

President's Letter

FURTHER THOUGHTS ON THE 1ST ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL BHIKKHUNI DAY SEPTEMBER 17, 2011

Converging streams of benevolence and sheer altruism produced the 1st Annual International Bhikkhuni Day (IBD), a day of celebrating women's spiritual accomplishments. After all was said and done, IBD proved to be an astonishing patchwork quilt. Once assembled, the overall design could not have been predicted by the isolated, donated scraps of material from around the globe. For me, it became a lesson on the power of community, of how good-hearted people coming together can create something no one person could singly imagine or do. The day confirmed why it is so critical for women to live in communities. The synergy and dynamism of the group surpass any solo effort.

Jacqueline Kramer, Alliance for Bhikkhunis (AfB) former vice president and current Executive Editor of its online magazine *Present*, out of deep concern for the plight of monastic women, conceived the idea of a national holiday to commemorate bhikkhunis. Bhikkhuni Tathaaloka Theri suggested the month of September since the founder of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, Mahapajapati, ordained on a full moon in September. Ayya Tathaaloka would later offer us a sumptuous article on the ancient and highly accomplished Bhikkhuni Uppalavana, one of the gifts marking the day. Bhikkhuni Amma Thanasanti proposed the annual event should be international, not national. She also wrote a revealing article on extraordinary women who influenced her. They included her sisters in robes, her mother, and the famed laywoman teacher Dipa Ma. All of the IBD articles can be found in the AfB digital Library.

And so it went, people adding their talents and ideas, extravagant in their giving of time, while trusting that something good would develop but not sure what it might be or how the finished product would look. In retrospect, the entire event was a collective act of faith. Ven. Bhikkhu Anālayo offered two scholarly papers, one on Mahāpajāpati's going forth

and the other on Bhikkhuni Dhammadinnā. Melanie Abhassara stirred our emotions through her exquisite chanting of the "Recollections of the Foremost Arahant Bhikkhunis." Bhikkhuni Karma Leshe Tsomo and AfB's board member Donna McCarthy created an informative power point on bhikkhuni history. Carol Annable searched out Dhamma talks and managed the evolving site, with bhikkhunis making suggestions on which of their talks would be most fitting for the event.

One of the earliest questions in planning the 1st Annual International Bhikkhuni Day was where to hold the event. What country or city would be ideal? In the U.S., for instance, there are still precious few bhikkhunis. It quickly became apparent there was no there, there, no central place where people could easily assemble for there were only a smattering of bhikkhunis in Southern California, a handful in Northern California, some in the Midwest, the East Coast, and Florida. It made sense to create a portable, downloadable, do-it-yourself retreat-workshop that anyone could quickly and effortlessly assemble and imple-

ment in their living room or backyard. There were simply too few bhikkhunis, too far apart, to lead local retreats.

Wonderfully, amazingly, people around the globe began planning events. Some worked with our Firstgiving site. Some designed days that worked for their unique setting or group.

In Ventura, California where I live, I organized a small, intimate event. A dear friend opened her home where eight of us met. We meditated inside as well as in her lush garden, bursting with flowers in the shape of white trumpets and ripe tomatoes grown from seeds imported from Italy. Hummingbirds and over a dozen Monarch butterflies watched over us and did their best to keep us entertained during walking meditation.

Alternating between periods of sitting and sharing, we used the downloads from the Afb site and talked about the women who impacted us. We honored mothers and grandmothers as well as Dhamma teachers. One man recalled a Santa Barbara Vajrayana nun who introduced him to Buddhism and meditation. I recounted stories of Ayya Khema as well as my Slovakian grandmother who walked miles to Mass every morning, whispered the rosary every night, and never passed a beggar on the street without depositing a coin. Her entire life a tender, loving prayer.

One woman spoke of breaking the news to her husband's aunt that they were divorcing. After relaying a few details, the woman reflexively tensed as she waited for the older woman's response, a woman who had over the years become a beloved aunt to her as well and someone she feared losing in the divorce. After a moment, in a thick Swedish accent, with absolute conviction, the older woman matter-of-factly stated, "Ooooh, he's such an asshole!" We all laughed. Aging aunts aren't supposed to talk like that, but it was a pitch-perfect response. Tears of affection and gratitude streamed down the meditator's face as she passed around a photo of the aunt who in a second or two let her know that she was not only there for her, but would be a fierce protector as well.

One of the women in our circle, a college English instructor, in thinking about influential female figures in her life, thought of Maya Angelou, the brilliant poet who writes with razor-sharp precision about the poignant history of African Americans. What she brought to share was Angelou's poem "Still I Rise." Almost at once I could see parallels between the African-American experience and the struggle of Buddhist women to ordain. One subject in the poem was the propaganda campaign launched against people of color. Angelou writes:

***You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.***

These lines could just as easily apply to the untruths spread about bhikkhunis and their history. Despite the avalanche of distortions and deception, bit by bit, bhikkhuni legacy is being recovered, thanks to the dedicated work of many men and women.

***Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.***

There are many forces currently unfolding, propelling bhikkhunis forward, their movement toward ordination destined, irrepressible, unstoppable, and essential—each woman's desire for full awakening the ultimate driver.

As waves of women ordain each year and take their rightful place in the monastic Sangha, there is a palpable joy and optimism, the hopefulness infectious. If the words "the slave" in the following lines were replaced with "women," this stanza could be used to describe the courage, confidence, and determination of many women who have and continue to reject a second-class status and insist on equality, on being seen as well as heard.

***Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of (the slave) women.
I rise
I rise
I rise.***

More and more bhikkhunis, inspired by their ancestors' gifts, rise among us.

Truly a reason to celebrate each September!

Susan Pembroke