

Present

The Voices and Activities of Theravada Buddhist Women | Summer 2011



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In the Company of Spiritual Friends: Sri Lanka's Buddhist Nuns

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Report on the 16th Annual Western Buddhist Monastic Conference

Sharing Buddhism with Children - The Buddha and Jack Kerouac Fistfight in Tusita Heaven

A Bridge Between East and West—An interview with Tsultrim Allione



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Present invites your letters—reactions, responses, reflections, and whatever else comes to mind. All letters are subject to editing. Please e-mail editor@bhikkhuni.net, or send post to PO Box 1058, Santa Barbara, California, USA 93102-1058

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Sima Malika at bhikkhuni temple

In the Company of Spiritual Friends: Sri Lanka's Buddhist Nuns

by *Susanne Mrozik*

It is, once again, a very hot and humid day in Sri Lanka. I prepare to board one of several buses I will take today to travel to a meeting that I'm not sure I really want to attend. Sweaty and grimy, dreading the hours of uncomfortable travel ahead of me, I am in a bad mood. But as I step into the bus, I see a Buddhist nun seated in the front row. I sit down next to her, we smile at each other, and my bad mood lifts. I am in the company of a *kalyanamitta*, or spiritual friend.

Ven. Payutto, a Thai monk-scholar, tells us that a spiritual friend is anyone "who is well prepared with the proper qualities to teach, suggest, point out, encourage, assist, and give guidance for getting started on the Path of Buddhist training."¹ Buddhist scriptures also tell us that spiritual friends, like the nun seated next to me, can teach without even saying a word.² This nun's kind, but disciplined, demeanor visibly embodies her Buddhist training. Seeing her,

I come back to the present moment, briefly letting go of my aversion to the physical discomforts of the day, and open up to the possibility of joyful human connection even on a really hot bus.

Sri Lankan Bhikkhunis Today

Anyone can serve as a spiritual friend to another Buddhist practitioner, but Sri Lankans (like other Buddhists) have traditionally regarded monastics as the ideal spiritual friends because of their extensive Buddhist educations. Until recently, however, the Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhist Sangha consisted only of *bhikkhus*, or fully ordained monks. For many centuries there were no *bhikkhunis*, or fully ordained nuns. Although women, in their capacities as mothers, teachers, and lay supporters of Buddhist temples, surely served as spiritual friends to others then (as now), the ideal

spiritual friend would have been a male monastic in the past. Today this is no longer the case. As of the late 1990s there are both bhikkhus and bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka.

Briefly, here's what happened: the Sri Lankan bhikkhuni order was originally established in the third century B.C.E. Together with the bhikkhu order, the bhikkhuni order flourished in Sri Lanka until the late tenth or early eleventh century when a period of warfare rendered both orders defunct. Although the bhikkhu order was revived several times thereafter with the help of bhikkhus from Burma and Thailand, the bhikkhuni order unfortunately was not. By the time progressive Sri Lankan Buddhists began to advocate for a Theravada bhikkhuni revival in the twentieth century, there were no more Theravada bhikkhunis anywhere in the world to perform the ordination ceremony, although there were many Mahayana bhikkhunis qualified to do so. For roughly ten centuries there were no bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka.

Fortunately, progressive Sri Lankan bhikkhus joined South Korean bhikkhus and bhikkhunis in 1996 and Taiwanese bhikkhus and bhikkhunis (among others) in 1998 to hold two international bhikkhuni ordination ceremonies in India. More than thirty Sri Lankan women were ordained as Theravada bhikkhunis in the course of these ordination ceremonies. Since 1998, bhikkhuni ordination ceremonies (called *upasampadas*) occur regularly in Sri Lanka in three locations (and perhaps more in the future): Dambulla, Dekanduwa, and Navugala. Because bhikkhunis tend to identify with the temple where they received their ordinations, distinct bhikkhuni "nikayas," or monastic sects, have begun to emerge in Sri Lanka. This has long been the case for bhikkhus as well.

The bhikkhuni order is growing in Sri Lanka. Currently there are about 1,000 bhikkhunis and about 1,000 samaneras,

or novice nuns, who are training to become bhikkhunis. Additionally, there are at least 2,000 dasasil, or 10-precepts, nuns, who observe the same ten novice precepts as samaneras, but do not necessarily aspire to become bhikkhunis.³ Dasasil nuns belong to an alternative order of nuns, which was established in Sri Lanka in 1905 when there was still insufficient support for a bhikkhuni revival. Although many dasasil nuns have ordained as bhikkhunis since the late

1990s, many others have not done so. Thus there are two different kinds of nuns in Sri Lanka today—samaneras/bhikkhunis and dasasil nuns—both of whom make important contributions to their communities.

Inevitably, the first women to become bhikkhunis came largely from the ranks of the dasasil nuns. Many of these women had lived for decades as dasasil nuns before getting the opportunity to ordain as bhikkhunis. Today, however, large numbers of young women are ordaining directly into the bhikkhuni order. In the course of my research on the Sri Lankan bhikkhuni revival, I have even met groups of sisters and/or cousins who ordained together in their teenage years. Several senior bhikkhunis have stressed the importance of attracting girls and young women to the bhikkhuni order. Accord-

ing to them, these are easier to teach than middle-aged or elderly women because their bodies and minds are more flexible, adapting more easily to the rigors of monastic training and education. They regard this younger generation of nuns as especially important to the development and dissemination of the order in Sri Lanka. That said, there is no official age limit to bhikkhuni ordination in Sri Lanka. I am 50 years old and have been encouraged on more than one occasion to ordain!

Whenever I meet a bhikkhuni who had lived in the past as a dasasil nun, I ask her how different her life is now. Bhikkhunis always begin by explaining that the biggest differ-



Bhikkhuni and laywomen

ence is the number of monastic precepts that they now observe. Bhikkhunis observe 311 precepts, whereas dasasil nuns observe 10 precepts. Even though they readily admit that it is much harder to observe 311 than 10 precepts, they routinely express gratitude for their many precepts. Why? Because the precepts help them to discipline their bodies and minds, which, in turn, helps them to refrain from unethical conduct. As one senior nun put it: the precepts protect her from her own mind, which might crave something that can lead to unethical conduct. She, and others like her, emphasize both the negative social and karmic consequences of unethical conduct. From the perspective of these nuns, the precepts protect them from these negative consequences in a variety of ways, including limiting their opportunities for misconduct, disciplining their bodies and minds through constant mindfulness of the precepts, and, perhaps most importantly, teaching them to relinquish craving for anything that leads away from the path to nibbana.

Some of my readers may be surprised by the extent to which Sri Lankan bhikkhunis focus on the negative consequences of unethical conduct. Please be aware that Sri Lankan Buddhists take

For example, unlike dasasil nuns, they regularly receive *atapirikara*, or the eightfold “requisites” such as monastic robes and begging bowls, from lay Buddhists. Lay Buddhists also invite bhikkhunis to participate in *sanghika danas*, which are alms-giving ceremonies in which the alms offered to a group of bhikkhus or bhikkhunis are symbolically offered to the entire Sangha. Bhikkhunis tell me that they feel better able to serve the needs of their lay communities now that they can perform any ritual requested of them.

Perhaps the most visible marker of the difference between bhikkhunis and dasasil nuns is their robes. Although both bhikkhunis and dasasil nuns wear the traditional Theravada orange-colored robes, there is a subtle difference between the robes of bhikkhunis and those of dasasil nuns. Bhikkhunis, like bhikkhus, wear an outer robe made of *cut cloth*. As one nun, put it, the robe looks like a rice paddy field. The outer robe of dasasil nuns is made from a solid, uncut cloth.

When I asked one senior bhikkhuni what she wanted me to tell the readers of Present, she said that former dasasil nuns like herself “were thirsty for higher [bhikkhuni] ordination! Fortunately in 1998 we got it. Now nuns in Sri Lanka are very, very happy!”

karma very, very seriously. Further, they regard fear (along with shame) as virtues precisely because they help us to refrain from unethical conduct. This is, in fact, also a common point of view in Buddhist scriptures, however strange it might sound to some modern ears. The bottom line is that Sri Lankan bhikkhunis express tremendous gratitude for their precepts. When I asked one senior bhikkhuni what she wanted me to tell the readers of Present, she said that former dasasil nuns like herself “*were thirsty for higher [bhikkhuni] ordination! Fortunately in 1998 we got it. Now nuns in Sri Lanka are very, very happy!*”

The precepts are not the only issue bhikkhunis bring up when contrasting their lives today with their lives as dasasil nuns. They also emphasize that they are now members of the Buddhist Sangha. (Dasasil nuns are not considered part of the Sangha, occupying instead a religious position somewhere in between that of a lay person and that of a samaneri.) Thus they are now able to perform all of the same religious rituals that bhikkhus perform.

Yet however different these robes look to the trained eye, to the untrained eye they look exactly alike. That may be one reason why so many Sri Lankans still have no idea that the bhikkhuni order was revived in their country! Even those who do know, find it very difficult to tell bhikkhunis and dasasil nuns apart. Consequently there is also frequently confusion about how to address bhikkhunis (please say “bhikkhuni vahanse” or “mehenin vahanse”)—an important issue in a country where the Sangha is addressed with a special honorific vocabulary. I have been surprised to find that even some lay supporters of bhikkhuni temples do not always know what the difference is between a bhikkhuni and a dasasil nun—or even that there is a difference! For these lay supporters, the only thing that matters is that their nuns are good nuns, that is, that they are virtuous and compassionate, and that they are skilled teachers of the Dhamma.

But if bhikkhuni ordination is now available to Sri Lankan women, why don't all dasasil nuns become bhikkhunis? And why are some Sri Lankan women and girls still choosing to ordain as dasasil nuns rather than bhikkhunis? I think the reasons are complicated and varied.

Sri Lankan Dasasil Nuns Today

Like bhikkhunis, dasasil nuns also make important contributions to their communities by offering religious programs (including meditation programs) at their temples, performing rituals for lay Buddhists, and engaging in various kinds of social work. Let us please continue to show our respect and gratitude to the Sri Lankan dasasil nuns for their religious and social services, even if we are also supporters of the bhikkhuni revival! It is a tribute to the tremendous courage and dedication of Theravada Buddhist women that, when blocked from access to bhikkhuni ordination, they developed alternative orders of nuns in Sri Lanka, as in Southeast Asia.

But if bhikkhuni ordination is now available to Sri Lankan women, why don't all dasasil nuns become bhikkhunis? And why are some Sri Lankan women and girls still choosing to ordain as dasasil nuns rather than bhikkhunis?

I think the reasons are complicated and varied. On the surface you might be told that it is because these women believe that the newly revived Sri Lankan bhikkhuni order is not legitimate. Why not? Because the 1996 and 1998 international ordination ceremonies, which revived the Sri Lankan bhikkhuni order, required the participation of South Korean and Taiwanese bhikkhunis who follow *Mahayana* rather than *Theravada Buddhism*. Thus some dasasil nuns believe that any Sri Lankan bhikkhuni is a Mahayana bhikkhuni rather than a Theravada bhikkhuni. This is a common argument on the part of those who reject the Sri Lankan bhikkhuni revival. I have heard it many times in Sri Lanka from many different people: Buddhist monks, Buddhist lay men and women, and dasasil nuns. Although bhikkhunis have lots of supporters, including Buddhist monks, their order is still controversial in Sri Lanka.

Susanne and bhikkhuni



Mother and son at temple

Sri Lanka's bhikkhunis are most definitely Theravada bhikkhunis, not Mahayana bhikkhunis. They follow the Theravada Pali Vinaya, and the Buddhism they practice and teach in their temples is Theravada Buddhism. Readers who want to know more about the debate over the alleged Mahayana affiliation of Sri Lankan bhikkhunis should consult the excellent essay by Bhikkhu Bodhi on the topic.⁴ I will not go into the details of this debate myself, both because Bhikkhu Bodhi's essay is available and because it isn't the only—or even most important reason—why some dasasil nuns choose to remain dasasil nuns.

So why do these nuns reject the option of bhikkhuni ordination? Firstly, it is not difficult to imagine that dasasil nuns, who may have given years of their lives to developing their order (especially those in administrative positions in the order) would feel a great deal of loyalty to their order.

Secondly and perhaps more importantly, Sri Lanka is a soci-

ety in which people routinely show respect, verbally and physically, to those whom they regard as their superiors, such as parents, teachers, monks and nuns, and elders of any kind. When two nuns meet, the junior nun shows respect for the senior nun. One very common reason why some of the younger dasasil nuns do not want to ordain as bhikkhunis is because their teacher-nuns may be too old to withstand the rigors of bhikkhuni training and ordination. Technically, a bhikkhuni is senior to a dasasil nun because she is a fully ordained nun and the dasasil nun is not. Thus when a dasasil nun greets a bhikkhuni, she must pay homage to that bhikkhuni by bowing to her. Many dasasil nuns believe it would be disrespectful to put their teacher-nuns in a position of having to bow to her former students. (And, of course, some teacher-nuns actively discourage their students from entering the bhikkhuni order, as do some monks connected to dasasil temples.)

Lanka and Southeast Asia if they had been given access to bhikkhuni ordination all along!

But why would lay girls and women choose to ordain today as dasasil nuns rather than as bhikkhunis? I think it is largely a matter of who one happens to know. For example, I interviewed a woman recently who ordained for the first time at the age of 64. She told me that when she was considering ordination, she was still unsure if she would ordain as a dasasil nun or a bhikkhuni. But she happened to have an acquaintance with ties to a bhikkhuni temple. So her acquaintance directed her to the head nun of that temple and she became a samaneri and eventually a bhikkhuni. The choice whether to become a bhikkhuni or to become a dasasil nun (as well as which temple to join) is frequently a matter of the accident of personal connections.

...the government helps to fund *pirivenas*, or monastic schools, for monks and dasasil nuns. But there is still not a single government-funded *pirivena* for samaneris and bhikkhunis in the entire country...Bhikkhunis do not need formal government recognition to live as bhikkhunis—no one can prevent them from doing so in Sri Lanka—but they do need formal recognition to establish the *pirivenas* vital to the successful development of the bhikkhuni order.

Similarly, some dasasil nuns are also uncomfortable with the fact that senior dasasil nuns, who may have ordained several decades ago, suddenly become very junior bhikkhunis if they enter the bhikkhuni order. Seniority is calculated by the number of years a person has been ordained, but no credit is given for the years a bhikkhuni was a dasasil nun. That means older bhikkhunis with a lifetime of experience as dasasil nuns might have to venerate much younger bhikkhunis just because the younger bhikkhunis happened to ordain before the dasasil nuns made their decision to become bhikkhunis. Furthermore, one dasasil nun, who is strongly opposed to the bhikkhuni revival, informed me that she had been snubbed by former dasasil nun friends after those friends became bhikkhunis.

The confusion of social and religious hierarchy created by the bhikkhuni revival is a significant factor in dasasil opposition to that revival. Of course, this confusion could have been avoided if Sri Lankan women had been given access to bhikkhuni ordination back in 1905! Women would not have had to create alternative orders of nuns in Sri

Recently I interviewed a nun who resisted my repeated attempts (and those of my research assistant) to find out whether she belonged to the dasasil or bhikkhuni order (we couldn't tell by her robes). She told us that virtue, or *sila*, doesn't reside in one's robes, but in one's person. A case in point is the nun who was seated next to me on that very hot bus ride. She was a dasasil nun, but she was just as much of a spiritual friend to me that day as the bhikkhunis whom I have met. Even though I personally support the bhikkhuni revival in Sri Lanka (and elsewhere), I also have great reverence for the many nuns in alternative orders such as Sri Lanka's dasasil nuns.

Legal Status of Bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka

The bhikkhuni order is still not formally recognized by the Sri Lankan government, a process that involves obtaining the support of some key politicians and monks. As already noted, the bhikkhuni revival remains controversial in Sri Lanka and certainly not only because of its alleged Mahayana affiliation. There are a lot of people who have stakes in the

bhikkhuni revival—whether pro or con—for economic, social, and political, as well as religious reasons. It is a complicated situation.

The immediate consequence of the lack of formal recognition is financial. Bhikkhus, and to a much lesser extent, dasasil nuns receive financial support from the government. (This financial support is another reason why some dasasil nuns are reluctant to become bhikkhunis.) For instance, the government helps to fund *pirivenas*, or monastic schools, for monks and dasasil nuns. But there is still not a single government-funded *pirivena* for *samaneris* and bhikkhunis in the entire country. Bhikkhuni temples must come up with the money to pay teachers to educate their nuns. Even when those teachers offer their services for free (and only some do), bhikkhuni temples must still pay the transportation costs of those teachers. This alone is a significant hardship for many bhikkhuni temples. Bhikkhunis do not need formal government recognition to live as bhikkhunis—no one can prevent them from doing so in Sri Lanka—but they do need formal recognition to establish the *pirivenas* vital to the successful development of the bhikkhuni order.

Although bhikkhunis do not receive government support, they do receive considerable private support from lay Buddhists (including some government officials) and Buddhist monks. It is difficult to determine the percentage of Sri Lankans who support the bhikkhuni revival, especially since a good number do not even realize that such a revival has taken place, or are confused about what this revival actually means. The most I can say at this time is that support for bhikkhunis is mixed. The temples I have visited enjoy excellent reputations in their communities. It appears that the more direct contact people have with bhikkhunis themselves, the more likely they are to actually support these bhikkhunis.

