

Present

The Voices and Activities of Theravada Buddhist Women | Winter 2011

September 17, 2011

The 1st Annual International Bhikkhuni Day

If You Honor Me, Honor My Mother Gotami ■ The 1st Annual International
Bhikkhuni Day ■ Honoring and Celebrating Bhikkhunis and Laywomen

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Venerable Kusuma and the Power of Literacy Education

Turning Back Towards Freedom

Wearing White in the West ■ Bhikkhunīsamyutta



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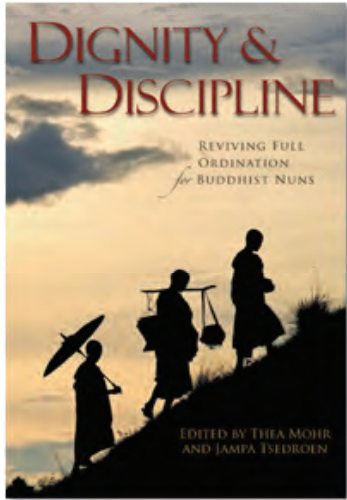
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Books in Brief



From Seeds of Doubt
to Seeds of Fruition:
A Recollection of the
Making of Dignity and
Discipline: Reviving
Full Ordination for
Buddhist Nuns, Dr.
Thea Mohr and Dr.

Jampa Tsedroen, Editors, Wisdom Publications,
Boston, 2010.

by Roseanne Freese

“I am not ready for ordination,” the young Tibetan nun courageously said. The room, a classic tiered lecture hall with giant chalkboards from the late 19th century, was filled with some 200 women, nuns and householders from every hue of the Buddhist rainbow. We had come together in Hamburg, Germany, in July of 2007 to participate in the first ever discussion of women’s ordination since Buddha ordained Mahaprajapati, his aunt, 2,500 years ago—the Buddhist Congress for the Ordination of Women, convened by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and hosted by the University of Hamburg, Germany. Up and down the rows sat Thai Maechees or Ten Precept Nuns dressed in white, Nepalese nuns of the Tibetan tradition wearing pale pink, Canadian Mahayana bhikshunis wearing light blue, Vietnamese Zen nuns wearing dark brown pants and tunics, German scholars in blouses and skirts, Sri Lankans in brilliant saffron togas, and Taiwanese Pure Land nuns in charcoal gray cassocks. This impromptu meeting of the women’s

sangha was called after the three days of presentations to debate and discuss the recommendations we wanted conveyed to His Holiness. Surprise filled the room. Some nuns leaned forward over their writing desks, tightening their jaws and narrowing their eyes, suspicious if not angry, others (including me) leaned back in our wooden seats, mouths agape in shock, yet still others hunched their shoulders and leaned their bodies in as if to support their sister, while a tiny few sat detached, ready to hear more of what the young woman had to say.

The next day we would witness something equally startling. Nine senior monks, including a teacher of His Holiness, and nine senior nuns, from all branches of Buddhism sat in chairs flanking both sides of His Holiness. Bhikshu Samdhong Rinpoche, Kalon Tripa (leader of the cabinet) of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile led the comments, maintaining a conservative stance, asserting that nowhere in the Tibetan Vinaya was there room for bhikshus to singlehandedly ordain bhikshunis alone. The others, however, espoused, even demanded, to change the future course of Buddhism. With vigor and informed passion, the seventeen elders endorsed full ordination for nuns. In direct contrast to Rinpoche, Bhikkhu Sujato, Abbot of Santi Forest Monastery in Australia observed, “The Vinaya never mentioned Mulasarvastivada, Dharmaguptaka, Theravada, Tibet, China, or Sri Lanka, and therefore we need not give such importance to these distinctions. Rather the Vinaya establishes procedures for enabling a candidate to go forth in the Buddha’s dispensation to seek the end of suffering.” They urged the Dalai Lama to initiate for the first time in history women’s ordination using the Mulasarvastivada Vinaya or the Buddhist precepts of the Tibetan Tradition. The maha theris or great elder bhikshunis were adamant. More than one nun pointed her finger right in the Dalai Lama’s face and more than once did His Holiness pull his visor cap another centimeter lower. These frank opinions were given not in a secluded chamber but before an audience of 1,400, including not just scholars, but the general public and the press.



Tibetan prayer wheels

To discover what led to this surprising polarity, then unanimity of support from the Western and Asian Sanghas, one must turn to the text *Dignity and Discipline*, which presents seventeen of the sixty-five excellent papers presented during those historic three days as well as the discussion on that dark night of the ego. The editors, Dr. Thea Mohr, lecturer, Religious Studies, Goethe University, Frankfurt, and Venerable Bhikshuni Dr. Jampa Tsedroen, Lecturer, Hamburg University, focused their selection on those papers that most ably developed the rationale for women's ordination. They also invited the great American Buddhist scholar, Dr. Janet Gyatso, Hershey Professor of Buddhist Studies of the Harvard Divinity School, to provide a forward to the book through which she provides a clear and exciting summary of the most prominent issues. While this short review cannot do justice to all the scholarship that the participants brought to the Congress, I would like to highlight what I found to be the most personally inspiring.

