dance of Life.” A calm and touching film 104-minute documentary about the life and work of Ruth Denison (1922–2015), a pioneer of *vipassana* meditation in the West. Produced and directed by Alexandra Kumorek (104 min).

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