

Present

The Voices and Activities of Theravada Buddhist Women | Winter 2011

September 17, 2011

The 1st Annual International Bhikkhuni Day

If You Honor Me, Honor My Mother Gotami ■ The 1st Annual International
Bhikkhuni Day ■ Honoring and Celebrating Bhikkhunis and Laywomen
New Turns Toward Ancient Paths: The Ordinations in California
Bhikkhuni Education Today: Seeing Challenges as Opportunities
Venerable Kusuma and the Power of Literacy Education
Turning Back Towards Freedom
Wearing White in the West ■ Bhikkhunīsaṃyutta



Present

The Voices and Activities of Theravada Buddhist Women

Current Issue
Winter 2011 | Volume 4 | Issue 1

ISSN 2156-0099. Present is published two times per year by Alliance for Bhikkhunis, a registered 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. PO Box 1058, Santa Barbara, California, USA 93102-1058
www.bhikkhuni.net

Editor-in-Chief

Susan Pembroke

Executive Editor

Jacqueline Kramer

Assistant Editor

Sarah Conover

Editorial Board

Sarah Conover
Roseanne Freese
Randy Graves
Jacqueline Kramer
Donna McCarthy
Susan Penbroke

Design & Layout

Sandi Hampton

THANKS TO

Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi, Venerable Bhikkhuni Sobhana, Ron Browning, Carudhamma Jo Ferris, Kathy Jean Schultz, Joan Sutherland, Janice Tolman

Present is an independent publication and does not represent any particular lineage, monastic, or teacher. The journal is produced for and supported by the Theravada fourfold sangha, and as such reflects the interests of that community. Present publishes essays, non-fiction, scholarly articles, news, and reviews about—and relevant to—bhikkhunis and the fourfold sangha. We welcome unsolicited articles, essays, scholarly investigations, photographs, artwork and illustrations. We do not accept unsolicited book reviews.

Copyright © 2011 Present/Alliance for Bhikkhunis. All rights reserved. Contents copyright reserved worldwide on behalf of Present/Alliance for Bhikkhunis and the respective authors and photographers.

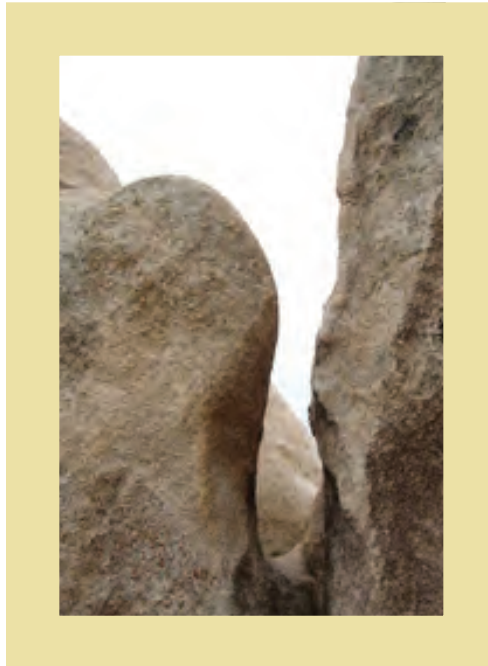
Bhikkhuni Education Today: Seeing Challenges As Opportunities

Text of a lecture given by video at
the International Conference on Education for Contemporary Female Sangha,
Luminary Buddhist Institute, Chia Yi, Taiwan, Republic of China

May 25, 2009

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi

The Buddha's teaching is known as *Buddhavacana*, the "Word of the Buddha." Words are meant to be heard, and in the case of the Buddha's words, which reveal liberating truth, they are meant not merely to pass through the ears, but to be listened to attentively and clearly understood. From its origins, Buddhist monasticism has thus been intimately involved with education. Education plays such an important role in Buddhist monastic life because Buddhism teaches that the root cause of suffering is ignorance. The antidote to ignorance is wisdom, which is acquired through a systematic program of education. The Buddha's discourses often describe five stages in learning the Dharma.