Bhikkhu Support for Bhikkhunis

There would be no Sri Lankan bhikkhuni order without the support of Sri Lankan bhikkhus. The groundbreaking 1996 and 1998 international ordinations could never have happened without the active participation of Sri Lankan bhikkhus. Further, the bhikkhuni order would not be about 1,000-strong today without the continued active support of Sri Lankan bhikkhus. Their support includes participating in bhikkhuni ordination ceremonies, advocating publically and privately for bhikkhunis (including for formal government recognition of the bhikkhuni order), holding alms-giving ceremonies for bhikkhunis, serving as teachers and advisors of bhikkhunis, and donating lands and buildings for bhikkhuni facilities. I cannot emphasize enough how much

many bhikkhus are doing to support bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka. Bhikkhunis routinely express gratitude in my presence for this support.

But bhikkhu support is, of course, mixed. I have occasionally been shocked by the hostility a monk expresses toward Sri Lankan bhikkhunis upon learning that I am conducting research on them. For example, one monk claimed that Sri Lankan bhikkhunis just care about money. This is, sadly, a stereotype I have heard on more than one occasion. The (false) logic behind the stereotype is as follows: Sri Lankan bhikkhunis are really Mahayana bhikkhunis. Most Sri Lankans know nothing about Mahayana Buddhism. They nevertheless reject Mahayana Buddhism because a) it is a “foreign” kind of Buddhism, and/or b) they believe that Mahayana monks and nuns don’t maintain celibacy (wrongly assuming that the Japanese model of married priests is the norm for all Mahayana clergy). At the same time, it is also a common assumption in Sri Lanka that foreigners are rich. So some opponents of the Sri Lankan bhikkhuni revival, like this monk, believe that Sri Lankan bhikkhunis took ordination primarily in order to get money from their allegedly rich, foreign, Mahayana friends.

I also have been informed of monks deliberately undermining the work of bhikkhuni temples. For example, one bhikkhuni temple was told to stop holding religious programs on monthly full-moon (*poya*) days because too many lay people were going there instead of to the local bhikkhu temple. One lay woman told me that the monk in her local temple—and even some of the lay supporters of that temple—give her a hard time for patronizing a bhikkhuni temple instead of their bhikkhu temple.

Again, it is impossible to know the percentage of bhikkhus who support bhikkhunis. Suffice it to say, that there is a great deal of support for bhikkhunis within the Sri Lankan Sangha, but it is not unanimous.

Lay Support for Bhikkhunis

A foreign bhikkhuni who has lived for many years in Sri Lanka told me once that if the Sri Lankan lay people support bhikkhunis then no one, not even bhikkhus, will be able to stop the bhikkhuni *sasana*, or lineage. I am happy to report that there is strong lay support for bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka. Of course not all laypeople support bhikkhunis, but those who have had the chance to visit bhikkhuni temples speak very, very highly of these nuns.

Bhikkhunis, like dasasil nuns, engage in a wide range of activities on behalf of their communities. These include children’s religious and secular educational programs, healthcare educational programs, outreach to the poor and sick, psychological counseling, and, of course, a range of religious pro-

One of the ironies of the bhikkhuni controversy in Sri Lanka is that both sides seem to believe that the very integrity of Theravada Buddhism is at stake in the bhikkhuni revival.

grams for all ages such as meditation classes, all-night pirith (protective scripture) chanting, alms-giving ceremonies, and Dhamma instruction of various kinds.

Bhikkhunis are especially in demand to teach meditation, something that doesn't happen routinely in Sri Lankan Buddhist temples. Several lay supporters have told me that they patronize a bhikkhuni temple because their local bhikkhu temples do not offer meditation programs. Knowing their reputations for good meditation instruction, bhikkhus themselves sometimes invite bhikkhunis to offer meditation programs for laity in their temples.

I have been especially touched by the interactions between bhikkhunis and village children. When we talk about lay support, we have to keep in mind that whole families are connected to these bhikkhuni temples, not just individual adults. My own local bhikkhuni temple places children front and center in all temple activities. For example, on one full-moon day, the children gave small sermons to all of us; a few of the older children chanted alongside the nuns during an all-night pirith chanting ceremony; and they were all invited, along with their parents, for a day of traditional games at the temple during the Sri Lankan New Year celebrations. Recently, I also heard a bhikkhuni at this same temple counseling some adults on how to treat a child who was acting out at home because he is jealous of a younger brother. Her advice was to refrain from scolding the jealous boy and instead shower him with love. I have often heard these bhik-

khunis telling parents to be gentle and patient with their children. Additionally, I have heard them instruct adults and children alike on the application of metta meditation to home life, making the Dhamma relevant to families.

The one religious practice prevalent in Sri Lanka that I have not found at bhikkhuni temples is the worship of gods and goddesses, who are propitiated for worldly gains such as passing exams, bearing children, or curing illness. Many bhikkhu temples house devalayas, or deity shrines, but this is uncommon, to say the least, at bhikkhuni temples.

The adjectives that lay supporters most commonly use to describe samaneras and bhikkhunis are compassionate (karunavanta) and virtuous (silvat)—especially with respect to keeping their monastic precepts. Lay women, in particular, stress how accessible they find nuns, whether seeking advice on family problems or instruction on some aspect of Dhamma. Indeed, I have been told several times by lay women that they feel much freer discussing such matters with nuns than with monks. Why? Because they know that monks and nuns are not supposed to associate too much with members of the opposite sex. And because they sometimes find monks intimidating since they hold such a high social and religious status in Sri Lanka. As one lay woman put it: “When we are with monks, we cannot be so [physically] close with them. We can be [physically] close with nuns and ask them questions, talk with them. We can talk about anything [with nuns]. We can ask them about anything. . . We can ask nuns things we can't ask monks. . . Even when we are practicing meditation . . . we can ask monks questions [about meditation] too, but we [do so from a distance] . . . with nuns we can even ask our question several times if we don't understand [the answer]. We don't question monks like that.” Her hesitation to question monks during meditation instruction was due to the fact that she had to ask her questions from a physical distance and because she was intimidated to admit to a monk that she hadn't understood his answer.

It is especially the adjective “virtuous” (silvat) that I hear again and again concerning nuns, which is not surprising since bhikkhunis are meticulous about observing their 311 monastic precepts, even the minor ones. Quite a number of lay Buddhists have confided to me that they find bhikkhunis more virtuous than bhikkhus. For example, lay Buddhists complain that bhikkhus sometimes request meat when laity are giving alms, something bhikkhunis never do. Lay Buddhists also complain about a perceived materialism on the part of some monks, who might own lots of fancy electronic equipment or, more rarely, their own cars. Again this is not the case for bhikkhunis, who are quite poor.

Of course, there are many virtuous (silvat) bhikkhus in Sri Lanka! The point I am trying to make, however, is that bhikkhunis are routinely singled out for their high degree of virtue. One of the ironies of the bhikkhuni controversy in Sri Lanka is that both sides seem to believe that the very integrity of Theravada Buddhism is at stake in the bhikkhuni revival. Those who oppose the revival believe that the integrity of Theravada Buddhism is threatened by the alleged Mahayana affiliation of the Sri Lankan bhikkhuni order. Those who support the revival believe that bhikkhunis guarantee the integrity of Theravada Buddhism because they are so virtuous. Thus there are many supporters, like myself, who believe that Sri Lanka's bhikkhunis (along with their bhikkhu supporters) are spiritual friends to the Theravada sasana, as a whole.



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¹ Phra Prayudh Payutto, *Buddhadhamma: Natural Laws and Values for Life*, trans. Grant A. Olson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 224-225.2

² Please see my *Virtuous Bodies: The Physical Dimensions of Morality in Buddhist Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

³ There is no official list of bhikkhunis and samaneris in the country although Ven. Chandima Thero of Manelwatta Temple has begun the process of compiling such a list. There should be an official list of all registered dasasil nuns, but I was not able to access it as this article goes to press. Further, as my student Gihani de Silva reminds me, many dasasil nuns are not registered with their national or local organizations. Premakumara de Silva states that there are 3,500 dasasil nuns in "Discourse and Counter-discourse(s) on the New Bhikkhuni Order in Sri Lanka: An Ethnographical Inquiry," *Nivedini* 15 (Nov.-Dec. 2009): 28. All statistics are tentative, since exact figures are not available. I thank my research assistant Chamila Somiratna for obtaining these statistics.

⁴ Bhikkhu Bodhi, "The Revival of the Bhikkhuni Ordination in the Theravada Tradition," in *Dignity and Discipline: Reviving Full Ordination for Buddhist Nuns*, ed. Thea Mohr and Jampa Tsedroen (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2010), 99-142. I have also summarized some of Bhikkhu Bodhi's points in "Celebrating the Revival of the Bhikkhuni Order," which was published in *Budusarana* April 17 (p. 5) and 25 (p. 4), 2011. Please note that the editors of the *Budusarana* article changed my original title. The title should have been "Celebrating the Revival of the Buddha's Fourfold Sangha." The editors also added subtitles, one of which is incorrect: "Tibetan Buddhism" should have been "Mahayana Buddhism."

VIETNAMESE BHIKKHUNI DHAMMANANDA: TRANSFORMING

War and Violence to Peace and Respect



Sakyadhita Conference Vietnam

By Susan Pembroke

Bombs from American B-52 planes and heavy rockets pummeled the rural North Vietnam village where Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's working class parents struggled to stay alive during the escalating Vietnam War. Born in 1969 on a gloomy day in winter, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, a skinny baby and the sixth of ten children, was given the name Pham, thi Minh Hoa. The translation is Pham, the Bright Flower, her name symbolizing hope and beauty at a time U.S. bombs were destroying the very forests she would come to love. The raging war prompted Ayya Dhammananda's family to flee the delta village of her birth and relocate to a remote area bordering Laos, a town nestled between the mountain ranges named Truong Son, the Long Range mountains.

Her hard working parents succeeded in farming a fertile track of land. Ayya (the term of respect she prefers) Dhammananda grew up in a wooden house, bustling with children and activity. Outside were the family's animals and beyond them lush forests, rivers, and mountains. In her world, one way of measuring quality of life was to count the craters from American bombs. In her village in the Ha Tinh province, she found only two bombed sites compared to many more in other towns. Their home, one of the largest in the village, attracted a steady stream of beggars. Even as a little girl, Pham delighted in giving food to those in need. She could not have imagined then that one day she would choose to abandon everything to ordain as a bhikkhuni and become a person dependent on others for food as well.

Her childhood and adolescence vacillated between tenderness and harshness, encouragement and disparagement, loving ties and wrenching separations. She had a kind-hearted mother who did not know how to express love and a father who recited poems and proverbs to her before she fell asleep at night and insisted the highly intelligent Pham go away to the best school but burned her books and beat her with a cane when she became too engrossed in learning. As a little girl Pham regularly turned to her grandmother for nurturance and affection.

In January 1973, almost four years after Ayya Dhammananda was born, a ceasefire had been arranged and U.S. ground troops left Vietnam. Soon afterward, though, fighting resumed between the North and South until South Vietnam surrendered on April 30, 1975. Pham was six. Peace lasted for only a short time. War broke out again, this time with China in the north and the Khmer Rouge in the south. The years from 1978 to 1981 were the most terrifying. In 1978 when Pham was in second grade, adults dug deep tunnels around her school so that teachers and children had a safe haven to escape the bombing.

Growing up in a veritable battlefield took its toll on Pham. A joking façade concealed a serious, thoughtful child who wanted to make sense of a bewildering, violent world. She sums up her life journey in three sentences. "I was born in suffering. I grew up in suffering and was looking for a way to overcome dukkha. I found the way and now live by it." The part she omits is an earnest wish to help others overcome suffering as well.

Her parents met when her father returned to his hometown after an absence of twenty-five years. Pham's mother happened to be caring for Ayya Dhammananda's paternal grandfather, a Confucius scholar who failed a test that could have led to a governmental position which would be appointed by the monarch. That failure scarred him. His bitterness impacted the entire family. Perhaps part of Ayya

Dhammananda's thoughtful personality and quest for a solution to life's cruel realities was partly forged by a combination of the tough life she was born into and a family that discussed ideas and philosophy.

“ I was born in suffering. I grew up in suffering and was looking for a way to overcome dukkha. I found the way and now live by it. ”

Yet, not all of her life involved hurt and sadness. Some of Ayya Dhammananda's happiest childhood memories involved listening to her father tell stories about his exotic experiences in foreign lands. His recounting of time spent in Thailand introduced her to Theravada Buddhism and sparked an inquiry that transcended the spiritual amalgam of animism, sprite worship, devotion to Quan Yin, Pure Land Buddhism, Christianity, and Confucianism prevalent in Vietnamese villages. Pham's father, a nationalist, joined the Vietnamese Liberation Army in Bangkok in 1946 when he was twenty-four. From northeast Thailand, his group advanced into Laos and Vietnam where they fought the French. Her father remained a fighter until the final Vietnamese victory over the French in Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

As a little girl Pham was fascinated by her father's tales about monks who were offered sticky rice when going on alms rounds in the early morning. Her father described the monks as quiet, good hearted, and generous in sharing what they had with the poor and homeless. The young Pham dreamed of living in those places so she could offer food. Her father could only apologize for living in a part of Vietnam in which there were no monks and expressed regret that it was not a Vietnamese custom to offer food to monastics the way they do in Thailand and Laos. A seed, a vision of another way of life, had been planted in Pham's heart. Her father's stories may have enabled her to imagine a life larger, more complex, and more enriching than the one her rural village afforded, and may have led to her spending fourteen years of her adult life in countries other than Vietnam.

Exploration, courage, and adventure were core aspects of her family's legacy.

As Pham entered her teen years, there was mounting tension and worry at home. Her oldest brother joined the army and was sent to Cambodia. Her father frequently lost his temper,

often leaving her mother and grandmother in tears. In addition, her two older sisters left school to work on the farm. When Pham was fourteen, her brother returned home a disabled war veteran. He lost a leg and suffered many head wounds caused

by a landmine. Late at night, under the moonlight, her brother played the guitar. He and her sisters sang melancholy songs about life, love, and war.

Already feeling despondent, her depression intensified when she was sent to live with an elderly uncle and his wife to study math after doing well in a school contest. She missed her family and asked to return but instead her parents sent a sister to stay with her. Later she would feel grateful to her family for insisting on the best education for her.

By the time she was sixteen, she became increasingly aware that her life was without meaning or substance. Sometimes, when alone, she would sit quietly by the side of a river, gazing at the far away blue mountain range covered in white clouds, and wish that one day she could live there in solitude. Around this time, Ayya Dhammananda had a striking and unforgettable dream. In the dream, she was a tall, thin man in his thirties, walking on a narrow, village path. The man's head was shaven and he was wrapped in a yellowish robe. He went from house to house, receiving food that he collected in a rounded, black object. Her current parents were donors. With barely enough food for the day, the monk went to the outskirts of a forest, sat under the foot of a tree, and mindfully ate. When Pham recounted the dream to her father, he explained the person in the dream was a wandering Buddhist monk. At this point in her life, she had yet to see a Buddhist monk or nun, even in a movie or novel.

Conflicts between her parents made the thought of marriage an increasingly unappealing prospect even at a time when Pham was losing her tomboy figure and occasionally fantasizing about romance. Her resistance to marriage intensified as she witnessed her oldest sister's troubling experiences with men. The young Pham vowed to never fall in love, to never allow herself to become a victim of men. It was not only her parents'

arguments and sister's difficulties that made her wary of family life, but comments her father made as well. When she questioned him about harming and killing others when he was a soldier, her father explained that you did not think about things like that when at war. In other conversations, her father implied that later in life he felt obliged to make other moral concessions as well, those times in the name of providing for his family.

Ayya Dhammananda, still years away from knowing she would one day ordain, thought long and hard about her father's remarks. She feared having a family might force her to do something contrary to her conscience as well. Her oldest brother, though, urged her "to live life in full. Thinking too much makes you miss lived experiences, makes you not a realistic person." She asked her brother how to stop thinking about unwanted or distressing thoughts. He confessed

to not knowing but believed monks might know. Ayya Dhammananda recalls feeling relieved that "at least someone knows, and one day I can learn with them." For a number of years, the wish to become a renunciant had been growing. Following high school, Pham made it clear to her family that she wished to become a nun even though she did not know whether to become a Christian or Buddhist nun.

Distracted by tragic events in her family and unsure of what she wished to study, Pham failed the entrance exams to a desired university. She returned home, helped on the farm, and tutored younger siblings. Eventually she entered an educational

young man.

No matter what her family told her, she remained reluctant to bring a child into the world. Some of the reasons had to do with her lingering confusion about life and what she witnessed at home and some of her hesitancy was driven by social and environmental concerns. Following the war, the Vietnamese population had risen considerably at the same

time punitive American sanctions made the country worse in every area of life. Many forests had been destroyed by the war. She felt very strongly that she could not add "more burden to this earth," the effect of yet another child in a country already ravaged by years of war and impoverished due to economic sanctions. She wrote stories and articles, voicing her multiple concerns, but none were published.

The sudden loss of a brother in a road accident crystallized her decision to renounce lay life. By the time she and her father reached the hospital, her brother was dead. His death was a brutal reminder of impermanence. She remained with her grief-stricken family for two months at which point nothing could prevent her from leaving home to become a nun. She went to the nearest Buddhist nun monastery in Vinh city which was 80 kilometers from her home. There, she met her first teacher, Ven. Thich Dieu Niem, a nun in her seventies. Pham was admitted after an hour interview centering on her circumstances and motives. This day marked a turning point in her life and was one of the happiest days



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college at nineteen and graduated at twenty-one. During these college years, she had contact with Mahayana nuns and became a regular visitor at their nunnery in Nha Trang city where her college was located. The idea of becoming a Buddhist nun solidified in her mind during this period. Her eldest brother, always the mentor to everyone in the family, persisted in urging her to live life full tilt. Her family even attempted to match her with a

she had experienced in many years.

