

DAUGHTERS OF THE BUDDHA, RISING UP

The Sakyadhita Conference 2006

by

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Women are slowly, determinedly, effecting a major shift in Asian Buddhism as they organize and push for full ordination of nuns. This movement is reflected in and supported by Sakyadhita, International Association of Buddhist Women, in the worldwide conferences it holds every two years. Full ordination of women in Buddhism is not just an internal move to right a wrong perpetrated over centuries on religious women, but it reaches out to affect the lives of all women in society.

This reciprocity between religious and secular conditions can be hard for us as westerners to grasp. We live in a secular society which, however much it is influenced these days by the Christian right, nevertheless maintains the separation of church and

state. We as American Buddhists make up a tiny minority in this country, have virtually no social influence, and are ignored by our government. The situation in some Southeast Asian countries is radically different. The vast majority of citizens adhere to Theravada Buddhism; the Buddhist establishment has tremendous influence over the people; and the government supports the religion. Thus, if women within the religion hold a low status, it makes sense that their devaluation will reflect out onto women in the culture as a whole.

Consider Thailand, where the huge problems of prostitution, sex trafficking, child-prostitution, domestic violence, and the spread of AIDS/HIV virus are facilitated in part by the low valuation of girls and women in the society. The status of women in robes mirrors this situation, as the *Maechees* (Thai “nuns”) are housed in monasteries but essentially function as cooks and servants there; they wear the white robes of the beginner until they die; they are denied Buddhist education and ordination, and are generally viewed as being on a comparable level with laywomen. While the monks are supported and venerated in every way by the laypeople, there is much less encouragement to support a nun—you will gain little merit from doing so.

If a fully committed female religious renunciant is neither supported nor honored nor respected, is it a surprise that in the society at large women are seen as lesser beings to be exploited? Conversely, if Thai nuns could succeed in achieving full ordination and take their places as teachers and heads of nunneries and other institutions, they could provide refuge for endangered women and positive models to support and encourage laywomen and girls to work toward equality and economic self-sufficiency in the civil society.

It is not just SE Asian Theravada Buddhism that maintains the gender inequality. Tibetan Buddhist nuns also are denied full ordination within their own tradition. (In Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, on the other hand, the order of fully ordained nuns thrives and holds a position of great social visibility and honor in countries like Taiwan.)

It is awarenesses such as these that have brought me to Malaysia, to participate in the 9th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women. Twenty-one hours it takes to get to Kuala Lumpur, the capital. At the airport I see groups of women wearing headscarves and long sleeves, others covered head to foot in black cloth, a reminder that a majority of the population in Malaysia (about 55%) follows the Muslim faith. Then there is a large Chinese population with some Sri Lankans interspersed (35% of the total), most of whom are Buddhist. It is the world of Chinese/Malaysian Buddhism that I am about to enter as I step out of the air-conditioned airport into the enveloping heat of a tropical climate very close to the equator.

Sau Seng Lum Exhibition Center

Imagine a giant high-ceilinged ceremonial hall with a stage opposite the opening. On the stage sits a large Buddha statue, garlanded in flames, against a gold and green background. Apricot-colored cloth garlands the stage, flowers abound; theatrical lighting hangs above. Music fills the hall, a lush male voice singing in Chinese.

On the floor in front of the stage hundreds of red plastic chairs are arranged in rows. The great front entrance doors stand open, and a curtain of cold air comes down just inside the hall. Breezes blow the banners and elaborate hangings. People scurry

about, registering, directing, rehearsing for the opening ceremony which will take place tomorrow on Saturday, June 17, the first day of the conference.

This is the setting for the 9th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist women, an event inaugurated in 1987 in Bodh Gaya, India, with the purpose of “nurturing [Buddhist] women’s potential for compassionate social action through networking, education, publications and training.” Every two years since then, a Sakyadhita Conference has been held in an Asian city “to unite Buddhist women worldwide and work toward gender equity in the Buddhist traditions.”