Photos courtesy of
Andrea Sender

According to a formula often found in the suttas: "A monk is one who has heard much, retains in mind what he has learned, repeats it, examines it intellectually, and penetrates it deeply with insight." Since, in the Buddha's days, the teachings were not written down in books but were transmitted orally, to learn the Dharma one had to approach erudite teachers, listen closely to what they taught, retain it in mind, and review it by repeating it out loud. One then examines the meaning, which leads to conceptual understanding. Finally one penetrates with insight the principles one has understood conceptually, thereby seeing the truth by direct experience.

1. The aims of classical Buddhist education

Wherever Buddhism took root and flourished, it has always emphasized the importance of study and learning. The Vinaya obliges newly ordained monks and nuns to spend several years living under the guidance of their teacher, during which time they learn the fundamentals of the Dharma and Discipline. In India, during the golden age of Buddhist history, Buddhist monasteries evolved into major universities, such as Nalanda and Vikramashila, which attracted students from all across Asia. As Buddhism spread from India to other Asian lands, its monasteries became centers of learning and high culture. From the Mahavihara, Abhayagiri, and Jetavanarama in Sri Lanka, to the Sera, Ganden, and Drepung monasteries in Tibet, Buddhism made a monumental contribution to global education. These great monasteries developed rigorous programs of Buddhist studies where Buddhist scriptures and philosophical systems were discussed and debated, giving birth to a culture of high intellectual sophistication.

Always, however, in the long history of Buddhism, the study of the Dharma was governed by the purpose of the teaching. Both the teachers and students were mostly monastics, and their curriculum had a monastic orientation. Learning was pursued, not as a self-sufficient discipline, but as an integral part of spiritual cultivation. The motive for study was faith and the aims with which one studied were the aims that the Dharma set for its followers. And what were these aims?

The first was simply to know and understand the texts. Buddhism is a religion of books, many books: scriptures passed down directly from the Buddha and his great disciples; sayings of enlightened sages, arahants, and bodhisattvas; treatises by Buddhist philosophers; commentaries and sub-commentaries and sub-sub-commentaries. Each Buddhist tradition has given birth to a whole library filled with books, and a primary aim of traditional Buddhist education has been to learn these texts, which are often memorized and then used as a lens for seeing into the ultimate meaning of the Buddha's teaching.

Since study of the texts is part of a process of self-cultivation, a second aim of Buddhist education is to transform ourselves. Acquisition of knowledge, in classical Buddhism, is quite different from the acquisition of factual knowledge by an academic scholar. The secular scholar aims to acquire objective knowledge, which does not depend on his character. A secular scholar can be dishonest, selfish, and envious but still make a brilliant contribution to his field. In Buddhism, however, knowledge is intended to mold our character. We learn the Dharma so that we can become better persons: people of moral integrity, virtuous conduct, and upright character. We use the principles of the teaching to transform ourselves, to make ourselves suitable "vessels" for the Dharma. We have to mold our character to become kind, honest, and compassionate human beings. By studying the Dharma we learn the guidelines that enable us to bring about

this self-transformation.

On this basis of a moral character, we investigate the teachings that serve as the basis for personal insight and wisdom. Therefore, a third aim of classical Buddhist education is to develop wisdom, to understand the real nature of things. It is said in the texts that whether or not a Buddha appears in the world, the essential nature of things remains ever the same. A Buddha is one who discovers the ever-subsisting laws of actuality and proclaims them to the world. The truth is simply the nature of phenomena, the true nature of life, which is hidden from us by our distorted views and false concepts. Through education, we straighten out our views, correct our false concepts, and by cultivating our minds, attain realization of the truth.

Finally, we use our knowledge of the Dharma—gained by study, practice, and realization—to teach others. Thus a fourth purpose of Buddhist education is to prepare us to transmit the Dharma. As monastics, it is our special responsibility to instruct others in ways that will promote their own moral purification and insight, to help them walk the path to happiness and peace. We thus study the Dharma to benefit the world as much as to benefit ourselves.

2. The challenge of academic learning

In the modern era, the traditional model of Buddhist education has met a rival in the Western academic model of learning. Western education has quite a different agenda than traditional Buddhist education. It does not seek to advance spiritual goals. Its purpose is not to help the student travel along the path to liberation. The aim of academic Buddhist Studies is to transmit and acquire objective knowledge about Buddhism, to grasp Buddhism in its cultural, literary, and historical settings. Academic Buddhist Studies turns Buddhism into an object detached from the inner being of the student, and in this respect it constitutes a departure from the traditional Buddhist model of education.

