

Awakening Truth



September 2, 2011

Extraordinary Women by Bhikkhuni Ajahn Thanasanti

September 2 is the anniversary of being a nun for 20 years. I take this time to pay homage to some of the extraordinary women who have directly and indirectly guided me to the path where I am now. I write as a prelude to International Bhikkhuni Day on Sept 17.

My first memory thinking about the way important women influenced my life was when I was about 10 and we were driving to Sea World in Long Beach California. My stepmother, Barbara, asked me and my brother to think of 3 men and 3 women that we would have wanted to meet or be like. The women that I thought of were Anne Frank, Helen Keller and Mother Theresa. Barbara was not impressed. She was hoping I would come up with people who were more glamorous or sexy and asked me if I could think of any like that. When I couldn't she eventually asked me why I these women came to mind and I remember saying something like, "Anne never lost faith in peoples goodness, Helen never lost courage, and Mother Theresa never lost capacity in seeing beauty and divinity in others."

I was shocked at first by how silent she was after I spoke. Then I realized I am not someone who is into glamor and movie stars. Barbara helped me see that I respond to a different drummer and what I thought and believed was very different from what the people around me valued. In this way she inadvertently taught me a great deal.

As a teenager, I discovered Peace Pilgrim from hearing about her after she had died. In her late 50's she set out with her only possessions the clothes on her back and a few stamps and comb in her pocket. She set out to walk for peace, determined to eat only when food was offered and sleep only when shelter was provided. She lived her life like this until she died in her 70's. Her willingness to be on the road, live on the faith, have very few needs

and speak her truth touched me deeply. Living in the way that she did she continues to live on in my heart and serve as a constant inspiration of faith and the positive possibility in homelessness.

Having lived at Amaravati and Chithurst Buddhist monasteries for 20 years I met many extraordinary women. It would be a very long list for me to recount everyone. I would want to share what I learned from each of the sisters that I have lived with. I would want you to know her unique ways, gifts, and the way she influenced me. I would want to tell you about the committed lay practitioners I have been in close association with. I would love to convey the depth of community feeling that can occur and the ways of knowing each other living in the way that we did- how you often had to shield your thoughts so that sisters didn't know what you were thinking- how small acts of kindness happened as a matter of routine, the magic of birthday trays- treasures appearing from nothing- and to be able to give some texture to the depth of friendships and the challenges that we navigated. I would want to share all this but it would be a whole book.

Most of the sisters I lived with over the years, the Anagarikas and the Siladharas have left the robes. It was the power of their presence, insight, compassion, intuition and ability to play when it was needed or listen if that was needed that created the fabric of our connection. What I appreciated the most was the sisters ability to have deep insight and stay in empathetic resonance with each other not splitting apart the transcendent from the imminent. Eventually, I was able to rest into the fabric of our connectedness as a source of strength. Being around others who shared a similar aspiration meant it wasn't just their actions that inspired me, but the overall sense of purpose in living the life that influenced me as well. What they gave me and still give me as sisters or post monastics now continues to nourish, inspire and sustain me.

But of all the extraordinary women in my direct spiritual life, Dipa Ma was the personification of one who had accomplished what I aspire to. I had heard about her when I was attending a class taught by Jack Engler on religion at UC Santa Cruz. Jack told us her life story, described her attainments both in concentration and insight as well as some of the psychic powers that she had mastered. He told stories of how she could retrace past lives, would playfully appear through walls or be in two places at once, accelerated time, or how she could manifest things. I remember being in the lecture hall at UCSC, leaning back in the cool seats listening as if I were on fire. I was compelled with interest and my attention was rapt. I was determined to meet her one day.

Eight years later in 1987, I was able to fulfill my dream. I went on a pilgrimage to India got to Calcutta and made my way to the Mahabodhi Society. I walked into the main hall. Directly in front of me was a woman whose back was to me. Her physical stature was tiny, but her presence was

so powerful and tangible I was physically taken aback. I asked “Who is that?” Well of course- Dipa Ma.