After nine months in the monastery, she was tonsured, not by the giving of precepts, but by verses of renunciation in the Thien Lam Te (Zen) Lineage. During those months, Ayya Dhammananda visited Theravada and Mahayana monasteries in Hue city, 300 kilometers away. Her mind inclined toward Theravada practice, however her heart told her to remain with her teacher

who was very ill. She stayed for two and a half years and performed all her duties, which were demanding since she was the only young and knowledgeable nun there.

Work occupied her time from 4:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., crowding out any time to learn the sutras or practice meditation. Though she appreciated the Bodhisattva practices and admired her teacher as an excellent example of a selfless servant for destitute people, Ayya Dhammananda wanted people coming to the temple to have more dhamma education, not just rites and rituals. One day a wandering Theravada monk came to their monastery. For the first time, she had the chance to listen to profound but practical dhamma teachings, which she found inspiring. She began comparing the busyness at the monastery she was at with the free and simple lifestyle the monk practiced. She began studying books on meditation by Achan Chah and other Theravada authors.

Her teacher gave her permission to go to Ho Chi Minh City where she met the Ven. Thich Minh Chau, the renowned monk who translated the five Nikayas into Vietnamese and founder of Van Hanh Buddhist Institute. She stayed at a Mahayana nunnery until moving to another nunnery established five years earlier by Ven. Vien Minh. Ven. H. Phapa, one of the monks there, trained in Burma and Thailand for thirty years. He recommended further study in Burma or Thailand. Eventually, she was admitted at the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU) in Yangon, Burma. While in Burma, when classes were not in session, she and the other nuns spent all of their time in forest meditation centers around Yangon.

Ayya Dhammananda studied with various teachers—Pa Auk Sayadaw, Sayadaw U Janaka, Sayadaw U Pandita and Ven. U Tejaniya, and Swe Oo Min Sayadaw. She received a B.A. in Buddha-Dhamma at ITBMU in 2002. Her meditation practice, informed by Buddhist studies, formed the basis of her Ph.D. dissertation: the connection between ego-consciousness and unsatisfactory experience.

While in upper Burma, she met Ven. Bhikkhuni Kusuma and learned about the situation in Sri Lanka for nuns. In Colombo, she continued her studies at the Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies (PGIPBS), University of Kelaniya, and earned a M.A. (2004) and a Ph.D. (2008) in Buddhist Studies at this institute.

In 2002, the first group of four Vietnamese Theravada nuns went to Sri Lanka to receive bhikkhuni ordination organized by Sakyadhita International's branch in Sri Lanka. The ordination conflicted with a final exam at ITBMU. Finally, in June 2004 at Anuradhapura, the ancient city of Sri Lanka, she ordained as a bhikkhuni with seven other women—five Sri Lankans, one other Vietnamese, and one woman from the Czech Republic. She lived with her mentor, Ven. Bhikkhuni Kusuma, for more than four years at Lakavipassana Medita-

tion Centre in Colombo and the Ayya Khema International Centre, founded by Ven. Kusuma, in Horana.

In 2010, a handful of Ayya Dhammananda's dedicated lay supporters were instrumental in the construction of the Khemarama nuns' monastery, the first bhikkhuni arama for Theravada bhikkhunis in Ba-ria Vung-tau province, 120 kilometers from Ho Chi Minh city. In residence are two bhikkhunis, one samaneri, and three postulants. The women monastics were offered land in northern Ha Giang province to build a bhikkhuni monastery. Among the five Vietnamese Theravada bhikkhunis, three have Master's degrees and two have Ph.D.'s in Buddhist Studies. Additionally, all were trained in intensive meditation retreats in Myanmar.

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ism prevalent in Vietnamese
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Vietnam remains primarily Mahayana, with over 24,000 Mahayana bhikshunis and samaneris. Nevertheless, since the 1940s when Theravada Buddhism came to Vietnam during the modern era through a group of monks ordained in Cambodia and led by Ven. Ho Tong, the ranks of Theravada monastics continue to grow. At this time, there are about 300 Theravada monks and about 400 Theravada nuns (eight precepts) in Vietnam. Ayya Dhammananda represents one of a handful of Theravada Vietnamese bhikkhunis.

Wanting to meet the needs of her supporters, Ayya Dhammananda travels throughout the country, giving talks to people from diverse backgrounds, distributing dhamma books, teaching meditation to old and young alike, and assisting in



sion and loving-kindness. She hopes to train young people as volunteers to work on this endeavor. Part of her motivation in going to Australia is to become more informed on the subject of domestic violence so that she can train others in Vietnam. She also supports efforts to assist Vietnamese children disabled from the lingering effects of Agent Orange, an herbicide and defoliant used by the U.S. during the Vietnam War.

Ayya Dhammananda wrote in an email interview, “I was born in suffering. I grew up in suffering and was looking for a way to overcome dukkha. I found the way and now live by it.” Unlike her grandfather who never learned to overcome life’s setbacks and disappointments, her life story is an example of transmuting heartache and grief into compassion and wisdom. In working to dispel her

own sadness and loss, she continues to bring hope and inspiration to those who have also endured tremendous hardship due to years of wars, impoverishment, violence, and ignorance. She encourages them to also walk the path of liberation with her.

rebuilding temples. She wishes to spread what she describes as a “rational Buddhism” in North Vietnam where most people have very limited information on Buddhadhamma. In addition, she has spent a considerable amount of time in Australia over the last three years, teaching the dhamma and supporting the budding Bhikkhuni Sangha there. She intends to spend the rest of 2011 and much of 2012 in Australia in meditation as well as teaching the dhamma to Australians, Sri Lankans,

If you can offer suggestions or help in assisting Ayya Dhammananda in organizing support for victims of domestic violence in Vietnam, she can be reached at scphaphy@gmail.com.

own sadness and loss, she continues to bring hope and inspiration to those who have also endured tremendous hardship due to years of wars, impoverishment, violence, and ignorance. She encourages them to also walk the path of liberation with her.

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Singaporeans, and other Westerners. In Victoria, she will be teaching at a Buddhist summer school program as well.

A subject of growing concern for Ayya Dhammananda is the prevalence of domestic violence. For thousands of years, Vietnamese thinking was influenced by Confucianism, a philosophy rife with patriarchal behavior and gender discrimination. Unfortunately for Vietnamese females, Buddhism is no better in its treatment of women. Both contribute to violence against women and children. Ayya’s goal is to form an organization to educate people about the dangers of domestic violence and implement solutions to this problem through Buddhist teachings on compas-

Susan Pembroke
President, Alliance for Bhikkhunis

Report on the 16th Annual Western Buddhist Monastic Conference November 8-12, 2010

by KC Madika WarEagle Bhikkhuni
edited by Cleo Kalyana Wolf, Samaneri

Monastic Gathering 2011



In the early nineties, American nuns from the Tibetan tradition conceived the idea of a Western Buddhist monastic gathering. They planned to invite Western monks and nuns of different traditions to talk, to enjoy each other's company, to find out more about each other, and strengthen connections among the greater Western Sangha. This evolved into a four-day conference, limited to forty participants, with the hosting center providing lodging and meals as Dana.

The 2010 conference was the 16th Annual Western Buddhist Monastic Conference. The theme was "Reflections on Renunciation: the Practice of Vinaya in the 21st Century." The Vinaya is described by I. B. Horner as "the discipline governing and regulating the outward life of the monks and nuns who had entered the monastic Orders." The Patimokkha contains the training guidelines that are recited on Uposatha days which occur approximately every two weeks on the new and full moon.

This past year the conference was held at Vajrapani Institute, a Tibetan Buddhist retreat center located in the Santa Cruz Mountains in Boulder Creek, California. The speakers and their topics were: Bhikkhu Bodhi—Continuity and Transformation: The Challenge of Monastic Discipline in an Age of Moral

Relativism; Ajahn Anandabodhi—Picking Up the Threads; Ven. Thubten Chodron—Vinaya as Practice at Sravasti Abbey: Practical Applications in Modern Times; Rev. Seikai Leubk—The Relationship Between the OBC and the Vinaya; Ven. Jian Hu—What to Preserve and What to Change? (Regarding the Monastic Tradition in the West); Ven. Thubten Saldon—The challenges of living the monastic life when such communities are rare.

The goal of the organizers was to encourage lively discussion, promote mingling and harmony, ensure that the people who normally would not talk be heard, and that wisdom and kindness prevail. For this reason, small groups were formed after each main speaker's presentation. At mealtime, the participants were encouraged to sit with people they haven't met yet. This strategy for social interaction helped make the conference a success. Several participants commented that the small group forums were helpful and appreciated.

The first day a Pali meal blessing was given and the evening chanting was Pali. The second day, the meal blessing and evening chanting were from the Chinese tradition. The third day, these were conducted as in the Tibetan tradition.

Three versions of Vinaya are in use today. Three others are available to scholars for research but are not in use. The variety derives from geographical location and school of emphasis. Those in the Theravada tradition from Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, or Sri Lanka use the Theravada or Pali Vinaya. The Dharmaguptaka Vinaya is used by those in or from China, Korea, Japan and Taiwan. The Mulasarvastivada Vinaya is used by those in or from Tibet and Mongolia. Today in the Western hemisphere, the Vinaya used is related to the culture and tradition of the individual or community. All three versions are similar in content.

Some differences among the Vinaya versions occur in how the Patimokkha rules are presented. For instance, a paragraph that is considered one rule in one version might be broken down into several rules in another version. Other differences occur in the detail and explanation of the guideline. The Vinaya is more than just the training guidelines; it contains

illuminating background and commentary on behavior that is wholesome or unwholesome, on what will benefit the Sangha and what will not.

Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni Patimokkhas vary in length, contain similar as well as different rules, and are not recited together. For example, the Theravada Bhikkhuni Patimokkha has 311 rules and the Bhikkhu Patimokkha has 227 rules, some of which spell out how bhikkhus should treat bhikkhunis. Most of the rules are believed to have been made as incidents arose and were brought to the attention of the Buddha to address. If a complaint was brought against an ordained Sangha member, the Buddha created a training guideline.

Scholars are sifting through the Pali canon, first written in Sinhalese on palm leaves. They are considering the provenance of the texts, the culture of the translators, and location of the materials and other aspects to decipher what fits and what may have been added or changed. It is generally acknowledged that when an individual reports what he or she has heard, they will present the report based on their own point of view and so may introduce something not present in the original telling. However, it is also accepted that the oral tradition in use at the time of the Buddha and afterward reproduced what was heard with striking accuracy. Scholars continue to inform us what may or may not have been given by the Buddha.

At least thirty-seven out of forty participants were in accord that literal translation of the Vinaya is not always appropriate. Differences in interpretation are subject to myriad influences. We all benefit by remaining flexible and charitable in our interpretation and application. If one monk interprets the training guideline on “not handling gold or silver” as not touching any kind of currency, and another understands that one is not to spend money for personal gain and uses currency, both are right for themselves at that time. If one monk is able to remain in seclusion as a homeless person and is supported by laity for all their requisites, they are fulfilling Vinaya guidelines. Another monk may need to get a job, go to school, and live in ways that require one to use money to support oneself. That person is also fulfilling Vinaya as long as they are not using money for personal gain. One way is not better than the other as long as both continue to grow in virtue, kindness, and wisdom.

The Korwat (Manual of Monastic Etiquette) of Wat Pah Nanachat addresses how to view variety in application of Vinaya very succinctly by quoting an education in loving kindness from Luang Por Chah. He said: “It’s not right to watch others with a fault finding mind. This won’t help your practice at all. If you feel annoyed, observe that annoyance in your heart. If other people’s sila is not perfect or they do not behave like good monks, it is not your job to be judgmental. You won’t become wise by watching and blaming others. The

Vinaya is a tool to assist you in developing Samadhi Bhavana. It is not a weapon for finding fault or judging who’s good and who’s bad. No one can practice for you, and you can’t practice for anyone else. So be mindful of your own behavior, this is the path of practice.” This reflects the attitude of the monks and nuns at this gathering.

Many people cherish the Vinaya. The practice of discipline teaches through mind and body awareness. It is not separate from dhamma. The application of the Vinaya in the modern Western

Many came away from the conference with greater confidence, happiness, and relief from the clarification that the Vinaya Patimokkha contains training guidelines, not commandments.

world can be confusing so it was very helpful to discuss issues such as travel and funding for requisites. Many came away from the conference with greater confidence, happiness, and relief from the clarification that the Vinaya Patimokkha contains training guidelines, not commandments. Adherence to the training guidelines as a standard of conduct ensures wholesome behavior, benefits all beings, and encourages interest in the Buddha Dhamma. Heartfelt wholesome conduct shines like gold. It was agreed at the conference that the Vinaya should not and cannot be changed, but that there are times when certain rules can be set aside by individuals or communities to be re-examined at a later date. It is important to look at the stories explaining the guideline to glean the spirit of the training guideline.

Among the presentations, one of the most touching was given by a nun who in the past said she had looked down on all renunciates that didn’t live by what she then called “strict Vinaya.” She thought she was better than they were. Then her circumstances altered and she had to use money, among other changes, and was totally humbled. She was not humbled because of having to adapt and vary the “strict Vinaya” she had previously observed but because she now had insight into the lack of compassion and loving kindness she had shown others.

It can be unclear what is Vinaya and what is etiquette derived from the culture or tradition. For instance, the Vinaya states that the robe of a renunciate should be a certain size but some of those that claim to abide by “strict Vinaya” use a larger size. That is actu-

ally against the guidelines but because it became a cultural norm to have a six-foot by nine-foot robe, it is allowed and persists. The guideline states that one should cut down the robe to appropriate size, which is about six by three and half feet. Those also claiming to hold to “strict Vinaya” would not be able to use a modern flush toilet as the guideline stipulates one must not urinate in water. Some deal with this “problem” by “confessing” the offense and turning around and repeating the offense over and over again. Others don’t “confess” the offense because they feel that confessing and then repeating the offense is not a true “confession.” These may sound like trivial examples to some but keep in mind that those who claim “strict Vinaya” are usually the ones who criticize and rebuke those who don’t keep a “strict Vinaya.”

Another example brought up at the conference is the timing of the Rains Retreat. It usually runs through the summer for three months, beginning in late June or early July. During the rainy season in India, the monsoon made travel difficult. Monastics could easily ruin crops and kill living beings by walk-

How do you use the spirit of the Vinaya to make guidelines for modern circumstances such as Internet usage? A nun or monk could claim to be abiding by “strict Vinaya” and still spend eighteen hours a day on the Internet because there are no training guidelines in the Vinaya forbidding it.

ing on them during this time. That reasoning does not apply to the same time period here in the States. Our most difficult time to travel in the States is usually December through March, but many are unwilling to change the time of the Rains Retreat here.

We also talked about what is not covered in any Vinaya. How do you use the spirit of the Vinaya to make guidelines for modern circumstances such as Internet usage? A nun or monk could claim to be abiding by “strict Vinaya” and still spend eighteen hours a day on the Internet because there are no training guidelines in the Vinaya forbidding it. Other topics discussed were cell phone and computer use.

The term “strict Vinaya” was deemed objectionable by the majority at the conference due to its inherent divisiveness, elevation of self and denigration of others, judgment, measuring, and comparing. As the numbers of people drawn to Buddhism grow in the West, renunciates representing the Buddha must take great care to develop and promote wisdom and kindness and not try for “one-upmanship” or competition by comparing different individuals, traditions, or ways of applying the Vinaya. Westerners are trained by the media, by our culture, by our history to be critical, judgmental, and competitive. This is a big drawback to overcome. It is one where we can make an enormous difference in this culture and in the world.

Another issue discussed was to whom these guidelines apply. We have federal, state, county, and city laws, even neighborhood laws. A neighborhood law can legislate what color you paint your house because the majority of residents want the neighborhood to look a certain way. These neighbors have agreed to abide by these laws in order to live harmoniously. The neighborhood across the river may have different laws. The Patimokkha is like neighborhood law. It says there must be at least four fully ordained monks or four fully ordained nuns comprising a local community (neighborhood) in order to recite the rules on Uposatha days (full and new moon days). It is debated how to determine what even this means. Four fully ordained renunciates living in proximity may choose to come together to recite the Patimokkha but can also choose not to gather together for this.

Interpretation of Vinaya is decided by individuals and communities alike and varies widely. So many factors affect translation. Because of this, it is sometimes easier to rely on tradition rather than to investigate thoroughly what the rule is and apply that understanding sincerely. It can also be difficult to go against tradition. Buddhist renunciates in some situations may know what they are doing does not follow Vinaya guidelines, but they adhere to tradition over Vinaya out of fear of repercussion from others. They may face judgment, ridicule, and ostracism by other renunciates and even laity.

Translation of the Dhamma Vinaya should not be attempted simply through scholarship but needs insight developed through meditation and reflection as well. Each situation as it arises must be treated according to what is discerned in that moment with all the wisdom the individual has attained. That’s a lot of mindfulness! So practice comes to the fore as a leading element in accurate translation. Sometimes this is overlooked. That is where the value of an experienced and practicing teacher comes in.

Buddhism in the West has been filtered through Asian culture. The flavor, customs, and etiquette of the fostering culture or tradition took root here and are often assumed to be integral to Vinaya. We have a responsibility to clarify the

difference. The hazards of comparing, judging, and attachment to personal preferences were discussed. The fetter of fixation on rules and ritual was also examined.