The academic approach to Buddhist Studies poses a challenge to traditional Buddhism, but in my view this is a challenge we should accept. There are two unwise responses we can make to this challenge. One is to reject the academic study of Buddhism and insist exclusively upon a traditionalist approach to Buddhist education. A traditionalist education might make us learned monks and nuns who can function effectively in a traditional Buddhist culture; however, we live in the modern world and in our interactions we have to communicate with educated people who've been nurtured on the ways of modernity. By taking a strictly traditionalist approach we might wind up as dinosaurs with shaved heads and ochre robes, analogous to the Christian fundamentalists who reject such modern sciences as geology and biological evolution merely because they clash with a literal interpretation of the Bible. The second unwise attitude would be to reject the traditional aims of Buddhist education and adopt the academ-

ic model, making objective knowledge about Buddhism the whole purpose of one's education. As monastics, this would mean that we abandon the religious commitments we make when we become monks and nuns. Adopting this approach could turn us into learned scholars, but it might also make us skeptics who regard Buddhism as just one among other interesting fields of study.

3. Adopting a middle way

As in many other aspects of Buddhist practice, the most fruitful response to this situation is to adopt a "middle way" that can reconcile the best features of traditional Buddhist education with the positive values of the modern academic approach to Buddhist studies. As I mentioned above, the traditional approach to education is intended to help us cultivate our character and conduct, to develop wisdom and deep insight into the Dharma, and to equip us to assist in the transmission of Buddhism from one generation to the next.

And what are the positive values of the modern academic approach? I will mention four.

First, the academic study of Buddhism helps us understand Buddhism as a historical and cultural phenomenon. Through the study of Buddhist history, we see how Buddhism arose against a particular historical background; how it responded to cultural and social forces in India during the Buddha's time; how it evolved through intellectual exploration and in response to rival philosophies and changing historical conditions. We also see how, as Buddhism spread to different countries, it adapted to the prevailing social norms, cultures, and worldviews of the lands where it took root.

Second, this historical overview helps us to comprehend more clearly the distinction between the essence of the Dharma and the cultural and historical "clothing" that Buddhism has had to wear to blend in with its cultural environment. Just as a person might change clothes according to the season while remaining the same person, so too, as Buddhism spread from country to country, it retained certain features distinctive of Buddhism while adjusting its outer forms to conform to the prevailing cultures. Thus, through the study of Buddhist history and of the different schools of Buddhist philosophy, we can better grasp the core of the Dharma, what is central and what is peripheral. We will understand the reasons why Buddhist doctrines took the forms they did under particular conditions; we will be able to discriminate between those aspects of Buddhism that were adapted to particular situations and those which reflect the perennial principles of the Dharma.

However, by the above statement, I don't intend to propose that we settle for a scriptural fundamentalism, taking the most archaic Buddhist teachings alone to be of lasting value and seeing later developments as mere cultural adaptations. I believe that human consciousness itself undergoes historical evolution, setting the appropriate stage for corresponding

transformation in cultural forms, whether in art, philosophy, literature, or religion. Thus, in my understanding, different



phases in the historical evolution of human consciousness evoked and nurtured tendencies in Buddhism either implicit in the basic principles or in some way consistent with or derivable from them. These tendencies could not blossom into explicit teachings until the evolving consciousness of human beings reached a level suitable for their manifestation. In my view, this fact, just as much as cultural adaptation, explains the diversity of Buddhist schools and the wide variety of discrepant and apparently contradictory teachings we find under the rooftop of Buddhism.

Third, the academic study of Buddhism sharpens our capacity for critical thinking. What is distinctive about modern academic learning is the premise that nothing should be taken for granted. All assumptions are open to questioning; every proposition should be examined closely and rigorously. Whereas traditional Buddhist education often emphasizes unquestioning acceptance of texts and traditions, modern academic education invites us to argue with every Buddhist belief, every text, every tradition, even those supposed to come from the Buddha himself. While such an approach can lead to fruitless skepticism, if we remain firm in our faith the discipline of modern education will strengthen our intelligence until it becomes like a knife well tempered in a fire. Our faith will emerge stronger, our intellect will become keener, our wisdom will be brighter and more luminous. We will also be better equipped to adapt the Dharma to the needs of the present age without compromising its essence.