I stayed at the Mahabodhi Society with a few friends that I met on retreat. Together, we would walk across town to her humble apartment she shared with her daughter Dipa and her grandson, Rishi. We spent the balmy Calcutta evening meditating with her and asking questions about practice. I felt that even if my life had ended right there, having met Dipa Ma and felt the power of her presence, it would have been enough.

Occasionally we joined their family gatherings. One of the Barua clan had become financially successful and had a big celebration to bless his new house. The stereo was loud and people gathered and talking excitedly. The atmosphere was buzzing. Dipa Ma walked in front of me calmly through the bustle of all the people heading straight for the Buddha and bowed. For Dipa Ma, life’s sole purpose was awakening. Her actions reflected her priorities. Her unwavering focus helped me refocus mine.

Being with Dipa Ma was like being in a vast endless ocean of Love. I felt that she saw me deeply, clearly and accurately but no matter what she saw, I felt her acceptance and love. This was most tangible for me when she blessed us when we left her apartment. She would hug us then hold our heads between her two tiny and very loving hands while blowing over our heads as she chanted. I felt as if I were standing under a waterfall with a cascade of love pouring over and through me touching every part of my body heart and mind. From knowing Dipa Ma, I knew what unconditioned love was.

Dipa Ma was born in an East Bengal village in 1911 as Nani Bala Barua. As was customary for that time and culture, she was betrothed at 12 years of age went to live with her husband Ranjani Ranjan Barua and her in laws. He left for Burma for work as an engineer one week after their marriage when she joined him two years later.

Dipa Ma’s mother and sister had prepared her for the domestic duties of being a wife. But no one said anything to her about sex. When her husband told her she recoiled in shock and felt terribly ashamed. For one solid year she lived in fear and wouldn’t go anywhere near him. Ranjani was unfailing kind and waited. Eventually they fell deeply in love and later she would describe him as her first teacher. But after many years of marriage no children were conceived. For many people not being able to have children is a loss. But in India it is something akin to a family catastrophe. Her in-laws found another woman for Ranjani to marry which he refused.

Eventually a child was conceived, borne. Tragically, shortly after birth, this little baby girl died. The grief from the loss deeply affected Dipa Ma and soon after she developed heart disease. Then a healthy girl was born who was called Dipa, meaning “light” thus Dipa Ma means “Dipa’s mother” or

the “mother of light”. Another child was conceived; the all important son was born. Very soon after he was born, he also died plunging Dipa Ma’s into inconsolable grief. Her husband was very attentive but the strain of looking after Dipa Ma, little Dipa and working full time was a lot. Completely unexpectedly, he too suddenly died. So in a period of 10 years Dipa Ma lost her husband, her health and two children. Both of her parents were dead, India was far away and she was left raising her 7 year old daughter alone.

All she wanted was to meditate. Finally she did get to a meditation center but she didn’t stay long; a dog clamped its teeth into her leg and she had to leave to get medical treatment. But at home, she continued with her meditation. A few years later, she again found her way to a meditation center. After just six days she experienced the first level of enlightenment. Many of her family and friends noticed that Dipa Ma who had been so sick, depressed and dependent had transformed. Suddenly many of her health issues had resolved and she was radiant, clear, peaceful, and independent. Eventually she was known as one who had uprooted all traces of ill will and desire. Students from all over started coming to learn from her.

Once Anagarika Munindra, her teacher, was talking to a group of meditation students while it seemed that Dipa Ma was asleep in the back. One of the students asked why only men were allowed to become Buddha’s. Dipa Ma sat bolt upright and with a very clear and utterly confident voice said, “I can do anything a man can”. It was so out of the blue and so true, that everyone laughed.

When I remember that Dipa Ma said that “Daughters of the Buddha are fearless,” I soften around my resistance to fear when I tremble with what is arising.

When I heard Dipa Ma had said that mindfulness and love were the same, something deep in my belly relaxed as if holding these two as separate had created a tension that no longer needed to be there.