Renouncing worldly pursuits of family, fame, and fortune are not generally well regarded in the West. This culture works hard to deny any association of family, fame, and fortune with greed, hatred and delusion. In the West, work is expected from everyone. Supporting oneself and one's family is a primary factor in evaluating an individual or group's function in society. A beggar is regarded as a pariah. Bowing is done only to royalty; prostrations might be used in an abject plea for life. In Asian cultures, bowing is de rigeur and children do prostrations of respect and love for their parents, grandparents, and teachers. To give without expecting something in return is actively taught to children in the East, however that is not the case in the West. What is acceptable for

The term "strict Vinaya" was deemed objectionable by the majority at the conference due to its inherent divisiveness, elevation of self and denigration of others, judgment, measuring, and comparing.

those from Asian cultures may not be acceptable to Westerners. The benefit of change in either case should to be evaluated on a situational basis while remaining open-minded and flexible at the same time.

It is a challenge to stand your ground, support your own decision making process, and be confident that you are doing the best you can. As the Buddha taught near the time of his death and is preserved for us in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta: "Rely on yourself, you are the light, don't rely on anyone else. The dhamma is the light, rely on the dhamma, don't rely on anything else." Networking with others in similar circumstances at events such as this conference helps to sustain the practice by validating or illuminating the paths we tread.

Support for living as a Buddhist monastic is extremely difficult to obtain in this culture, especially for women. Because of this, many ordained renunciates have to work for a living. Some drive cars, handle money, go to school, and pay taxes. Many have no health insurance or must work to obtain it. Those who are supported generally have a Laity Sangha of Asian culture that is accustomed to providing requisites for monastics. The attainment a renunciate can reach in seclusion or in the monastic environment is not apparent to the casual Western eye. There is little under-

standing of the life of a renunciate. Ordained Western Buddhists benefit themselves as well as lay practitioners if they become involved in their communities and explore various avenues of outreach, including directing centers and offering educational programs. We are generating and nurturing an embryonic Laity Sangha, not serving one already extant. Recently a highly respected lay Buddhist teacher, considered a master by many, told a Theravada nun that she "doesn't want an arahant (at her center) because they are useless." That's the sort of thinking we are struggling with.

We believe that we should allow each individual to practice the Vinaya as they see fit. We are not to judge each other by "our" standards. We need to agree to disagree and focus on our own practice. Living dhamma is what is important. The dhamma came before the Vinaya and that needs to happen here.

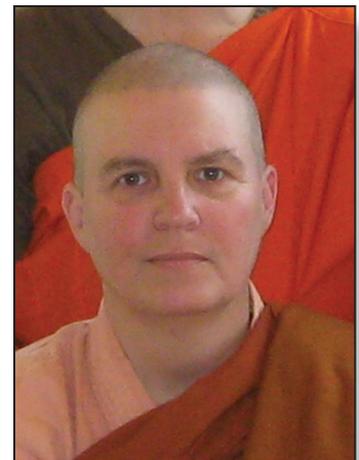
Let's end with a verse from the Pali Canon:

"Renunciates, more than 150 training rules come up for recitation every fortnight, in reference to which young people desiring the goal train themselves. There are these three trainings in which they (the training rules) are all contained. What three? The training in heightened virtue, the training in heightened mind, the training in heightened discernment. These are the three trainings in which they are all contained..."

"There is the case, renunciates, where a renunciate is fully accomplished in Virtue, Stillness, and Discernment. With reference to the lesser and minor training rules, offenses are committed and then redeemed. Why is that? Because it happens. But as for the training rules that are basic to renunciation and proper to renunciation, Virtue is steadfast and firm. Having undertaken them, one trains in reference to the training rules. Because of the ending of (mental) effluents, one dwells in the awareness-release and discernment-release that are free from effluent, having known and made them manifest for oneself right in the present..."

"Those who are partially accomplished attain a part; those who are wholly accomplished, the whole. The training guidelines, I say, are not in vain." (AN III.87-88)

"If you want to end suffering, drop your story, that's what it boils down to...How do you do that? I'll show you." Raised a fundamentalist Christian, daughter of a preacher in the Closed Plymouth Brethren, in the American Midwest, Ven. Madika has survived and learned a great deal to come to her present incarnation as a Western Theravada nun. Incorporating techniques and tools that have helped her, she regularly offers a workshop entitled "Freedom from Disturbing Emotions" that is both entertaining and empowering. She also teaches a form of Qigong called "Awakening Stillness."





SHARING BUDDHISM WITH CHILDREN

By Jacqueline Kramer

Both monastics and lay teachers, out of the fullness of their hearts, have a sincere interest in seeing the Buddha's teachings thrive in the West. We sit in the question, what brings people to the path? How do we open up the way for the next generation? Bhikkhu Bodhi wrote about how he felt the first urging to set foot on the noble path at the sight of a well-practiced monk. While interviewing Tsultrim Allione, she told me that what drew her to Buddhism fresh out of high school was a trip to India where she saw Tibetan refugees bright and joyful despite having lost everything.

Passing on the true spirit of Buddhism is more than an offering of wise information. It is a transmission of consciousness. Children are particularly sensitive to the consciousness of those around them. They sense our authenticity and heartfelt kindness. With this in mind, this article, rather than emphasizing lesson plans and specific teaching materials, is more interested in speaking to the heart of what really communicates the spirit of the dhamma and in sharing some communication skills that may enable us to enter teaching situations with confidence.

The hope is that this will be of support to parents, monastics, or anyone else wanting to share Buddhism with children.

Not only did the Buddha leave instructions on awakening and living in the world in an awakened state, he also gave us examples of how to teach. In the forty-five years that he traveled around India after his enlightenment, he skillfully applied his teachings to many different situations and many different populations. We can follow the Buddha's example as we prepare to bring his teachings to the children of the West.

The Buddha met people at their level of spiritual maturity and developed an explanation of his teachings from there. An example of this can be found in the Sigalovada Sutta. In that sutta, the Buddha comes upon a man quickly praying in the four directions, as was the Hindu custom at the time. He saw the man, Sigala, going through the motions of the ritual but missing the opportunity for a deeper experience. Deftly, the Buddha took the form of ritual Sigala was engaged in, praying in the four directions, and turned it into a teaching opportunity by applying principles regarding relationships between

child and parent and other primary relationships, to the four directions. This is one of many examples of superb teaching approaches taken by the Buddha that has been passed down to us in the suttas.

A great teacher, whether they teach math, tennis, religion or any other subject, is a catalyst for the student's shift in consciousness or change in their perspective of the world and their place in the world. No lesson plan or teaching system alone can ever be as powerful as our own wisdom, compassion, and vulnerability. This is good news. We can trust our own natural goodness and sincerity to do the work for us. If a teacher is genuinely kind, knows how to listen deeply, really likes the people she is teaching, and has authentic experience of the subject matter, she simply needs to remain open to the teachings moving through her. Teaching is a transmission, whether we are teaching adults or children, the subject matter is only the context. We listen, let go of boundaries and defenses, open our hearts, and trust ourselves.

No lesson plan or teaching system alone can ever be as powerful as our own wisdom, compassion, and vulnerability.

Another aspect of bringing the Buddha's teachings into a new culture is being knowledgeable about that culture's beliefs and values. We can piggyback on the wisdom that is already present. This is what the Buddha did when he came upon Sigala praying in the four directions. He took what was already there, a Hindu form of prayer, and built on that. In the West, we find Christianity and Judaism as well as a great respect for science and business. American values and perspectives are informed by the Abrahamic religions, by Descartes, Newton and other philosophers and scientists who were interested in observable phenomena. The more familiar we are with the beliefs and customs of these systems, the more we can use the metaphors of the culture. It's also helpful to check our own heart to see if we have any prejudices regarding these religions and philosophical systems.

Many westerners who are teaching Buddhism came to Buddhism from either a Christian or a Jewish background. Many of us came to Buddhism because we found something lacking in our religion of origin. It's important to heal any rift within ourselves so that we can be respectful of the culture in which we are introducing the Buddha's teachings. By observing the culture's traditions from a respectful stance, we are then able

to build the Buddha's teachings onto the already existing structure. We can take customs such as Christmas, Passover, fasting rituals, grieving rituals and such, and add Buddhist wisdom to that template just as the Buddha added the wisdom he wished to transmit to the Hindu culture of his time. We come to children with respect for their ancestors and an understanding of their worldview. With an open heart and listening awareness, we speak the native language using metaphors that are most pertinent to the children we are teaching. From that foundation we can try out many time-tested teaching modalities.

Whether gathering by an outdoor fire pit or curling up on a sofa in a candle lit room, children have listened, wide eyed with wonder, to stories told and retold. Whether over a simple meal of rice and beans or a sumptuous feast of turkey, candied yams and apple pie, prayers of gratitude have been spoken before partaking of the fruits of the Earth. Teaching values to our children is as old as human history. Although each culture may have different values and unique ways of instilling these values in their children, there are some themes that pop up over and over again throughout history in cultures near and far. We can plug into these methods as we bring the Buddha's teachings to Western children. I'd like to share the perspective on a few classic teaching modalities developed by the Hearth Foundation, a non-profit organization I founded five years ago to support the spiritual growth of mothers and families.

Story telling

Reading to children and telling stories is one of the most delightful ways to open up discussions and impart wisdom. Anytime is a good time to read a book to a child. In a Sunday school setting, it is helpful to pair the dharma talk given to the adults with a book that addresses the same subject matter, or at least something similar, for the children. This way when the children ask their parents questions regarding the issues brought up in Sunday school, the parents have also had some time to think about the subject. It puts the parents and children in the same stream. There is no need to limit our choice of books to those that are strictly Buddhist. If there is a good book on the golden rule written from a Christian perspective which accords with the lesson being taught, there is value in using it. There are many wonderful children's books available. Hearth is compiling a list of children's books at www.hearth-foundation.org. A few books we like are listed at the end of this article.

Arts and crafts

One of the key ways children and adults learn is through their hands and their eyes. I was at a painting workshop recently where we painted all day. When I drove home in the late afternoon, everything looked like a symphony of beautiful lines. Art puts us in alignment with our senses and brings us to a state of greater awareness. While the children's hands are busy, there are many opportunities for conversation, laughter,

Whether gathering by an outdoor fire pit or curling up on a sofa in a candle lit room, children have listened, wide eyed with wonder, to stories told and retold.

and, most importantly, presence. There are an infinite amount of potential art projects and many books on the subject. You do not need to be an artist to foster an artistic experience. Creating specific projects is beyond the scope of this article, but I would like to offer some thoughts regarding ways to approach an art activity.

- Children are naturally creative and don't need much to get going. It is not necessary to know a lot about art or have special art materials. Even just paper, colors, and a simple idea to start with can bring interesting results.

- We are not about the business of creating Picassos. The best thing a teacher can do is put aside any advice or judgments about the child's artwork. Every line, every smudge, is beautiful. All are expressions of thushness.

- Sometimes it's fun to color things in. Buddhnet (www.buddhanet.net) has some black and white drawings of the Buddha's life that can be downloaded and colored in. There are other Buddhist study materials for children at that site as well.

Nature adventures

Being in nature with children offers many opportunities for sharing the dharma. In Hearth's Shrine Room series, we invite the moms to take a walk with their children and find flowers and/or other objects to place on the family altar. This exercise gets the family out into their neighborhood and spending time with each other. As they walk, they are alert to their surroundings, the season, and the unique beauty of their area. A walk in the neighborhood with an eye to the native life forms and seasons brings children into contact with the Earth and its gifts. A little garden can teach children many important life lessons. Lessons, such as how the discipline of watering a plant each day, bears wonderful results. Observing the ecosystem reveals the interrelatedness of all of life. These are just a couple of the many lessons growing plants offers. If garden space is not available, some planter boxes or flower pots work fine. Birds, insects, and animals all offer opportunities to teach about life and awareness. A teacher, whether in the city or the country, can follow nature as she leads the instruction.

Meal sharing

Two key Buddhist values are generosity and gratitude. These are values Buddhism shares with the other wisdom traditions and so these values create a natural bridge between the cultures. Meal sharing, whether it be a celebration, a family dinner, or snack time at Sunday school, is a time to appreciate the fruits of the Earth. A teacher can help the children remember that what they are eating came from the Earth and bring

presence and gratitude for that which sustains us. One classic exercise in awareness is to give each child a raisin. Ask the child to put the raisin in their mouth and close their eyes. The facilitator guides the group in being present as they explore the taste and texture of the raisin. This exercise brings greater awareness in the moment and a deeper appreciation of the Earth's bounty and our inter-connectedness. The teacher can talk about how the raisin, or other fruit or vegetable, came to us. Starting with the seed in the Central Valley, farm workers tilling the soil, watering, growing, harvesting, picking, washing, transporting, packaging, buying and so on until it reaches the child's mouth. You can get as detailed as you like with this. Wendy Johnson of Green Gulch Farm does a great job with this exercise. You may wish to read her work. This exercise teaches so much about the unique quality of each simple raisin and the interconnection of all things as well as being a mindfulness meditation.

Guided meditation

Even though children may not be ready to meditate on their own, they are able to follow guided meditations at an early age. Each guided meditation can be created anew, keeping in mind how long the children's attention span is and what images they would be most receptive to. These guided meditations can be on a theme such as loving kindness or ease or they can be a simple instruction on feeling what is in this present moment. If you would like some ideas of specific guided meditations, there are a couple of recommended books at the end of this article. A wonderful meditation is offered in the book *Moody Cow Meditates* by Kerry MacLean. In it, the grandson comes to his meditating grandfather after a very bad day. The grandfather sprinkles glitter into a clear cup of water and asks his grandson to sit and watch the glitter until it settles down. This helps settle the boys mind. At the end of the book are instructions on what materials to use for this meditation.

Being in the present moment

Finally, transmitting Buddhism is not really about teaching anything. We create an atmosphere in which children can be present and discover the answers for themselves. When Siddhartha was a young boy, his parents brought him to the annual spring plowing festival. While the adults were enjoying the ceremony in the field, young Siddhartha sat on a blanket underneath a Rose Apple tree, enjoying the sounds and sights all around him. He was safe, he was comfortable, and in that place of ease, he fell into a quiet, bright, empty, expansive state. Years later, after exerting much effort, studying many

Finally, transmitting Buddhism is not really about teaching anything. We create an atmosphere in which the child can be present and discover the answers for themselves.

teachings, and engaging in many meditation techniques, Siddhartha once again found himself sitting under a tree. While under the Bodhi tree, Siddhartha resolved to not move until he had found the path out of suffering. Harkening back to his experience as a young boy under the Rose Apple tree, Siddhartha let go of meditation technique, let go of trying, and with full presence in the moment resolved to not rise from where he was sitting until he had found what he was looking for. That night the Buddha became enlightened. As teachers of Buddhism, we listen for that Rose Apple tree moment in our children and when we find it, we acknowledge and celebrate it. Children are naturally adept at being in the present moment. Perhaps our most important activity as teachers of Buddhism to children is honoring and validating their innate awareness. Teaching children is easier than you think. Be yourself, be present, everything else is commentary.

Some books we like:

Picture books:

I Once Was a Monkey, stories of the Buddha told by Jeanne M. Lee. Stories about kindness, thinking clearly before acting, endurance and patience.

Buddhist Tales, retold by Sherab Chodzin and Alexandra Kohn. A book of classic Buddhist tales, such as the Angulimala tale and The Living Kuan Yin. Taken from several Asian cultures. Good, short stories to read to children.

The Three Questions, based on a story by Leo Tolstoy, written and illustrated by Jon J Muth. A wonderful lesson on mindfulness.

Becoming Buddha—the Story of Siddhartha, by Whitney Stewart and Sally Rippin. Some simple stories of the Buddha with nice pictures.

Zen Shorts, by Jon J Muth. 3 Zen koans in children's story form with delightful pictures

Little Stone Buddha, by K.T. Hao, illustrated by Guiliano Ferri. A story about kindness and service.

Tenzin's Deer—a Tibetan Tale, by Barbara Soros, illustrated by Danuta Mayer. A story about the power of compassion,

dreams, healing, loving deeply and letting go.

Samsara Dog, by Helen Manos. About the cycle of rebirth and nibbana. Good for teaching Buddhist perspective on death and rebirth.

Books kids can read (or you can read them to the child) and books for teens:

Prince Siddhartha—the Story of Buddha, by Jonathan Landaw and Janet Brooke. The best book I know of on the life of the Buddha for children. It can be read to younger children or read by elementary school children.

Kindness—a Treasury of Buddhist Wisdom for Children and Parents, collected and adapted by Sarah Conover, illustrated by Valerie Wahl. A read aloud anthology of Jataka tales and stories from the great Buddhist traditions. (See the Book Review department for a review of this book.)

Wide Awake—a Buddhist Guide for Teens, by Diana Winston. Introduces meditation, karma, enlightenment, metta, the four noble truths and other basic Buddhist tenets to teens.

Dharma Punx, by Noah Levine. A spiritual autobiography of how Buddhist practice helped a troubled teen turn it around. For older teens.

Teaching meditation:

Moody Cow Meditates, by Kerry MacLean. A picture book on helping young children use meditation to settle their minds.

Baby Buddhas—a Guide for Teaching Meditation to Children, by Lisa Desmond. A number of different meditation techniques designed for children.

Starbright—Meditations for Children, by Maureen Garth. Though not strictly Buddhist, these meditations can be helpful for younger children.

There are many more books on Buddhism and spiritual principles for children. I hope this list will help get things started for you.

Jacqueline Kramer, author of Buddha Mom—the Path of Mindful Mothering, has been practicing meditation and studying Buddhism for over 40 years and is director of The Hearth Foundation which shares Buddhist wisdom and practices with mothers around the world. www.hearth-foundation.org. She lives in Sonoma with her daughter and granddaughter.



The Buddha and Jack Kerouac Fistfight in Tusita Heaven

By Nathan Robnett-Conover

The girl near me on the bus doesn't look like a nun. Red and yellow flowers crowd a dirty skirt she sports over a pair of worn jeans. Under her seat a small black and white dog lies stretched out next to a stickered banjo case. The Portland sunlight that filters through the bus's windows catches on the girl's nose piercing before coming to a rest on the blue flannel arm she's slung around a derelict backpack like a caring friend.