Fourth, and of special importance: the academic study of Buddhism fosters creative thinking. It does not merely impart objective information, and it often does not stop with critical analysis. It goes further and encourages us to develop creative, original insights into different aspects of Buddhist history, doctrine, and culture. The academic study of Buddhism can thus generate new insights into the causal factors that underlie the historical evolution of Buddhism; it can help us discern previously undetected relationships between the doctrines held by the different Buddhist schools; it can bring to light new impli-



cations of Buddhist thought and new applications of Buddhist principles to the resolution of problems in such contemporary fields as philosophy, psychology, comparative religion, social policy, and ethics.

The interplay of critical thought and creative insight is actually how Buddhism itself has evolved through the long course of its history. Each new school of Buddhism would begin with the criticism of some earlier stage of Buddhist thought, uncover its inherent problems, and then offer new insights as a way of resolving those problems. Thus, the academic study of Buddhism can contribute to the same process of creative growth, innovation, exploration, and development that has resulted in the wide diversity of Buddhism in all its geographical and historical extensions.

4. Buddhist education and the encounter of traditions

This brings me to the next major point. Ever since Buddhism left India, different Buddhist traditions have flourished in different geographical regions, with only minimal contact. Early Buddhism, represented by the Theravāda school, has flourished in southern Asia. Early and middle-period Mahāyāna Buddhism spread to East Asia, giving birth to new schools suited to the East Asian mind, such as Tiantai and Huayan, Chan and Pure Land. And late-period Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism spread to Tibet and other Himalayan lands, where it has reigned in splendid isolation from the rest of the Buddhist world. For centuries, each tradition has remained sealed.

Today, however, modern methods of book production, communication, transportation, and transmission of knowledge give scholars from each tradition the opportunity to study all the major Buddhist traditions. We now have, almost liter-

ally, the entire universe of Buddhism, from the Pali Canon to the Vajrayāna, at our fingertips. Of course, each tradition can involve a lifetime of study, but with the growing connections between people in different Buddhist lands, any program in monastic education should expose students to teachings from the other traditions. This will give students an appreciation of the rich diversity of Buddhism. It will enable them to grasp its transformations throughout history; to learn about its splendid heritage of philosophy, literature, and art; to understand its ability to profoundly influence people in different cultures as determined by their own backgrounds and dispositions. Perhaps a complete program of monastic education should give monks and nuns from one tradition the chance to spend a year or two in a monastery or university connected with another Buddhist tradition, just as secular universities often permit students to spend their junior year abroad. Learning and practicing in a different Buddhist tradition will help to widen their minds, enabling them to understand the diverse range of Buddhism as well as its common core.

It is quite likely that the encounter of Buddhist traditions taking place today will transform the face of Buddhism itself. It may lead to cross-fertilization and even hybrid formation, whereby new forms of Buddhism emerge from the synthesis of different schools. At the minimum, it will serve as a catalyst encouraging adherents of each tradition to give more attention to aspects of their tradition that have generally been neglected or under-emphasized. For example, the encounter with southern Theravāda Buddhism has stimulated interest in the Agamas and Abhidharma among followers of East Asian Buddhism. As Theravāda Buddhists study Mahāyāna Buddhism, this can stimulate an appreciation of the bodhisattva ideal and the pāramīs in the Theravāda tradition and thus create a closer bond between them.

5. Engaging with the modern world

Buddhist monastics do not live in a vacuum. We are part of the modern world, and an essential part of our monastic education should teach us how to relate to the world. From its origins, Buddhism has always been closely entwined with the cultures in which it found itself. Because monasteries are often situated in quiet places remote from the bustle of normal life, we sometimes imagine that Buddhism teaches us to turn our backs on society and pass our lives as solitary hermits. This, however, would be a misunderstanding. As monastics, we should not lose sight of our obligations to people living in the world and of our duty to transform society in the light of the Dharma.