Shortly after that trip to Asia I went to Amaravati in 1989 to become an Anagarika. Once I heard that Dipa Ma had died I wanted to plant a tree in her memory. We planted an oak tree in the ‘Buddha Grove’ for her. I put Dipa Ma’s photo in the tree, chant and walk around it. As the tree began to grow I noticed that it had a very loving energy.

I left Amaravati and when I returned years later, I couldn’t remember exactly which was Dipa Ma’s tree. Many trees had been planted and they all had grown 15-25 feet during the time that I was away. At each of the trees I thought it could be I pressed my back into the trunk. At one tree I felt my back relax as if touching something soft and comforting and felt like I was standing in a waterfall of love. I knew I was at Dipa Ma’s tree.

Until Amy Schmidts [1] books were published only a handful of people knew about Dipa Ma and my connection with her. Until recently, the tree was not marked. So when one friend described “the mother tree” at Amaravati, my attention piqued. I asked more details about where it was. Sure enough, it was the same tree. Without any other context, my friend Kathy had found it by its loving energy and had her own name for it.

When I reflect on extraordinary women in my life, I have to include my mother. Anyone who knows her would know why. Her vitality, courage and willingness to fight for what she thinks is right has been a profound example and teaching in my life. But her love of life, her insistence on the importance of playing and her willingness to see everything as an adventure has given me resource and frame of reference that I don't know where I would be without. It has been a complicated relationship because of the path I have chosen. When I first told her I intended to ordain, it plummeted her into inconsolable grief- gone were the grandchildren and extended family she so deeply longed for from me, gone were dinners together, gone were holidays together or being together in simple ways that mothers and daughters can share. But she has been unfailing supportive throughout all these years. With her unfailing love, and her commitment to do her own work at coming to terms with her own grief- she had to adjust her perspective to meet my lifestyle- her support has guided me.

Let me share some stories:

In the mid 90's Mom came and picked me up at the Land of the Medicine Buddha in the hills outside of Santa Cruz. She took a road which was dangerously narrow and steep. Because she hadn't seen me in 2 years she was excited. Being excited, she wasn't paying that close attention to the driving and drove off the side of the road. The cutaway hillside was extremely steep. The right side of the car sunk into the soft earth. From the angle we were at, I was sure we were going to roll down the hillside and crash into the buildings just below. But we didn't roll. To my utter amazement we just stopped. Eventually we got out of the car and called for help. The one tow truck had to call for another as it took two trucks to pull the car out. The tow-truck driver said that he had never seen a car at that kind of angle not roll.

After the ordeal, Mom wanted some dinner. With charm and positivity, characteristic of Santa Cruz, the waiter at the restaurant said something like, “Are you having a great day?” Mom's response was, “Yes, it was quite an adventure.” I was amazed. We had come dangerously close to rolling which could have been fatal. And even in a situation like this, she saw it as an adventure.

A story that I love happened when we were camping at MacKerricher State Park in Mendocino 3 years ago. The fields were full of flowers. While

walking back from the ocean I was looking directly at her face as we were talking. All of a sudden she disappeared. I was startled for a moment as I didn't understand what had happened until I looked down and saw her on the ground. She saw a flower and threw herself on the ground with enthusiastic abandon, clutching her little magnifying glass, exclaiming, "Isn't it cute?" I laughed. No ordinary mom this one! (Mom is 81 this year and she still loves camping. This July we camped at the same campground.)

This year marks the 20th anniversary of my 'going forth' as a nun. As I take this opportunity to pay homage, I see that the blessings from the extraordinary women of my life have given me an invaluable resource. Dipa Ma, more than anyone else, showed me the power of unconditional Love – giving me a direct transmission on what is left when everything else falls away- showing the mind in its natural state. Thank you Dipa Ma.

[1] *Dipa Ma: The Life and Legacy of a Buddhist Master* by Amy Schmidt



Dipa Ma bowing goodbye after teaching her first retreat at Insight Meditation Society in 1980.

Photo by Maria Monroe.

*“Daughters of the Buddha
are fearless.”*

Dipa Ma

(March 25, 1911 – September 1, 1989)