I met Mickey two years ago when she had yet to be baptized in the train-hopping, world-renouncing, utterly uncompromising legacy of Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder, when she still went to Reed College. Seeing her on a Portland bus in late November, it takes me a second to recognize her and another minute to decide how I—Macbook owning, YouTube-addicted, car-driving, meat-eating, Nathan—will approach her.

Mickey fascinates me in that she represents a manifestation, if an extremely colorful one, of a drive to renounce that's been a part of my life ever since I read Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* at fifteen. The book spurred me on to investigate the Buddhist teachings of Jason Siff, a former monk living in Idyllwild, California. What had before manifested as an aggressive and directionless search for truth suddenly found expression in a compassionate, allowing practice of meditation as taught by Jason. My encounter with the Dharma would shape the next seven years of my life by providing me with both a spiritual direction and the tools with which to question that direction.

Hearing the gentle investigative teachings of Jason Siff and

beginning to meditate daily felt like meeting the person I would marry. The vision of golden Theravadan robes shone in me with a bright lucidity. What could be a more worthy pursuit in life than to cultivate compassion and understanding in one's heart? What could be a better way to do this than to confront the mind directly? The self-evidence of this logic required no further articulation or justification. I would be a monk...

Someday. In the meantime, I had to find a girlfriend, lose my virginity, get drunk for the first time, learn to play the guitar, confront my creative side, contribute something meaningful to society, overcome a numbing depression, get into a good college, prove my manhood through a job, and negotiate the sea of stimuli permeating my generation's adolescence. Yet, time and again, the heady wine of ambition, or a girl's sweetness, transmuted on my tongue into an inconvenient body of knowledge: that of the suffering and ethereal-

ity of experience. C.S. Lewis describes pain as "God's cry to a deaf world." At least once every year, for the past seven, this cry crescendos for me into a vision of ordination and a confidence that the one task worthy of death's inevitable approach is an investigation of the mind and heart. Yet circumstance, culture, and my youth demanded patience. I found myself the inheritor of a poignant tension articulated by Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Hermann Hesse.

These writers understood the lure of a life free of compromise. Tolstoy's wife barely prevented him from selling off his estate and the rights to his books. Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* gave the world the character of Alyosha; a youth whose teacher forces him to renounce his desire for the priesthood in order to live in



the chaos of the external world. Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf* fictionalizes Hesse's lurching search for a substantial truth on the margins of a society from which he feels utterly separate. These writers recognized the breadth of spirit required to embrace compromise in the face of uncompromising truths such as death and God (two of the three were Deists). In their surrender of idealism exist a deep compassion and grace. A Buddhist interpretation of such compromise might point to its acknowledgement of the imperfection of human existence and the presence of dharma in all aspects of life—the First Noble Truth.

My idealism encountered this line of reasoning most directly this past winter. My recent work at a high school for at-risk youth in North Portland allowed me to experience "the world" in a way I hadn't before, due to my prior absorption in academia. Although the work felt meaningful (and humbling; the interview and first class both involved me sweating through my shirt), the realization that came from it surprised me. Even though I felt more put-together than I ever had before—I was meditating an hour-and-a-half every day, exercising regularly, and managing to avoid awkward silences when talking to a cute barista I saw weekly—all I found myself thinking was, "It's not enough." I knew where this led: I'd met the middle-class suburban householder and I wanted more. There are, in the world today, people as radiant as any saint of the past, and the common denominator between them seems to be a life of meditation. Our existence fades too quickly for us to compromise. Upon hearing my plans to ordain the next year, my parents expressed support: "We always expected this," my Dad told me over Skype.

My meditation teacher had a different idea. "Nate," Jason advised me, "you must wait until the other paths in your life dry up, leaving you with only this as an option. You should wait until you find yourself in a situation where ordination comes to you." My oldest friend's view regarding renunciation reflected Jason's: "Some renunciation is very visible. True renunciation is harder to see. It is more of a letting go." Such a view represented a wholesome one in another respect; it caused me to look directly at what drives my desire for such extreme changes in my life. Through the spiritual, the insatiable ambition of the American psyche finds its most subtle and difficult manifestation. Patience and gentleness forced me to look at this drive rather than act immediately on it.

Following this conversation, my disappointment and decision to postpone ordination drove me to ask again how one can lead a spiritually-uncompromising life in the midst of a world that requires compromise in every other aspect. I came up with love.

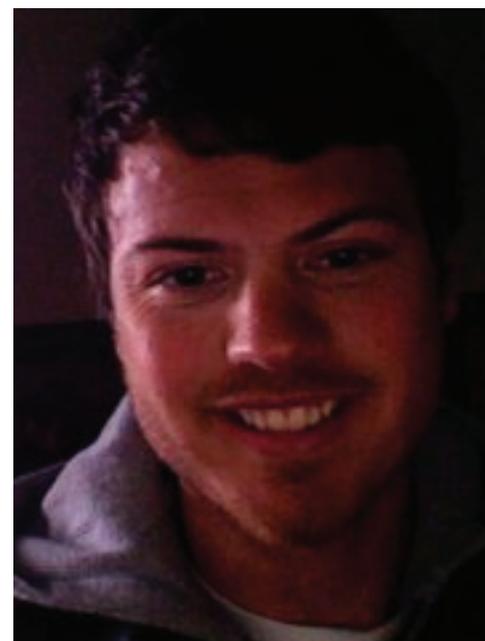
In A.D. 1177, the Sufi poet Farrid ud-Din Attar wrote *The Conference of the Birds*. One section of this poem tells of a Sufi spiritual leader who falls madly in love with a Christian woman and burns his Qur'an at her request. He returns to his followers having converted and wiser than ever before. When taking him back, the followers grieve only that they did not shed their robes for a love as he shed his. I admire the Sufis because they loved God to

such an extent that they could easily slip and love a woman. Sometimes it seems impossible to tell whether Rumi writes for a lover or for the divine. Perhaps in working towards the selfless loving of those around her, the poet comes to a place similar to the ascetic. In reducing the manifestations of desire in their lives to a few forms—the Other or enlightenment—both figures—the selfless lover or serene renunciate—can look directly at the act of desiring and building self. By paying acute attention to the world, the poet, like the ascetic, can reach through it.

This brings us full-circle to the bus's punk priestess. When I interviewed Mickey about her decision to leave college for a life of train hopping and music, she told me that, despite its differences with the life of an ordained monk, her life led, in her eyes, to an essential truth. She said, "When you live outside of the law and social norms, you get a lot more extremes. I've seen people do amazing things and really fucked-up things in the past years, and I've been humbled by it. One of the biggest realizations I've gotten has been about humility." Through her full-bodied embrace of the world, Mickey came to a place talked about in the Suttas: a softening of the self. There are many roads to Kansas.

For the moment, I don't see a need to make a final decision between renouncing and embracing. Perhaps the soul burns like a sun. A seed of gravity draws it into itself only to have it ignite ever-more-complex elements within its body and expand into the dark again. Its oscillation into the space without and the material within brings it closer to singularity (or maybe just a knowledge of its rhythm). Perhaps the tension between poetry and meditation represents the most vital element of my spirit. Of course, this is all talk. It's all really about practice, practice, practice... and sometimes poetry.

Nathan Robnett-Conover is currently majoring in English at Portland State University and interning at Open Meadow, a high school for at-risk youth. He enjoys back-country skiing, running, and backpacking.



The Presidents Message:



Will the West Have a Bhikkhuni Sangha?

A Bhikkhuni Sangha is sprouting in the West. Will this fragile shoot survive? No one can say for sure. It is highly possible that one day Theravada bhikkhunis will disappear from the Western landscape altogether. To conclude otherwise is to ignore history as well as contemporary challenges facing Western monastics. Unlike the expanding number of bhikkhuni viharas and training centers in Southeast Asia, there is no guarantee that ordained women will coalesce into well-supported, thriving bhikkhuni communities in the West.

It is a mistake to assume that because female Theravada monasteries have strongholds in a number of countries, they will naturally thrive elsewhere. During a span of a thousand years, Chinese bhikkhuni monasteries flourished while Sri Lanka had not a one. This is ironic since it was Sri Lankan bhikkhunis who brought ordination to their Chinese sisters. What was, ended. The same can happen in the U.S. and other Western countries.

Another illustration of what may take root in one country but not another is Taiwan. This East Asian country has had dynamic female monasteries for decades. Ordained women overwhelmingly outnumber male monks. The rapid growth of bhikkhuni monasteries happened at a time when similar bhikkhuni monasteries were non-existent in Thailand and Burma, countries relatively close. Communities of ordained female monks are only now beginning to emerge in Thailand but not in Burma. What may seem utterly reasonable to one culture may appear irrational, unacceptable, or even offensive to another.



Mahapajapati Bhikkhuni Monastery,
Pioneertown CA

*It is easy to assume that
since some female
monks exist now,
they are here to stay.
History tells us otherwise.*

An additional error would be to view misogynistic attitudes as the primary driver blocking women from enjoying the privilege of living as a female monk. A Westerner may be inclined to assume that as gender equity spreads, female renunciants will have an easier time. In reality, in Southeast Asia where women to this day are often viewed as inferior to men, fully ordained women are faring much better compared to the West. Southeast Asian women are blessed to have been born in countries in which the laity has a long tradition of supporting male monks. Adding female monks to the mix has not been that much of a paradigm shift for lay supporters. For many Thai and Sri Lankan women, it is a relief to be able to have close contact with a female monk. They can reveal things to a woman they could not broach with a man.

Currently, a few dozen fully ordained Theravada women are beginning to appear in the West, but, by and large, they are struggling and lack dependable support. Quite a few live in relative isolation on family property and are provided for by sons and daughters. The majority who are trying to make a go of it without family assistance are finding it tough getting their basic needs met. It is easy to assume that since some female monks exist now, they are here to stay. History tells us otherwise. Ordained women have appeared in Thailand, even in Tibet, over the last several centuries, but those hopeful sparks and embers died, without leaving a trace and certainly without evolving into viable communities.

A few isolated bhikkhunis here and there do not a

Bhikkhuni Sangha make. The charismatic German-born Ayya Khema is an example of this. Though she transformed the practice of her students through the re-introduction of jhana practice, she did not leave a legacy of a Bhikkhuni Sangha. There were no junior nuns to pick up where she left off. This is a cautionary tale that warns us not to read more into the occasional glimpse of a Western woman in orange robes. Brilliant, entertaining, and adept writers and meditators, such as Ayya Khema, attract substantial support from lay people. A reserved, introspective young woman, just entering a spiritual career, will not garner that level of support and can easily slip through the cracks.

How do we protect women who are ten, twenty, or thirty years from arriving at spiritual maturity? How do we encourage Westerners to care about a young (or older) woman who lacks the wit and storytelling ability of their favorite lay teacher? This brings us to the central question: does a Bhikkhuni Sangha matter? If so, why? Is there value in supporting individuals who are focusing on their practice and development even if we do not seem to derive immedi-

ate benefit from their efforts? Unless lay Western Buddhists recognize the value of having full-time, dedicated female monastics, the fledgling Bhikkhuni Sangha in the West will perish over time.

Each historical period contains its own unique challenges and problems for monastics. There were, for example, bhikkhunis in the ancient Siam kingdoms of Lanna and Sukhothai. The changing political scene during the rise of the Ayutthaya kingdom led the monarchy to offer support exclusively to the Bhikkhu Sangha, signaling the death knell of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. When the Bhikkhuni Sangha as well as the Bhikkhu Sangha died out in Sri Lanka hundreds of years ago, one was revived (multiple times), the other wasn't. There were Burmese bhikkhunis who could have journeyed to Sri Lanka with Burmese bhikkhus to ordain women, but the Burmese bhikkhunis were of a different lineage than their bhikkhu counterparts. As a consequence, the Burmese bhikkhunis were excluded from participating—another example of the Bhikkhuni Sangha falling victim to politics. What are the contemporary forces at work in the West that may prevent the development of robust, sustainable bhikkhuni communities?

Within this short article, I cannot hope to include the entire gamut of problems Western women renunciants face. Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi has written cogently about modern challenges in play for Western monastics in his essay, "The Challenge of

A reserved, introspective young woman, just entering a spiritual career, will not garner...(much) support and can easily slip through the cracks. How do we protect women who are ten, twenty, or thirty years from arriving at spiritual maturity?

the Future: How Will the Sangha Fare in North American Buddhism?" <http://www.bhikkhuni.net/library.html> I refer the reader to this in-depth analysis of intellectual, cultural, and social issues Buddhist monastics must address if the Sangha is to prevail in the contemporary world. Rather than cover the same territory, I will focus on pragmatic concerns bhikkhunis are confronting in attempting to secure solid footholds.

Practical Problems in Establishing Bhikkhuni Monasteries

We are not accustomed to sharing our breakfast of scrambled eggs and toast with monks on alms rounds. For many who work and have children to shuttle off to school, it takes every bit of their effort to get the family out the door on time. They often don't have time to eat breakfast themselves, let alone provide it for someone else. In Southeast Asia, it is commonplace to have several generations residing in a home and cherishing a family tradition of sharing food with monks. I have been on pindabat, alms round, multiple times with Thai bhikkhunis. Dozens of people will come out in the early morning to offer rice, fruit, and vegetables, kneel and bow their heads, awaiting a blessing, grateful for a chant that sets the tone for the day. If you are a Sri Lankan or Thai bhikkhuni, you will not starve. We lack this template in the U.S.

Another problem facing Western monastics is the reality that Buddhism is still very much a minority religion. Non-Buddhist neighbors might frown on women walking the streets, begging for food. This is not what spirituality looks like for people in the West who see virtue in industry, self-reliance, and material prosperity. To be dependent, to need help flies in the face of a cultural bias toward independence and self-sufficiency. People might think, I need to work for my food, why don't you? There

is a lack of understanding that maintaining mindfulness and Right Effort, and adhering to the disciplinary code throughout the day is a full-time, rigorous job which benefits many. It is well worth the sacrifices we make to keep this committed cadre of ascetics focused on the task at hand, namely, ending the pointless and futile merry-go-round of finding happiness through the senses. These renunciants are in search of a higher happiness and their single-minded work may inspire us to direct our energies to more fruitful and satisfying endeavors as well. Can the West embrace renunciation as an essential means to peace and contentment? Can they recognize that renunciation is a reward, in and of itself?

In Southeast Asia, lay people routinely volunteer at temples and monasteries. It is a time to be of service as well as to practice. Upasikas and upasakas play a critical role in keeping monasteries operating. Just finding sufficient help to buy and prepare food, run errands, and build and maintain

monasteries is harder in the West since it is not something we have been taught to do. Many Buddhist converts come to Buddhism via a retreat model. They pay good money and expect something in return. Living in a monastery and giving instead of receiving is an alien concept. And since Theravada Buddhists compose a small percentage of the overall population, the care for ordained women falls to a narrow band of people, placing those supporters at risk of burn out. Also, much of the support for Western monastics to date has come from immigrant populations. As their children and grandchildren become more secular and westernized, this help may vanish.

Land acquisition and development pose another set of problems to overcome. Demanding Western zoning and building codes make erecting monasteries much harder compared to Asia. Two years ago while traveling in Northern Thailand, I observed supporters of a local bhikkhuni come together to erect a temple for her. Within hours, they constructed much of the building. I seemed to be observing the Thai version of an Iowa barn raising, both events similar in that they brought a village together to achieve a task as well as strengthen bonds. In the case of Thailand, they were also creating a place they could call their own. No building permits were needed. No plumbing or heat or air conditioning was installed—just some walls and a roof. In the U.S., the authorities would have shut it down.

Related to constructing monasteries is the problem of finding affordably priced land that is zoned for group use. Even if such land is found, building code requirements can be deal breakers. For example, for a bhikkhuni monastery to qualify for property tax exemption, the building must be constructed in accordance with the Americans with Dis-

Can the West embrace renunciation as an essential means to peace and contentment? Can they recognize that renunciation is a reward, in and of itself?

abilities Act. This adds a whole layer of complexity and expense to the construction process. Even simple meditation huts, kutis, bhikkhunis would be delighted to have are not allowed in the U.S. because they violate building codes. The climate in the West poses other difficulties. Even in desert areas, it can be extremely cold at night. No sleeping under trees or in tents year-round in the U.S. or other Western countries. Even if hardy enough to pursue a wandering ascetic lifestyle, an individual risks arrest for vagrancy if adopting a life of homelessness.

Zoning is another issue. In most places, zoning ordinances prevent more than three unrelated people from living together. Though homes are offered, bhikkhunis cannot assemble the mandated number of four women, the

number needed to chant the Patimokkha, without breaking the law, even though they might be satisfied to share a small space. As a consequence, women who would like to live together in community, bound by and inspired by the Vinaya, cannot.

Additionally, exorbitant health care costs can prevent women from ordaining or remaining in robes. In some instances, U.S. bhikkhuni monasteries mandate that a woman seeking to join their community show proof that she can afford to pay her health coverage. One very ill nun without health coverage could generate staggering medical bills and bankrupt a bhikkhuni monastery already struggling to stay afloat. So, in order for bhikkhuni monasteries to evolve, they need new women entering their ranks but they are simultaneously reluctant to let women in for fear of being crippled by unexpected medical bills. The negative feedback loop is this: lay people might be more enthusiastic about backing bhikkhuni monasteries if they were able to visit such monasteries and find the experience instructive and heartening, but financial and other roadblocks stop such communities from forming, so lay people lack the contact and needed inspiration to fund these monasteries. Lay people will not mourn the loss of something they have never known.