Today this responsibility has become more urgent than ever before. As humanity has learned to master the material forces of nature, our capacity for self-destruction has increased by leaps and bounds. The discovery of nuclear power allows us to create weapons that can obliterate the entire human race at the press of a button. The world has become more sharply polarized into the wealthy and the poor, with the rich getting richer and the poor slipping into ever deeper poverty. Billions subsist on one or two meager meals a day, and ten million die each year from hunger and chronic malnutrition. Poverty breeds resentment, increasing communal tensions and ethnic wars. In the industrialized world, we recklessly consume our natural resources, polluting the environment, burdening the atmosphere, and heating up the planet to dangerous levels. As the earth's climate grows warmer, we risk destroying the natural support systems on which human survival depends.

As Buddhists, we have to understand the forces at work in today's world, and to be able to demonstrate how the Dharma can preserve us from self-destruction. For this, we need programs of study that go beyond a narrow fixation on Buddhist Studies, programs that prepare Buddhist monks and nuns to deal with global problems. The core of Buddhist education should, of course, emphasize the classical Buddhist traditions. But this core curriculum should be supplemented by courses that cover other areas where Buddhism can make a substantial contribution to improving the state of the world. These would include such subjects as modern psychology, sociology, bio-ethics, conflict resolution, and ecology, perhaps even economics and political science.

As Buddhist monks and nuns, we have an obligation in today's world to raise high the torch of the Dharma, so that it can shed light on those living in darkness. To be effective in this role, Buddhist education must equip us to understand the world. This expanded vision of Buddhist education will likely draw objections from strict traditionalists, who believe that monastics should confine themselves to Buddhist Studies in the narrow sense. They might point out that the Buddhist scriptures prohibit monks from discussing such topics as "kings, ministers, and affairs of state," let alone from studying secular subjects like sociology and ecology. However, we have to realize that

we live in a very different era from that in which the Buddha lived and taught. Buddhism flourishes to the extent that it maintains its relevance to human affairs, and to communicate effectively with people we must understand the enormous problems they confront and see how the Dharma can offer solutions to them. This will require a rigorous and radical revision of traditional programs of Buddhist Studies, but such renovation is essential for Buddhism to discover a contemporary relevance.

6. The challenge and opportunity for bhikkhunis

One aspect of our contemporary situation deserves special mention, and that is the role of women in today's world. Most of the traditional cultures where Buddhism has thrived have been predominantly patriarchal. Though the Buddha himself promoted the status of women, still, he lived and taught during the Patriarchal Age and thus his teachings were inevitably colored by the dominant outlook of that era. This has been the case up to the modern age, and attitudes shaped by this background still prevail in almost all traditional Buddhist lands.

Now, however, women are breaking free from the constraints of a male-dominated worldview. They claim the same rights as men and take more active roles in almost every sphere of human life, from the professions like law and medicine, to university positions, to business and finance, to national leadership as presidents and prime ministers. There is no doubt that this "rise of the feminine" will have a transformative effect on Buddhism as well. Already, some women have become prominent scholars, teachers, and leaders in Buddhism. Several traditions that lost the bhikkhuni ordination have recovered it, and hopefully, in the near future, all schools of Buddhism will have thriving communities of fully ordained bhikkhunis.

For bhikkhunis to stand alongside bhikkhus as qualified representatives of the Dharma—as teachers, interpreters, scholars, and activists—education holds the key. It is thus necessary for bhikkhunis to attain a level of education equal to that of their bhikkhu-brothers in the Sangha. They should attain competency in every sphere of Buddhist education, whether it be Buddhist philosophy, culture, and history, meditation and mind development, or the application of Buddhism to the problems of modern life. I sincerely hope that this conference, which brings together Buddhist nuns and educators from many traditions, will contribute to the achievement of this aim.



Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi is a former president of the *Buddhist Publication Society*, renowned Pali scholar and translator, and chairperson of *Buddhist Global Relief*.

Present

Post Office Box 1058
Santa Barbara
California, USA
93102-1058

Help celebrate and support Present/Alliance for Bhikkhunis!

This copy has been made available to you through the generous donations of our readers. If you enjoyed this issue, then please consider a tax-deductable donation to help support Present/Alliance for Bhikkhunis. 90% of donations are allocated for bhikkhuni ordination and training costs; bhikkhuni medical, dental and health insurance expenses; and providing requisites, including books and computers, to bhikkhuni viharas. Donations can be made quickly, easily, and securely [online here](#).