The Buddha ordained women as well as men, and he said that the sangha should consist of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen. Efforts to re-establish or establish for the first time this fourfold sangha in every Buddhist country by offering full ordination to nuns, lie at the root of Sakyadhita (which means Daughters of the Buddha). If its founders, among them Karma Lekshe Tsomo, an American woman in Tibetan-Buddhist robes, and Ayya Khema, a German-born woman in Theravada Buddhist robes, had been afforded full ordination in their own traditions, they would have simply pursued their religious vocations in their respective sanghas. But when they saw that their chosen traditions denied ordination to women, they reached out to Buddhist women throughout the world to create an organization to address this inequality.

At the Sau Seng Lum Exhibition Center I wander the perimeter of the hall, where exhibits hang on the walls. Here I learn about Reverend Chang Heng, the female head of the temple that is hosting us, who had been trained in Taiwan. I see photographs of old people receiving care at the stroke rehabilitation center run by the temple; pictures of people hooked up to machines and tended by white-coated technicians at the

hemodialysis center also established by the temple; patients being cared for in the white van sent out into the community by the Loving Charity Mobile Clinic. So this must be the “humanitarian Buddhism” prominent in Taiwan. How different it feels here from our own Buddhist centers in the States. Service seems the main thrust of this temple, and from the photographs it appears that multitudes of people are involved.

As I watch the many volunteers, female and male, doing their jobs of setting up, and then note the dignitaries convened for the opening ceremony, I begin to understand the monumental organizing task that has made this conference possible, and how integrated into the local Chinese/Malaysian community we are. Later I talk with one of the major organizers, Christie Yu-ling Chang, who describes how she and Karma Lekshe Tsomo journeyed to Malaysia in the two years preceding to make all the contacts, enlist the local groups and individuals, begin the organizing that would create this environment to house, feed and facilitate the communication of 530 participants. And I saw the penetrating intelligence and sound judgment of the organizers in soliciting the support of the local government and Buddhist community for a conference in which women challenge the prevailing restrictions and explore unconventional approaches to Buddhist education and practice.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, the undisputed center of this conference, is a remarkable woman. Having gone to Asia as a young hippie, she found Tibetan Buddhism, and donned the robes of a Tibetan monastic. In 1982 she received full ordination in Korea. For more than twenty years she has tirelessly worked to benefit Tibetan nuns in India and Tibet, establishing nunneries, teaching the young women to read, raising money to support them. She has authored and edited a small shelf of books drawing together the

thinking of female Buddhist scholars throughout the world on issues affecting Buddhist women. Also, in the last ten years, Lekshe managed to earn a Ph.D. in religious studies and land a job as an instructor at San Diego State University. Like any other Western woman wearing Tibetan Buddhist robes, she receives no support from the Tibetan Buddhist community or religious establishment. So, how to pay the rent and buy groceries? With years of writing, editing, speaking and organizing behind her, she chose university teaching as a job that would sustain her.

In a ground floor room of the exhibition center partitioned with sheets, we sleep, 150 or so of us, on mats on the floor. Earthlyn Manuel of the San Francisco Zen Center, her partner Simbwala, Wendy Lewis, a priest at SFZC, Mavis Fenn from Canada and I are given real mattresses—probably because we are westerners used to comforts—and we settle down in a row among the fifteen or so other inhabitants of the improvised “room,” who have been given thin foam mats to sleep on. Each woman sets her suitcase at the end of her mat (no shelves, dressers or hooks provided), and for five days we live out of the suitcases.

There we all are, snoring, mumbling in our sleep, one woman grinding her teeth at night. And from beyond the blue sheet at our feet come the voices of the very young Tibetan nuns whom Lekshe has brought with her from India. They chatter and laugh and tease one another irrepressibly while the rest of us try to sleep. Earthlyn is amused. “They’re just kids,” she says, “Think of them as background noise.”

Sleeping so closely with others, I give up wondering if I will snore and disturb someone. The individualism and insistence on privacy that we enjoy in the West can not operate here.

We eat three sumptuous meals a day, as well as an elaborate tea, all of it catered by a local vegetarian restaurant. On the drink table is Malaysian coffee—“white coffee” it’s called, strong and thick and tasting of the sugar with which it is roasted. A Chinese/Malaysian man at the first of several banquets tells us, “There are certain things you will always find in a Chinese temple, and one of them is that you will be well fed!”