The lack of solid material assistance impacts the bhikkhunis in other ways. Bhikkhus are able to enter established monasteries and focus on their practice to the exclusion of other activities. Newly minted bhikkhunis often lack this luxury. The pressures of keeping a small vihara or monastery going often force them to do more teaching and traveling than their male counterparts. The lack of retreat time can impede a bhikkhuni's spiritual progress. It can also be flat-out frustrating, demoralizing, and enervating.

In conclusion, we are a long way from having a solidly anchored Western Bhikkhuni Sangha. An array of problems persists, some cultural, some practical. Complacency and an unfounded optimism can blind individuals to current perils, thereby guaranteeing the Bhikkhuni Sangha fails in the West. If these ordained women disappear from the contemporary scene, we all lose, whether we realize it or not.



Susan Pembroke

1st Annual International Bhikkhuni Day

September 17, 2011

If you are convinced the expression of feminine energy and wisdom is vital for enlightenment,
If you believe women must be equal, influential, and full partners if Buddhism is to thrive in the modern era,
If you wish to see communities of monastic women in every corner of the world offer safe havens of learning and practice,
If you'd like your daughter, sister, wife, or mother to have access to the compassion of ordained women and witness renunciation as a lived truth,

then join us on **September 17, 2011**, for our **1st Annual International Bhikkhuni Day**, a global celebration of bhikkhunis, of fully ordained women. Meditate and share stories with people in Spain, Sri Lanka, Canada, Thailand, the U.S., and elsewhere. Be inspired and transformed!

This first celebration will honor the founder of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, Mahapajapati Theri, as well as commemorate women spiritual teachers who have brought out us the best in us, be they bhikkhunis or our mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, or teachers, or simply women we have read about.

In addition to expanding our awareness and becoming informed about the rich and complex spiritual legacy left to us by women, we also raise money for bhikkhuni monasteries so that monasteries that are struggling can survive and new ones can be constructed.

Visit our homepage at www.bhikkhuni.net for talks and other tools, designed to create a memorable day of reflection and discussion, learning, and local as well as global community building. Your presence, your voice, your investment in the feminine manifestation of enlightenment can make all the difference!

"Throughout the ages, women have had a unique way of approaching the spiritual path and a specific perspective on wisdom. This feminine vision of enlightenment is process oriented, relational, circular, transparent, and passionate." **Lama Willa Miller**

Japanese Buddhist Nuns Dislocated by Quake/Tsunami

Many Buddhist nuns have been dislocated by the earthquake and tsunami and are in need of assistance. If you'd like to help, please direct donations to the Zen Nihon BukkyoNisoHodan, a national, Tokyo-based, non-sectarian association of Japanese Buddhist nuns. Their website (in Japanese): <http://jibo.sakura.ne.jp/>. We are sending metta and karuna to all of Japan.

“Welcoming New Growth from Established Roots” Two Siladhara Nuns Take Leave of the Ajahn Chah Lineage to Follow the Bhikkhuni Path

Ajahn Anandabodhi and Ajahn Santacitta, of the Aloka Vihara in San Francisco, traveled to Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in Hemel Hempstead, UK in April to formally "take leave" of their community and the Ajahn Chah Lineage.

In November of 2010 they announced their intention to follow the bhikkhuni path, which is not open to them in the Thai Forest lineage. "The ready availability in the US of bhikkhuni ordination, the ordination given by the Buddha, offers us a new platform for the establishment of a training monastery for women," they said in their announcement.

The ceremony was attended by all of the Siladhara nuns and four senior bhikkhus, including Ajahn Amaro who is the abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery.

A celebration to welcome them home and recognize this transition, entitled "Welcoming New Growth from Established Roots" was held at the flower-filled Aloka Vihara, 1632 48th Ave., San Francisco, on May 7, 2011. Over forty attendees offered food for the meal. During the ceremony following the meal, the attendees read poems, presented pictures, sang songs, and made other offerings to the nuns. This was followed by a ceremony to plant seeds in their

backyard garden, symbolizing their new beginnings.

They will ordain as bhikkhunis on October 17 at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. For more information please visit their web site:

www.saranaloka.org/whats_new.html



Ajahn Anandabodhi

Ajahn Anandabodhi was born in Wales in 1968. Coming across the Buddha's teaching at the age of fourteen had a profound effect on her inner life. She has practiced meditation for over twenty years and has lived in Amaravati and Chithurst monasteries in the UK, since the age of twenty-

four; helping in various areas of running the monasteries and enjoying times of longer retreat and "tudong"-walking on faith-and taking the sign of the samana out into the world. Currently, Ajahn Anandabodhi is living at Aloka Vihara in San Francisco where she is helping to establish a nuns' monastery in the Theravada tradition. She shares dhamma from the Vihara and in the Bay Area and occasionally teaches in other parts of the USA.



Ajahn Santacitta

Ajahn Santacitta was born in Austria in 1958 and has been practicing meditation for over 20 years. Her first teacher was Ajahn Buddhadasa, whom she met in 1988. After living in Thailand for several years,

she ordained in 1993 at Amaravati Monastery in England and trained with the nuns of the Ajahn Chah/Ajahn Sumedho lineage for 17 years. Since meeting Shechen Rabjam Rinpoche in 2002, she also integrates the Dzogchen teachings of the Tibetan tradition into her practice. In 2009 Ajahn Santacitta moved to Aloka Vihara in San Francisco; she teaches in the Bay Area and occasionally other parts of the US. It is her intention to support the establishment of training places for women and to share her experience in community, as a means for cultivating the heart and opening the mind.

Donations Help Aranya Bodhi Hermitage Acquire Much Needed Trailer

During the past month, many friends have been working diligently to find a kitchen trailer for the Aranya Bodhi Hermitage, replacing a much older trailer that was damaged by winter storms and affected by dangerous mold and mildew, which had been affecting the health of several of the residents. Through the diligent work of many friends, the hermitage now has a new used trailer, complete with all the kitchen fixtures, shower, and a separate bedroom for a resident or guest. This 1996 trailer was only used a few times by the original owner.

The new trailer will allow indoor cooking and shower facilities for the four monastic women and the lay steward now living on the land. In summer, especially during the Vassa retreat from July to October, up to 12 women will use the new trailer, along with an outside camp-kitchen and shower tents.

The total cost for acquiring the new trailer was \$9,500, including purchase price, licensing, registration, transportation from Stockton to the Hermitage, and road repair required to move the trailer to its new slot. (As a bonus, the gravel driveway will be improved by the road crew for safety and protection of our visitors' vehicles.) Out of the \$9,500 cost of acquiring and installing this trailer, the Alliance for Bhikkhunis offered \$2,000 and Awakening Truth (Ajahn Thana-

santi Bhikkhuni's support organization in Colorado) has kindly pledged another \$3,000. The Hermitage is appreciative of the donations of all these friends.

However, \$4,500 in donations is needed to pay the costs that remain. (The Dhammadharini Board of Directors offered to loan these funds to the Hermitage (from Dhammadharini funds designated for other purposes), as the kitchen trailer had become an environmental health hazard. With 5-7 women in retreat at the Hermitage, it had to be replaced urgently.)

Friends of the Hermitage would like to join the AFB and Awakening Truth in



Ruth Dennison



offering an invitation to those who would like to participate with Friends of the Hermitage in funding the remaining cost of the new used trailer and getting it in and set up on site. If you wish to donate, see <http://www.aranyabodhi.org/dana>. Be sure to indicate the purpose of your gift, and kindly drop a note to awakeningforest@gmail.com so that we can announce when the goal is met. Sara Sacksteder, on behalf of Friends of the Hermitage, will happily reply to any questions about this project and how you can participate.

Alliance for Bhikkhunis:

Anyone who has ever thought about spending quality time with Ruth Denison in this, the twilight of her long life, might think about coming and staying at Dhamma Dena (Joshua Tree, CA) for anywhere from two weeks to several months to serve as her personal assistant and driver. Room and board would be free. If interested, please contact Jill Rayna at 707-632-5589.

New Aranya Bodhi Hermitage Trailer

Alliance for Bhikkhunis:

News from Vietnam, taken from Thailand's Ven. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's site. 16-18 November 2010 Ven. Bhikkhuni Lieu Phab invited all the five Theravada Bhikkhunis to perform Sima Samutti (boundary consecration) at their temple in Baria, Vung Tao province, Vietnam. Also on the same day, to help them receive Kathina (robes) Theravadin style. Ven. Dhammananda will lead the sangha from Thailand.

Alliance for Bhikkhunis:

We received the following message from Viriya Karuna about the introduction of Theravada Buddhism in Spain: The Spanish Association for Theravada Buddhism (www.aebtheravada.org) is a nonprofit organization founded in March 2008. We started out with only people who were



New Spanish Theravada Sangha

working to spread Theravada Buddhism in Spain. AEBTHERAVADA is growing, not very fast, but steadily, and we already have 50 members. We hope that anyone sincerely interested in Buddhadhamma will join us to share their experience and help promote the Buddha's original teachings in Spain. During the few years of our existence we have been visited by several monks and Mae Chee Bridget from Thailand. Retreats and Dhamma talks have been well attended and we are looking forward now to the renovation of an old house and to offer it as a place for individual retreats. Our short-term goals would be establishing Dhamma-groups (study and meditation) all over Spain. Already there are a few, but mostly in the big cities in central Spain. Originally we thought that in the long term we might be able to have a monastery, but are now happy to announce that there is already the first bhikkhu coming to Spain. For the time being he wants to see if there is enough support for him to stay in this beautiful country. He would be the first ever resident bhikkhu here! So that's what we are working for right now. Our wishes came true—earlier than ever thought!

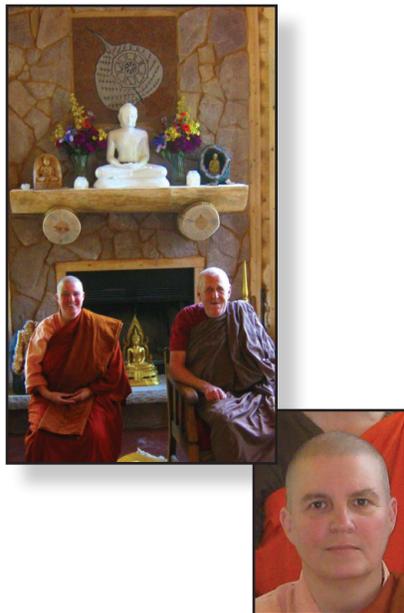
Alliance for Bhikkhunis:

Mark your calendars now to be part of honoring the founder of the Bhikkhuni Sangha Mahapajapati Theri as well as commemorating our first women teachers during the **1st Annual International Bhikkhuni Day** on September 17, 2011. Join our circle of support for bhikkhunis worldwide! (Visit our homepage for information on this awareness raising, fund raising, community-building, educational event: www.bhikkhuni.net.)

Installation of Bhikkhuni Ven. Madika as co-abbot of Dhamma Sukha Meditation Center, in Annapolis, Missouri.

On May 21, 2011, Venerable KC Madika WarEagle Bhikkhuni was installed as co-abbot at Dhamma Sukha Meditation Center (DSMC) in Annapolis, Missouri. Venerable Vimalaramsi is the founder and current abbot of DSMC. Ven. Madika will oversee the women's monastic area, monastic planning, as well as the daily operations of the center.

She is joined by samaneri Sister Kalyana. Please see – <http://www.dhammasukha.com> for more information.



New Co-Abbots, Ven. Madika, Bhikkhuni and Ven. Bhante Vimalaramsi.

Two Noteworthy Articles from the Bangkok Post:

Buddhist Women Honored (March 4, 2011)

March 8 was International Women's Day and this year it coincided with the presentation of the 2011 Outstanding Women in Buddhism Awards, when five women were feted for their contributions to Buddhist spirituality.

The award, now in its 10th year, was presented at a ceremony held at the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women, in the Don Muang area.

The five winners were:

•Hathairat Suda, social worker and activist. For the past 17 years, Hathairat has been working to promote reproductive health, HIV/AIDS prevention, and sex education amongst youngsters. Once ordained a samaneri, or female novice, in the Theravada tradition, she has found Buddhist teachings and the roles of female monastics helpful in her counseling work with teenagers.

•Sujitra (Sudassa) Onkom, academic, dharma writer, and vipassana meditation teacher. Teaching at the Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty of Rajabhat University's Thon Buri campus, she has penned 18 dharma books in Thai and six in English. Apart from doing TV and radio programmes, she is also a highly respected dharma and meditation teacher.

•Debra Quayle Travis, meditation teacher. With strong foundations in both Theravada and Vajrayana Buddhism, Travis has for the past 15 years been teaching meditation to people from all walks of life, including prisoners. She is a student of spiritualist Lama Tsultrim Allione, whose specialty is Tibetan Buddhist lineage.

•Maechee Daranee Chantrawut, Buddhist nun. The former teacher with several awards to her credit, she now teaches meditation and dharma to women practitioners at her own nunnery, where therapeutic treatment for stroke patients is also offered as part of social services. She is currently executive director of the Thai Maechee Institute.

•Samaneri Dhamma Visudtha, female novice. Ordained a nun at 15, she has spent the past 39 years practising and teaching dharma and meditation. A highly respected teacher, she was ordained a samaneri 14 months ago and her elevation to a bhikkhuni in a few years' time promises to be a significant event.

Gender and religion: Where nuns fear to tread

(Published March 6, 2011.)

A court in India's Bihar state recently ruled in favour of Mae Chi Ahree Pongsai, a nun in her seventies, who lodged a complaint requesting that she be allowed to replace Phra Khru Pariyat Thammawithet as head of the Thai Nalanda temple, 90 km from the state capital of Patna. Mae Chi Ahree reportedly claimed that the former abbot, Phra Maha Tharntong, who died in 2007, had written in his will that if she came into conflict with his successor, she should seek assistance from India's courts to take over.

Thai Mae Chi Ahree Pongsai recently won an appeal in India's Bihar state to replace Phra Khru Pariyat Thammawithet as head of the Thai Nalanda temple outside Patna, India.

The controversy over a Thai Buddhist nun successfully petitioning an Indian court to gain control of a temple has raised broader questions surrounding the administration of temples overseas. It has also highlighted the ambiguous role nuns, or mae chi, face within the structure of Buddhism in Thailand. The official council of ordained clergy in Thailand, the Sangha Supreme Council, does not recognize mae chi as full members. They are not officially allowed to interpret or teach the dhamma (the teachings of the Buddha), or perform religious rituals.

The Interior Ministry, however, does regard them as clergy, meaning they are unable to vote, while the Transport Ministry treats them as lay people, denying them rights accorded to monks, such as free transport services.

In the past, efforts have been made to clarify the status of mae chi, such as in 1991, when the Institute for Thai Nuns pushed parliament to consider a "Nun Act", which would outline basic regulations for nuns.

According to a September, 2002, article from Inter Press Service, the Religious Affairs Department's response was unambiguous: "It is impossible. A nun has never existed in a Thai Buddhist decree."

Sri Lanka, like Thailand, follows Theravada Buddhism; however it permits women to be ordained as monks. A con-

trovery also challenging traditional power structures within Thai Buddhism erupted in 2001 when a Thai female Buddhist scholar, Dr Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, was ordained in Sri Lanka, and shortly thereafter, another Thai woman, Samaneri Dhammarakhita was ordained by a Sri Lankan preceptor on Thai soil, marking the first time a woman had been ordained in the country.

But Mae Chi Ananta Nakboon of the Mae Chi foundation strongly disagreed with Mae Chi Ahree's actions.

"What was she thinking when she went to court to get the rights to manage the temple?" she said. "Mae chi are under the support and teaching of the monks. We have no right to challenge their authority in any case," said Mae Chi Ananta. "In the temple, the teaching of the monks receives the highest respect from the people. The mae chi do not earn the same respect. How can they then manage temples successfully?"

She said Mae chi can establish meditation centres and foundations and administer them, "but definitely not temples".

Further complicating matters in Mae Chi Ahree's case is the way in which Thai temples abroad are administered. They do not fall under the Sangha Supreme Council or the Ecclesiastical Law, as do all the temples in Thailand. There are currently over 300 Thai Buddhist temples around the world, with some 1,200 monks. Thai communities abroad establish the temple, putting administrative power in the hands of laypeople.

"Most overseas temples are established as non-profit organisations or under a foundation with or without Thai Buddhist monks at the beginning," said Amnaj Buasiri, director of the secretariat of the Sangha Supreme Council.

Mr. Amnaj argued that the Thai government should take over Thai Buddhist temples abroad. Mr. Amnaj strongly believed that a concrete way to solve the management problem of Thai Buddhist temples in foreign countries is to transfer the temples to the Thai government. He cited Wat Buddhapadipa in London and Wat Sanghapadipa in Wales as examples of where this model has been effective.

"The temples transferred the land and property rights of the temple compound to the Thai government, and the Thai embassy in the UK works with them to help look after the property as a national asset interest in a foreign country," he said.

In the case of Mae Chi Ahree, who recently returned from India, there had been no progress made in talks with her.

According to Mr. Amnaj, she refused to meet with government representatives, choosing instead to speak through a loudspeaker and insisting she still had the right to manage the temple. Mr. Amnaj said that Phra Khru Pariyat and eight other monks continued their duties at the temple, and that the facility had thrived since Phra Khru Pariyat took over in 2007.



A Bridge Between East and West— An Interview with Tsultrim Allione

Interview by Jacqueline Kramer

I first met Tsultrim Allione at Spirit Rock on a one-day retreat. Having read her book *Women of Wisdom* in the 1980s, I was looking forward to meditating with her—and was not disappointed. Sitting with her feminine, powerful presence greatly enhanced the experience of vastness in my meditation. A pioneer who helped bring Buddhism to the West, Tsultrim is the co-founder, spiritual director, and resident teacher of Tara Mandala in Pagosa Springs, Colorado, and was the first American woman to be ordained as a Tibetan nun in 1970. She has fashioned the Chöd teachings for Western sensibilities and writes about it in her book *Feeding The Demons—Ancient Wisdom for Resolving Inner Conflict*. The Chöd teachings were developed by an eleventh century Yogini named Machig Labdrön, of whom Tsultrim Allione has been recognized as an emanation. We talked over the phone while she was in India. Even through the blurred phone reception, her words were clear and powerful.

JK: How was it for you, in the beginning, as a young woman with a deep spiritual quest? Did you feel supported? Did it feel natural to pursue it? Was there resistance?

TA: My path began when I was nineteen. My personal path was also a process of individuating from my parents. I had really wonderful parents so I wasn't trying to get away from them or hurt them, at the same time they had a path in mind for me that was different than the one that started to emerge in my life. In retrospect it all makes sense but at the time, as a nineteen-year-old, it was very difficult to even understand what I was longing for. There was something I was longing for that I wasn't finding in college and that I wasn't going to find in a career. I think the late teens and early twenties is such an important moment in a young person's life. It's really not talked about that much, that time of individuation and moving out of the home.

So, I went to India. I was living in the United States Consul General's mansion in Calcutta. We went everywhere in a huge American car, with the American flag blowing, and a uniformed chauffeur. We were taken to Mother Teresa's home for unwed mothers and unwanted babies in Calcutta to do volunteer work in this car. I was uncomfortable in this situation and felt I wasn't really in India. So I left and hitchhiked across India with a Japa-

nese friend of mine. We hitchhiked and took third class trains without a ticket from Calcutta to Dharamsala. It was actually shocking and an amazingly beautiful experience. We would ride up on the top of trucks which had a little box over the cab for extra storage space. We sat in this sort of balcony from where we could see India pass by. It was fall so not too hot and not too cold. The crucial part of this journey was, I was going towards something unknown that was calling me, drawing me forward but I had no words for it. I had been part of the sixties-era experiments with psychedelics and drugs that expand the mind or alter consciousness and even before that was interested in Tibet and India and their spiritual traditions.



Tsultrim Allione

I was interested, like a lot of people of our generation, in alternate realities but had no idea about Buddhism or what a path would be, or discipline. So we hitchhiked across India and landed in Dharamsala in November of 1967 where I met many Tibetan refugees. They had been out of Tibet less than 10 years and were living very primitively in flat-

tened tin can houses. As soon as I met them, I had a feeling of recognition—a deep, deep longing inside of me, as if I had been homesick all my life for something that I didn't realize I had been homesick for.

There were very few books on Buddhism at that time. And there weren't very many there in Dharamsala. There was a little pamphlet on "What is a Buddhist?" given away in Dharamsala. I read that and it was talking about the Four Noble Truths, like all conditioned existence is suffering and I thought, how depressing Buddhism is. I actually wasn't attracted to Buddhism when I first read about it. I wasn't attracted to an approach to life in which everything is suffering. I didn't feel that way about life.

I didn't understand the deeper aspects of what the Buddha meant by suffering. However, I was very attracted to the Tibetan people. That was really my avenue, I'm sure it was from a past life. I had an inner longing and at the same time I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do and there was no cultural context for me to pursue it. I did anyway. After six months in Asia, I went back to the US, to college, for a while, but felt that what I was looking for was not here. I tried to organize a meditation group at my college. Me and a few other people would get together and meditate. We didn't know how to meditate. We would just sit. Then I returned to India, overland from London to Kathmandu through Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, and I met His Holiness the Sixteenth Karmapa when I arrived in Kathmandu. That was the turning point when I developed the idea to become a nun.

JK: Had you seen any nuns at that point?

TA: I must have seen some nuns, but I don't have a clear memory of seeing nuns. Tibetan nuns were around, but there were more monks. I hadn't even taken the refuges before ordination. Afterward I had to figure out what vows I was taking. I was given the Getsulma ordination with thirty-six vows.

It's the highest ordination given to women in the Tibetan organization.

JK: How long were you a celibate monastic?

TA: Almost four years.

JK: Were you in India the whole time?

TA: I was in India most of the time and back in the United States for a year. I gave my vows back when I was in the U.S. Once I was ordained, I realized that there was only one Tibetan nunnery. It was on the way to Dharamsala and overseen by the Karmapa. Have you heard of the woman Freda Bedi? She was a very interesting woman. She was English and married to an Indian man, Father Bedi, a very spiritual man who was very close to Gandhi. She was called "Mummy" by the lamas



Retreat at Tara Mandala

because she started a school for young Tibetan reincarnated lamas or tulkus. She educated them in English and she was the one who sent Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche to the West. She was very important actually. Her nun's name was Khechog Palmo. She mentored me a little bit, but I was very independent. There was only her and I in the Karma Kagyu tradition. Tenzin Palmo, Ani Jinba Palmo, and Lodro Palmo were Western, but they were Drukpa Kagyu. It was way before Pema Chodron took ordination. I wasn't called to be in the nunnery where there were no teachings and where the nuns were just doing pujas. So I went up into the mountains on retreat. I found my teacher, Apho Rinpoche. He was a married yogi who had four children.

JK: Is celibacy a choice a monk can make in your tradition?



TA: If you're a monk, you're celibate. But you can be a yogi. There's another path called the white Sangha, the Ngagpa or Mantrika. This (refers to) people (who) can be married but are also full time practitioners. But if you are a monastic, you're celibate.

JK: **It's nice that there's a range there.**

TA: Yes, that you're not just a layperson or a monastic, but there's another option. So I lived as a nun. I never lived in a nunnery. I lived in retreat or was on pilgrimage. I studied in Nepal with Sapchu Rinpoche and Darjeeling with Kalu Rinpoche. I went back to learn from the Karmapa. I lived in Bodhgaya. During this time, I was learning to read and speak Tibetan and doing my meditation practice.

JK: **Did you have your child in the United States?**

TA: Yes. I got pregnant in India. My husband was Dutch so we went to Holland for a while. Then we moved to Vashon-Maury Island, an island close to Seattle. I had her, a home delivery, on that island. I was twenty-six or twenty-seven. I actually had postpartum depression. It wasn't talked about at that time. I had a feeling of, "what did I do. I gave away all of my freedom. I can't practice because here I am with a baby day and night." Sherab, my daughter, was colicky and very active. It was a big change for me, a shock. I had been told when I was pregnant if I had a boy, it meant it was okay I'd disrobed, but a girl meant I had really fallen from grace. Trungpa Rinpoche helped me a lot with this. He said we should celebrate my new life and asked me to start teaching. I began teaching under his guidance and studying in the Seattle area with a great lama, Deshing Rinpoche, who lived in Seattle, and had my second daughter,

The monastics are an essential part of planting Buddhism in new soil and wherever Buddhism has taken hold, it has built up its ordained Sangha.

JK: **What an amazing adventure for a young woman to be on.**

TA: Yes. I was ordained when I was 22. It was very good to be experiencing a "virgin existence" in the sense of belonging to no man, to be an independent woman, to not be caught up in whatever was happening with my latest boyfriend. That's the age when you're exploring relationships. I cut myself out of that for those four years. I found a lot of strength in myself. I was actually very happy. I was joyful. I loved my teachers. I loved the lifestyle and I felt supported in India. I never felt from any of my teachers at that time that there was a problem with me being a woman. I didn't feel I couldn't do certain things because I was a woman. Probably if I had kept going, I was doing pretty preliminary practices at the time, it might have been a problem. I don't know if I would have been blocked from further practices if I had gone on, but I don't think so. I didn't feel blocked or terminated as a woman, and I didn't really want more.

I didn't want to become a fully ordained bhikkhuni although the Karmapa wanted me to. I didn't really want more vows. I'm not the nun type. It isn't something I've always wanted to do. At the same time, the amount that I did do was a really good thing for me. I got a lot of inner strength from it. The reason I disrobed is that I went back to America and went into Trungpa Rinpoche's sangha, which was pretty wild. It was not exactly a monastic environment. I was young, in my twenties. I wanted to be a part of all of that and, of course, there was my sexuality bubbling up. And, I had no support whatsoever as a nun when I went back. There were no other nuns, not Tibetan, not Western, not Theravadin—nobody but me. Disrobing was a very agonizing decision. But I also started dreaming about babies. I went back to India and returned my vows. Very shortly after that I got pregnant with my first child.

Aloka. After a while, we moved to Boulder, Colorado and I started teaching at Naropa University, which was just starting then. Trungpa Rinpoche was really teaching people how to be in the world. His students were very serious practitioners. Their practice was the primary focus in their lives. It wasn't like today where people do the dharma as an addition to their life. It was more like, "What do I have to do so that I can practice?" That was good for me in the sense that I was a really serious practitioner.

JK: **How was it for you to be a mother and a serious practitioner?**

TA: It wasn't easy. I don't think you've ever talked to a mother who would say that's easy. Being a mother is so full time. I had my second child seventeen months after the first. Within two years, I had two children. I was meditating with my kids crawling all over me. After many years, I took day or two retreats away and tried to have a daily practice. But it was difficult when they were little because they would wake up so early and by the time they went to bed at night, I was exhausted. It was difficult. I tried to make my practice—life as practice—but at the same time I had such a longing for deep practice. It's different to think, I'm going to be mindful while I'm changing the diaper, than engaging in deep meditation practice. I did have a longing for the deep practice so it was a conflict and there was nothing I could do. It's just wasn't realistic. But eventually my children got older and I could do more short retreats and try to bring them into the practice.

JK: **How did you do that?**

TA: One of the games I played with them was making altars. We would meditate in front of the altar. I took them to Nepal and they learned about practices like making offerings.

*As soon as I met them
(Tibetan refugees), I
had a feeling of recog-
nition—a deep, deep
longing inside of me, as
if I had been homesick
all my life for something
that I didn't realize I
had been homesick for.*

JK: That sort of thing goes deep into the bones. My daughter had contact with the Sri Lankan monks when she was young. She remembers them fondly to this day.

TA: Yes. To me it's the presence of the people. It's not what you say. It's who you are and what you do.

There were no family retreats at that time or family programs. There was just childcare, which wasn't so great for the children. My two older children ended up feeling like Buddhism was something I left them to do. Now there have been efforts to include children in the practice. At Tara Mandala, we help families develop family practice. I've thought about it a lot because it was something that was so challenging for me. I think there are a lot of men and women who want to have a family and who are serious practitioners. They want their kids to have a positive experience of the dharma.

JK: It seems to take a community infra-structure to support that sort of activity. It sounds like you're building some of that at Tara Mandala.

TA: Yes, we are. It's been going for over twenty years. We now have kids who've grown up, kids who have come to family retreats since they were one or two years old and are now in college or post college.

JK: Do you have monastics?

TA: The monastics are an essential part of planting Buddhism in new soil and wherever Buddhism has taken hold, it has built up its ordained Sangha.

JK: Yes, it's interesting how the Tibetan lineage has layers of monasticism, how it offers different levels of

practice, from monk or nun to a full time lay practitioner. It sounds like there is a lot of respect for the different layers.

TA: Yes, the Tibetans, at least the older generations, are deeply spiritual people. They practice quite a bit. That was what attracted me to Buddhism in the first place, the joy of the Tibetan refugees I met. Some of them saw their whole family shot and still they radiated joy. How was that possible? It was because of their understanding of karma and their faith in Buddha-Dharma.

JK: What do you think it is that created the capacity for that level of equanimity?

TA: I think the profound practice, the level of realization of their own lamas, is a big part of it. The commitment to reach realization in one lifetime and the practice that comes with that gives everyone such a profound inspiration.

JK: Is there anything about your practice you'd like to share with our readers?

TA: One of the things that people of my generation have sat with is being a bridge between Asia and the West. We've been looking at how to make these profound teachings that have evolved in Asia practical and applicable for people in the West. My focus in this life has been the Chöd practice and the work of Machig Labdron. I evolved the demon work, feeding the demons from that, as a way to help people work with their own demons. It came out of my understanding of how Mara tried to stop the Buddha from becoming enlightened. It's not something from the outside. We all have our Maras—fears, jealousy, illnesses, poisonous emotions, or eating disorders. We all have demons. The demon work is about feeding that side of you, the shadow part of the psyche, and inviting it to come out, then feeding it. That's a huge paradigm shift for our culture. We fight against our demons, we try to get rid of our demons, before we actually find out what our demons need. There is always an emotional need behind our demons. When you find the need, the demon energy can relax. If you don't do that, if you fight against your demons, they actually get stronger and stronger. All these aspects are like our children. They just want attention. When we accept them and acknowledge them, that energy can become integrated. The energy becomes accessible. It becomes an ally.

JK: We really need that sort of work in our culture. I hope it expands into many areas that need healing. Thank you so much for sharing your life and insights with us.

TA: My pleasure.



Jacqueline Kramer, author of Buddha Mom and director of Hearth Foundation, has been studying and practicing the dharma for over thirty years.

A film by Margarethe von Trotta
Reviewed by
Kathy Jean Schultz



Barbara Sukowa as Hildegard von Bingen

LIVING IN COMMUNITY, THEN AND NOW

A Film Review of *Vision: From the Life of Hildegard von Bingen*

Vision, a film by German writer/director Margarethe Von Trotta (Zeitgeist Films) is a biography of the twelfth-century Catholic nun Hildegard von Bingen, a woman who lived in Germany from 1098-1179 A.D. The tale of Hildegard's life has been passed down through history because in an age when women weren't permitted to read, write or compose, she authored books and composed music that is still recorded today.

Vision is the most recent collaboration between Von Trotta and the actress Barbara Sukowa who portrays Hildegard. The film follows Hildegard from the age of ten when she is sent to a monastery to her development as a mystic and a master diplomat and politician as she turns forty.

This bio-pic's plot centers on Hildegard's attempts to navigate the dangers of church politics and money matters, and the wily ways in which her monastery's endless need for fundraising conflicts with the ascetic life the nuns and monks inside are expected to live. Contemporary Buddhist monastics face a similar balancing act of trying to focus on their practice while addressing the demands of the world. The film also chronicles how this innovative woman charted a new spiritual direction for the women under her care.

For example, the film portrays Hildegard as disgusted by her community's—and her era's—commonplace ritual of self-flagellation that left its practitioners' bodies bloody and raw. The Buddha also abandoned the harsh—and he believed pointless—ascetic practices of his day when he developed the Middle Way. In a scene where Hildegard undresses the body of her mentor after the older woman dies, she discovers a bloody barbed-wire corset wrapped around the body's waist. While this was meant to subject the wearer to the sufferings of Christ in accord with Catholic tradition, right there Hildegard stands apart, with a horrified reaction.

She won't be having any of that.

The Buddha developed council discussion and voting to decide on issues impacting the Sangha. Hildegard saw the value of this as well. In one of the film's early scenes, the abbot (played with villainy by Alexander Held) decides Hildegard should become the "magistra" or leader of the cloistered nuns, her fellow sisters at the time. Hildegard insists that the nuns should elect their own leader, and that the magistra should not be chosen by the abbot, as was the hidebound rule within the monastery.

With this rebellious act she took her life in her hands, as she had to have known full well.

Circled by the grim monks living in the cloister, she stands up to the abbot who insists he is the commander-in-chief and that he will therefore appoint the magistra. This is only one of the film's many scenes where he could have had her expelled for disobedience, perhaps even executed her. However, the abbot is constrained by the power Hildegard's alleged "visions" have earned for her. The Church hierarchy, the abbot's superiors, believed Hildegard's visions meant she was in direct contact with God.

Each scene tightens the tension between Hildegard and the abbot. She masters this shifting balance of power, dripping as it is with fear and superstition. Like a surfer, she is ever-moving and bending with the waves of dogma. Her struggles with twelfth-century Catholicism reveal how religion and spirituality part ways, reminiscent of the Buddha's own journey into that divide.

Another instance of Hildegard adopting a consensus model to settle disputes within her community arose after the nuns set off to build their own monastery. Most of the cloistered women, coming from privilege as they did, were unaccustomed to physical labor and deprivation. Camping outdoors in tents while they did the dirty and strenuous work of building a new monastery was not what they had signed up for. An insurrection threatened. Many nuns longed to return to the comforts of their former cloister. As magistra, Hildegard had the authority to quell the revolt and order the dissenting nuns to obey. Instead, she convened the community and gave every sister an opportunity to voice her opinion on the matter, from the youngest to the most senior. After a frank discussion, it was agreed to allow the nuns who wished to leave permission to go without any reprisal.



Harmony within the community was restored and the monastery completed.

Von Trotta avoids the tendency of some current Hildegard fans to portray her one-dimensionally as an "early feminist." Instead, remaining authentic to the twelfth century is Von Trotta's theme. Appropriately enough, much of the story is told by shadows and lighting. Despite being labeled as a feminist director, Von Trotta herself publicly rejects the phenomenon of "woman's filmmaking," arguing that it confines one to a ghetto of sorts.

It is true historians have found accounts of Hildegard being described as an irrepressible spirit, and it is true as a result modern analysts compare her to feminists, or label her a feminist, because her actions can be

interpreted as a lance in the boil of gender barriers, as well as in the superstitions that ruled the medieval world 24/7. Yet such analyses come soaked in the benefit of hindsight and Monday-morning quarterbacking.

To conceive of notions like women's rights or feminism in 1150 is like suggesting they had rocket launches or call-waiting.

Given everything known about treatment of women in twelfth-century Europe, it's doubtful Hildegard was agitat-

ing for equality and more likely she was just trying to survive. Authenticity, rather than some modern point of view, percolates throughout the film. As Von Trotta told an interviewer in 2010, "Hildegard always said 'I'm so weak,' but she had to say that in order to be accepted."