Participants at the conference come from over twenty countries, among them Nepal, Bangladesh, Tibet, Bhutan, Korea, Sri Lanka, India, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Mongolia, Germany, the United States and Canada. On the panels—two each day for the next four days—lay scholars, nuns and lay practitioners give presentations reporting on Buddhist women’s activities in their home countries, offering images of the female divine in Buddhism, exploring the challenges of cross-cultural communication. They examine sexist assumptions in Buddhist language and institutions, and celebrate new Buddhist communities and learning centers for women in Asia.

As the days progress, we see gorgeous images from the small countries nestled up among the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas; we hear of nuns’ colleges being built in some countries; of research into images of goddesses in Buddhism; we see paintings by a Taiwanese female Chan (Zen) master.

The concern with gender equity in Buddhism runs throughout. In the giant upstairs conference room where the panels are held, very often the presenters wear monastic robes—the brown robes of the *Bhikkunis* (fully ordained nuns), and the white robes of the Thai *Maechees*. Of the 530 participants, there are 161 women in robes, most of them foreign (that is, from Asian and Western countries other than Malaysia). The

majority of the people at the conference are local women and men from the Chinese Malaysian population.

As the need is expressed again and again for the changing of repressive rules and institutions, I realize that I am witnessing the growth of a feminist movement within Asian Buddhism. Parallels to the early women's liberation movement in the United States come to mind. Our activism grew out of the civil rights and anti-war movements, while the Asian women have no such experience in challenging the system. And in the young freewheeling society of America, we could afford to take radical stands and perform radical actions. The ancient, traditional culture of Thailand, on the other hand, presents quite a different environment.

One young Thai scholar from Chiang Mai, Kulavir P. Pipat, maps out the “visible and invisible obstacles” to the full ordination of women in Thailand, emphasizing the “closed-mindedness of conservative Thai Buddhists,” which includes beliefs that women are “polluted and inferior beings” and “cannot attain enlightenment.” She describes the 1928 law passed by the Supreme Sangha Council under the National Bureau of Buddhism that forbids any monk to ordain a woman as a nun or a novice nun. This act is followed even though the Thai constitution guarantees religious freedom for both men and women. The legal definition of the Thai Sangha includes only male members: *Bhikkhus* (monks) and *Samaneras* (novices).

Kulavir ends her talk with a call to action, citing the “hierarchy and patriarchy” in Thai Buddhism. “Both visible and invisible obstacles together have been barring Buddhist women from spiritual development in Thai Buddhism,” she explains. “Therefore, the visible obstacle—the power monopoly evident in the structure of Thai

Buddhism—should be reviewed and adjusted. The non-Buddhist and unconstitutional Sangha Act of 1928 should be amended or cancelled. At the same time, all invisible obstacles must be eliminated. The closed-minded, sectarian, gender-biased beliefs and the double standard towards women should be reviewed, deconstructed, and corrected. To tackle these issues will take a policy that integrates education, social action, and public policy reform. Last, but not least, Buddhist women need to organize themselves to empower and support each other.”

Pipat’s rousing statement leaves me pondering the uncomfortable position of *Maechees* in present-day Thailand. In periods of radical transformation or reform, there are always groups caught in the middle. The Thai *Maechees* are housed in temples, and while they must spend many hours each day preparing food and performing cleaning tasks, and while they are rarely given teachings, at least they are protected and can live the simple life of a monastic and pursue the meditation practice that can take them to liberation. Many of them are simple village women, widows, old women, who are just grateful to have a refuge. But in Thailand now the young educated women in robes are not content with this subordinate role: they want to take the vows and wear the robes of the women alive during the Buddha’s lifetime, to be empowered to study, teach and counsel just as a monk would.

(Perhaps we are reminded of some Western Catholic women, those passionate beings who know in their hearts that they are meant to be priests, to celebrate the Eucharist and minister to the people, yet who are denied ordination.)

To accomplish their goals, a handful of *maechees* have managed to travel to Sri Lanka to receive full ordination. Back home in Thailand they exist in insecure

circumstances, not welcome in the temples, disapproved of by much of the society, ignored or condemned by the Thai Theravada Buddhist establishment. I talked with one of these fully ordained nuns, who speaks enthusiastically of the pieced-together life she lives, most recently working in a small temple where the monks accept her. She asserts, “You have to take a risk, if anything is going to change!”