The film illustrates how and why Hildegard is labeled a "first" in many arenas. During her lifetime, nuns were largely the only women who could read and write. While girls from noble families might have a shot at learning to read, in general the only way for a poor girl to have hope for getting an education was to become a nun. Hildegard not only read but wrote and performed plays and composed music so haunting it survives to this day and has been recorded by multiple contemporary musicians. Some of it comprises the film's soundtrack.

The film shows how she investigated the healing and curative chemicals in plants, and instructed her sisters in botany and medicine, such as it was in 1150. She seems to see God's work in plants and trees, and it was obvious to her the flow from plant to medicine to healing and health was God's plan. She suspected that plants and animals were put on the earth for man's use, and that

man was God's ultimate creation. Local people brought their sick relatives to her. Curing them embellished her reputation as a saint on earth, thereby keeping her in the good graces of the Church's upper management. Her healing abilities trumped her uppity reputation. Lucky for her.

Von Trotta uses subtle techniques—camera angles, lighting, and sudden turns of Sukowa's head that show a slightly comical twist on her face—to reveal to the audience that although her male rulers believed she had godly powers, Hildegard herself suspected she was merely learning science. Slowly we see that she gets that and they don't. A scary thing to stumble upon in 1150.

She authored books about theology and about what she perceived in her visions. The film traces the way in which the pope and bishops backed her in this recording of visions, once rumors about her work reached them.

She wrote about natural history as well as animals and zoology. Her musical plays were performed in her convent. She had a convent built—that alone causes her to stand out from the pages of history. In a crater of superstition, Hildegard found workarounds.

She has one friend among the monks—Brother Volmar, played with both subtle and overt romantic feelings by Heino Ferch. The film does not confirm whether their love was ever physical. Brother Volmar chances to come into possession of a pile of books, some written by Aristotle and other philosophers, some about botany and chemistry, and other scientific pursuits. He brings this trove to his friend Hildegard who is enchanted by them.

This scene defines her life: She opens the books with awe and wonder, as if a great light was floating up from the pages. Books! Knowledge! Now here is something to be worshipped!

Talk about an information highway. The books opened for her a world of scholarship and thoughtfulness, critical thinking, experimental tactics and research, philosophical frontiers, things about which she'd had no chance to see in her stilted, confined cloister. It is the reading of these books that will sculpt her into a "Renaissance woman" before the renaissance, whose belief in her visions will now become tempered with knowledge and political shrewdness.

As each scene peers through the veil of Dark Ages superstition, we see her ever-more-elaborate dance of

survival strengthen proportionate to her improved debating skills.

The monks and nuns live in the same monastery, theoretically so the monks could protect the nuns, but when one of her sisters becomes pregnant by a monk, Hildegard again challenges the abbot directly, pointing out the nuns need protection from the monks. They need to build their own separate convent residence, and that the notion of living on the same grounds is incompatible with celibacy.

This scene is yet another unpalatable challenge to the abbot's authority, another moment when he would like to use his power to ban her from the cloister, if not excommunicate her from the Church, but he gulps hard and knows he can't do that, once again, because the Church's hierarchy is entranced, or at least curious enough for the jury to still be out, by her writing about her visions, and convinced her visions came from God.

By describing her visions in her writing, she continually risks excommunication from the Church. That may not sound like a big deal now, but in 1150 it was tantamount to being banished to live alone on an island with no clothes or iPhone.

The film's suspense flows from the harsh patriarchal culture shimmering with fear. The world was black and white, with no gray: A person is either on God's side or on the side of the Devil. No middle ground. For all the eloquence of Hildegard's speeches, men around her pretty much thought she was on the side of the Devil. One false move and they could be done with her.

The film shows the way girls from noble families were traded to monasteries and convents in exchange for prestige, favors, power, and even a fast track to heaven. In return for all of these perks, wealthy families financed monasteries. Dependent as they were on their benefactors, the monks and nuns were ever bowing down to the nobility. Modern nuns choose to join a convent, but women during the Middle Ages had no choice. Like Hildegard, most were brought to the convent and left there by age ten.

Despite this, Hildegard's accomplishments mount, and stand in contrast to her life, given that she was shut up in a cramped stone building with little outside-world contact for the first forty years of her life. She penned a play, "Ordo Virtutum," (Play of Virtues) that her sisters performed. She becomes a playwright as



well as a scholar who dared to build a library when books were difficult to find.

When crises hit her, Hildegard experiences near-death illness or fainting. She would lie down in great pain, unable to rise, and then experience visions or white lights. She would remain prone and in pain for hours. In the film, this habit seemed to prove to her enemies that she had a special connection to God who protected her with a vision whenever she was verbally attacked or threatened.

Hildegard thus learns how to use people in high places.

Church rulers believed in visions and she had them. After the unwanted pregnancy and subsequent suicide of one of her sisters, through careful manipulation, Hildegard convinces the abbot to let her build her own convent for her sisters. For a woman, she had astounding command of language, moving from point to point like a criminal defense attorney might do in front of a jury. Hildegard's family, by locking her up in a monastery, condemned her to an ascetic life, shut off from the world, a virtual slave to the abbot. Nonetheless, she claimed God ordered her, in her visions, to write down everything she observed. Quite handy in an environment where most women couldn't read, but where she wanted to write about everything.

She described brilliant white light and a sense of heat in her brain, and was also known for being chronically sick. She tells the abbot one of the reasons the sisters should elect her, rather than him appointing her, is that they know how sickly she often is, and therefore they should decide if she is capable of becoming magistra.

Not mentioned in the film is the fact that some modern scholars argue Hildegard must have suffered migraine headaches, and that this explains both her having to lie down in pain during her visions, her reputation for frequent sick feelings, and the bright light and heat she described. What she took for God's message could have been a migraine.

Her description of the aftereffects of her visions matches classic migraine symptoms. Migraines are often followed by feelings of blindness or paralysis, both of which she wrote about. As the contemporary neuroscientist Oliver Sacks wrote about Hildegard, "It is a tribute to the remarkable spirit and the intellectual powers of this woman she was able to turn a debilitating illness into the word of God, and create so much with it." Other women

of her time undoubtedly suffered migraines, but they likely remained bedridden (or in that time—straw pallet-ridden) and in paralyzing pain for the duration and were simply relieved when it ended. Most women would not have been able to use the affliction to advance their careers. Only Hildegard figured that out. Or divined it.

Von Trotta noted in a 2010 interview that, in addition to Sacks' theory, "Others have said it was a form of epilepsy. And it's true, with epileptic seizures you are in the middle of the world and then all of a sudden you are outside it. But you are not in a coma, you are really present. And in the medieval ages, faith was undoubtable. The Bible was her material, so Hildegard worked with this (to explain her visions.) If she'd been a Buddhist, she'd have worked with different material."

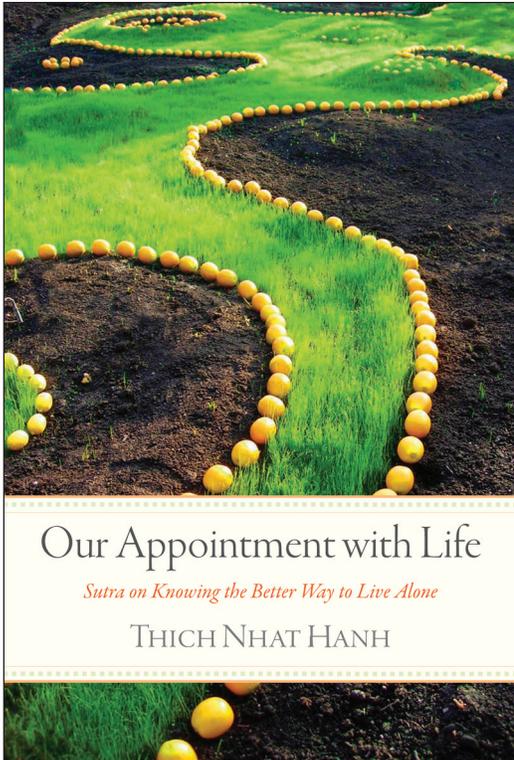
By the film's end, the Catholic Church has been painted as something of a public relations business. The abbot at one point muses that if Hildegard's claim of visions from God is accepted by the Church's powerbrokers, "people everywhere will know of us." Sounds like a quest for fame. He was obsessed with power, as well as obsessed with the hierarchy, and obsessed with what the top of the hierarchy—the pope—would think.

The abbot's wish came true. Because of the film *Vision*, people everywhere can know of him.



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A review of
Our Appointment With Life
*Sutra on Knowing
the Better Way to Live Alone*

by Thich Nhat Hanh

Parallax Press, Berkeley, CA, 2010, 62 pages

When we read a book about the Dharma, we should ask: “Does this book help me on the Way?” If we ask this question about Thich Nhat Hanh’s *Our Appointment With Life*, the answer is yes. We should also ask, “How does it help?” The book answers with direct and deceptively simple advice.

This is a book that takes up the Bhaddekaratta Sutta (Majjhima Nikaya 131) to point us to a crucial and rarely addressed area of practice. Coming from a man who has seen horrors we can only guess at, the book deserves respect for its unswerving insistence on taking up the Buddha’s advice to take the Path into one’s life in a serious, challenging way. The heart of Buddhist practice is in how one trains oneself, accepts a discipline that often goes against the grain, and leaves behind the heedless and distracted world that will always call us back.

But this leaving is not a physical one. It is a change in the way we relate to our everyday experience of ourselves and of others. Renunciation is a central aspect of the Buddha’s teaching, yet there is little examination of what is meant by it in popular writing on the Dharma, so we owe Thich Nhat Hanh our gratitude for this book. He has taken on a subject of profound meaning, difficult to understand, and has given the reader access to it that can serve as a jumping off point for contemplation and practice.

“Looking deeply at life as it is,” the Buddha says in the Bhaddekaratta Sutta, *Knowing the Better Way to Live Alone*, “in the very here and now, the practitioner dwells in stability and freedom.” To look deeply at life requires a stable mind, not only because we seek quiescence, but also because this looking can be painful and difficult. When we see the myriad conditions that lead to this hurt, we can be freed of it. This is one level of understanding the statement.

At another level, this mindfulness in itself is aloneness. The book is about a very subtle and deep issue. Renunciation, or aloneness as Nhat Hanh rightly puts it, is a way of being that requires a practical and practiced understanding of the Satipatthana Sutta as well as the cultivation of those mind states that lead to liberation.

Much as it would be nice to be able to read the Buddha’s teachings exactly as they are recorded, it is not realistic and it is misleading. We don’t know very much about the context in which the Buddha taught, and as Richard Gombrich points out (in *What the Buddha Thought*), most of the nuances, puns, and layered meanings of what the Buddha said are lost to us and not recoverable. We just don’t know enough about the context. There is for example, the intriguing story in the sutta that a god “of the 33rd level” asked a monk about seclusion. It was this question that led to the Buddha’s teaching. Why would a god of such attainment want to know about

seclusion? And why approach a monk rather than the Buddha himself? It is possible that this allusion was obvious to the audience of the time, and gave a level of meaning to the teaching that is lost to us. So we have to interpret or rely on others' interpretations, not only because of our ignorance of the source material, but also because the teachings are being presented to contemporary listeners with very different associations and perspectives to what's written. And it's to this audience that this book speaks.

Nhat Hanh interprets the Bhaddekaratta Sutta in terms of practice as well as attitude. This is an antidote to the tendency to take the suttas/sutras literally, in this case to assume that renunciation means leaving the world and living a life of physical seclusion. Just because it is simple—and presented in a simple way—doesn't mean that it's easy. The book begins with this definition: "Living alone means living to have sovereignty over ourselves," and to be freed from the past, the confusions of the present, and anticipation of the future. This kind of freedom is the fruit of the disciplined and serious practice of mindfulness, practice that's undertaken "day and night." It can lead one to the experience of existential aloneness that I believe is the outcome of practicing *sati*. (The word *sati* itself has to be interpreted—it can have several different meanings). It is a state free of psychological and emotional enmeshment with others, of *mana*, the conceits that create the impression of connectedness where there is none. This kind of aloneness can facilitate the ability to discern between attention to content of thoughts and the phenomenon of thinking itself.

In the course of this kind of practice, we can recognize and confront the ghosts of the past and future, and the book promises that when this comes about we are freed from their influence and able to return to the present moment. "We only have to smile at them. We only need to breathe and . . . say, 'Oh, I know you are a ghost.'"

Nevertheless, there is an essential caveat: this smile is not an easy one to come by, and the book can give the impression that it is. Because it is so short, it has to present very subtle issues very briefly. This smile is a description of a state of equanimity that arises spontaneously from a life of practice, practice that oftentimes entails the opposite of smiling: confronting fear, despair, confusion, as they arise in the mind. Hanh describes this as recognizing the past for what it is: a ghost. But it is not a ghost until we can come to understand the difference between a thought and a 'mere' thought. This discernment is the sword by which you kill the Buddha when you meet him in the road. This is the difference between *papanca* and *ni-papanca*, and the ability to discern the distinction, born of "deep observation," is hard won and not always stable. It means no less than establishing a *vihara*, a dwelling place, that is outside the self.

We should not mistake the brevity of the book, however, so as to give the reader the impression that she only needs to smile and things will be set right. Such brevity lends itself to idealistic and abstract interpretations that make it seem as if the issue were clear when it often is not. The spontaneous smile is a long time in the making; the intentional smile as a response to suffering does little to change things. In fact it may lead to repressing pain rather than examining it; smiling to push away rather than to be with. There is an awful lot of this kind of advice in popular Buddhism, and it is not a good thing.

Considering that the author has seen the worst of what ignorance and enmeshment can lead to, we can have faith that his smile is born of great suffering, discipline and faith in the Dharma.



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Kindness: A Treasury of Buddhist Wisdom For Children and Parents

By Sarah Conover

Skinner House Books, 2001. 164 pages

Illustrated by Valerie Wahl

As the name implies, *Kindness: A Treasury of Buddhist Wisdom for Children and Parents*, is a wonderful treasure of a book. From the front cover, which is a painting of two men having a conversation, one of whom is comfortably perched up in a beautiful tree, we are interested in looking further into this book. There is this bit of magic to begin with, and the magic continues to unfold and infuse the book with a creative, engaging spirit.

Sarah Conover has created a structure and format that allows each story in the treasury to stand alone. Each story is accompanied by a complementary saying of the Buddha or Buddhist teacher. Most stories also showcase a full-color illustration from Valerie Wahl, which are thematic, interesting and fun. For example, I imagine child and adult, child alone or even a whole family together, enjoying the “The Quarrelsome Quails: A Jataka Tale,” which is introduced with the verse, “We must all face death; those who really know it, put aside their quarrels”. On the next page is a wonderful drawing of a lively group of quails who look like they are engaged in quite a conversation! The story is adapted by Ms. Conover in a style which generates movement, humor (“It was just an accident, I promise!” stammered the clumsy bird. “Sure!” rebuked the first quail, “Don’t you have two eyes?”) and anticipation. We are taken in and along. Children’s eyes will likely shine!

While each story stands alone, the quality of the collection encourages the reader to continue on, looking to the next, and then the next interesting piece. For example there is one satisfying short tale with the title, “The Mice who Taught the Monk to Smile”. It is a story about a monk’s journey from misery to joy through examples of what the Buddha

taught about happiness. “Around eight hundred years ago in Tibet lived a cranky, ancient monk. He was a peaceful man but not a happy man.” The Buddha is the storyteller in another piece, “The Monkey King: A Jataka Tale,” a story which cleverly interweaves a variety of themes, including envy, greed and the troubles which arise with gossip and discontent. The satisfactory ending of this piece is that some wisdom is learned and a new recognition of happiness is enjoyed by the king monkey’s troupe.

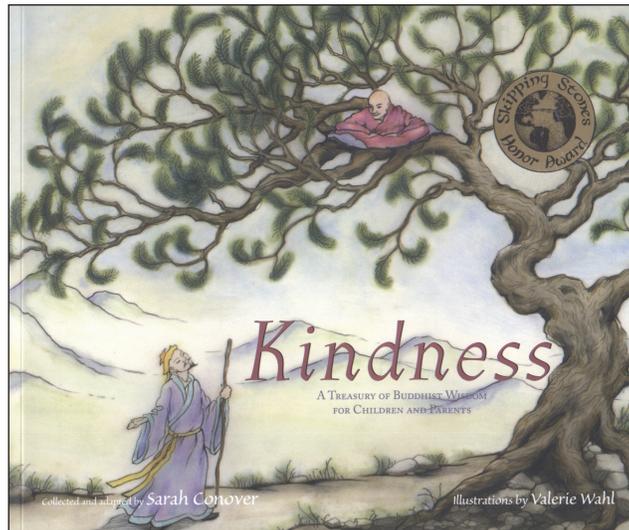
Sarah Conover has carefully and lovingly constructed an educational component to *Kindness*, with a foreword “To the Young Reader” and a Preface for adults which both provides background and historical information about Buddhist literature and the development and spread of Buddhism around the world. Near the end of the book

is an interesting arrangement of “Sources of Quotes and Sayings,” with specific notes for each story, and finally at the very end is a section on “Story Sources,” which includes commentary and thoughtful considerations, enriching the entire work.

It has been my pleasure to share *Kindness* (and Conover’s other books of this same genre) with each of my grandchildren at different childhood ages. We all enjoy entering and exploring the treasury!



Cynthia Schroeder is a retired clinical social worker, an active grandmother, and a long-time practitioner of Anupassana--Recollective Awareness--Buddhism. When she's not with the grandchildren in South Carolina or New Mexico, she lives in Spokane, Washington.



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