Tensions rise at points in the conference when this youthful determination meets the resignation of older women in robes. One white-robed woman tells about the lives of the *Maechees* at a Bangkok temple. She describes their practice and work inside the temple in supporting the monks, who take a more public role of teaching, counseling, leading practice sessions out in the community. She indicates that she and her sisters in the white robes have no interest in becoming ordained as nuns; they are content in their subordinate role.

Of course, nowadays, there are educated *maechees* who live much more visible and sophisticated lives, involved in social work, teaching, and the building of learning centers. But still, the agitation for full ordination grows, and more women travel to Sri Lanka or Taiwan to become fully ordained *Bhikkunis*; through pressure from within and with the help of allies from other Asian and Western countries, the Thai societal attitudes toward ordained women may begin to change. These seeds of transformation, firmly planted now, begin to grow and multiply, leaving the *Maechees* in a strange limbo.

There is also a movement to elevate and support the *Maechee* order, and the women in white robes may put their confidence there. Certainly any efforts to offer more opportunity and support to the *Maechees* would be welcome as a step toward empowerment, but as long as the establishment does not open the path to full religious

validation, at base these improvements will wind up being a way of further solidifying and institutionalizing the *Maechees*' second-class status.

Meanwhile, it seems clear that the full ordination of women will be accepted eventually throughout Asia, whether it takes fifty or one hundred or more years to accomplish. (We should remember that in our "egalitarian" United States, it took women eighty years of steady activism to win the right to vote!) While powerful forces of religious and governmental establishments are ranged against this change, they will find it hard to squelch the burgeoning movement of women demanding full ordination. Once individuals have tasted the freedom and dignity of equal treatment, they will never again be satisfied with less. The struggle to ordain women in Theravada Buddhist Sri Lanka took many years and was finally successful. There are now several hundred ordained nuns and novices in Sri Lanka, while Thailand has only about twenty at this point. Thai women look to Sri Lanka as a model.

Recently, within the Tibetan Buddhist traditions, a breakthrough has occurred. Reviewing the relevant research on the subject, the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan practitioners and scholars concluded that conditions warrant the re-establishment of the full Bhikkuni ordination. An International congress will take place in Hamburg, Germany, in July 2007 for monastics and scholars to decide the method by which to ordain the women. When this is accomplished, Tibetan Buddhist nuns will no longer have to travel to Taiwan or Korea or Southern California to receive full ordination but can receive it within their own tradition. This represents an enormous step forward for the well-being and development of Tibetan Buddhist nuns and, as a result, laywomen.

Lessons from the conference multiply. I find myself now with a more complex view of the many small countries making up Southeast Asia, whose populations balance Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Christian agendas to live together peacefully for periods of time, at others wracked by bitter internal conflicts. And now when I think “women in Buddhism” I remember actual conversations with Korean, Chinese, Thai, Tibetan and so many other women, each with her cultural and personal perspective.

But more exciting is the understanding I have now of the importance of equality for Buddhist women in the developing countries, which are wracked by tremendous levels of prostitution, sex trafficking, the rapid spread of AIDS/HIV, child sexual slavery. Poverty plus the low valuation of women push many into prostitution. Fully ordained and educated nuns could change the lives of multitudes of women by sheltering them from harm and training them for vocations other than the sex trade. “Development” in Southeast Asian countries may on the one hand erode tradition and allow women more choices, but on the other hand if women’s status remains low they will continue to be exploited and shoved to the bottom as economic and cultural changes take place. The nuns struggling for full ordination see their role as working to educate, protect and inspire women so that they can take an equal role in future society—and ultimately so that the great social ills of sexual exploitation and the epidemic of sexually transmitted disease can be eradicated. This is a revolutionary program, pursued not as we would do it in the West but with sensitivity to the cultural norms, a striving for “change as continuity,” as one of the speakers put it, in which the tradition is supported while changes are made in practices and perceptions. The women are moving slowly and carefully, in most cases, but they are determined to change our Buddhist world.