Dr. Gyatso opens the work by exercising the quintessential Buddhist discipline of exploring what is skillful. Building an ordination platform for women is more than just dealing with the Eight Garudharmas or the "Eight Heavy Rules" that nuns must honor by putting respect for the youngest monk but one day in robes ahead of respect for the most learned nun, scholar and veteran of sixty years in robes. To use a legalist approach to define the problem misses the spirit of the Buddha's wisdom, where consensus is paramount. Gyatso, unlike many Westerners, pleads that we remember this is a Tibetan community issue. To this I would add that this is a painful issue. The Tibetans are now entering their third generation of living in exile and the memory of their

leader fleeing in secrecy to evade capture by Chinese soldiers and Chinese aerial attacks is still a fresh and living memory. It is only in the last twenty years that the community of Tibetans in diaspora has entered the world limelight, and unfortunately, many if not most are still striving for identity, security, integrity, continuity, as well as religious freedom. Unlike Westerners, many Tibetans may actually equate change not with progress but with disempowerment.

Gyatso also observes that there is resistance to ordination by the Tibetan and other Asian Buddhist communities because it is seen as Western and Feminist. By extension, she argues that the Eight Garudharmas were and are a community issue of their own. The spirit of them, whether or not the Buddha actually mandated them, was to protect nuns from abuse. The idea of ordained women was, except for the newly emerging Jain community, a radically new development. Women could be inadvertently exposed to abuse by monks and laymen, and, thus, the Buddha's intention was to protect the morale of the sangha from a loss of discipline from within and loss of respect from the lay community without. The times, however, have changed. Buddhist women no longer face the patriarchal, financial, educational, and political constraints they did 2,500 years ago. Gyatso closes her essay by arguing that we need to shift from issues of power and legality to what would constitute a strong bhikshuni sangha. Indeed, one could push this line of thought further and wonder that if 2,500 years ago the establishment of Buddhism was jeopardized by admitting women, then today would it be jeopardized by not allowing them?

With this same spirit, let us consider other contributors to the Congress. Bhikkhu Sujato notes the problem of using Western religious concepts to package the problem. With respect to ordination lineages, there was never a so-called "schism" between Theravada and Mahayana or Mahayana and Tibetan Schools; they are but different Traditions. Differentiation came about through geographical adaptation over space and time. There was no self-proclaimed "Reformer." Indeed, one can study the different Vinaya texts preserved in Pali, Chinese, and Tibetan and find virtually no significant differences in the Precepts. To Bhikkhu Sujato's observations, I may add that one can read the accounts of Chinese travelers to Southeast Asia in the third and fifth centuries of the Common Era and find Mahayana Lineages thriving side-by-side with Theravada Lineages in countries as distant as Cambodia and Kazakhstan. Rather than dwell on differences within the Buddhist community, we should focus, Bhante Sujato says, on our "shared heritage," and work together for a "shared future as the custodians of

the Dhamma in this small world.”

Ute Husken, Professor of Sanskrit at the University of Oslo, in her essay takes Sujato’s line of argument one step further—there is too much focus on just one text. The Eight Garudharmas, which are only found in the Cullavagga, is not contained in the Pratimoksha or biweekly confession recited in all monasteries, nor is it found in any of the texts for the rites of ordination. The Buddha’s personal “ambivalence” was not an internal issue but an external expression of the “contradictory currents prevalent at the time of the redaction of these texts,” which were put into writing some four centuries after the Parinirvana of the Buddha. Dr. Lekshe Tsomo, an American scholar, Tibetan nun, and president and founder of Sakyadhita International, the very movement that held the first ever Buddhist women’s conference in Bodh Gaya, India, in 1987, summed up the contemporary concerns, “The freedom to receive full ordination is not only in the best interests of women, it is in the best interests of society at large, since it helps optimize the potential of all human beings.” In other words, consciousness is not dependent on gender.

Still we have the question: What do Tibetan women want? If the Mulasarvastivada Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, which began in the seventh century, existed for 1,300 years without ever ordaining women to full bhikshuni vows, then does the absence of ordination matter? Here, Lobsang Dechen, a Tibetan Ani or Ten Precept Nun, would argue that history does make a difference. She notes that unlike Sri Lanka and China, no Bhikshunis ever came to her country, and when the Tibetan community fled the Chinese occupation of her homeland, very few nuns escaped into India. That said, while Tibetan women can leave home, they cannot pursue higher studies without full ordination; and, without understanding, many do not grasp its significance. For her, the satisfaction of technical prerequisites is but a “small obstacle.” She and her sisters are ready!

The day finally arrived. His Holiness the Dalai Lama mounted the stage with his classic duck walk with toes pointing outwards. He bypassed the gilded wooden teaching platform in the center and without

pause quietly prostrated himself three times to a giant thangka of the Buddha hanging from the stage curtains. I sighed, recollecting that this is a Dharma gathering, and not a performance by my favorite rock star. I must listen with attention. Before those 1,400 people and the Buddha Realms, His Holiness at last gave formal remarks. Expectations were high. In essence, he noted that “Thus, there is no point in discussing whether to revive the bhikshuni ordination; the Buddha clearly intended for there to be bhikshunis. The question is merely how to do it properly within the context of the Vinaya.”

Exciting as it was to hear His Holiness advocate ordination, a world of meaning was contained in that statement. What followed, particularly after he heard the presentation by the eighteen Bhikshu and Bhikshuni

Elders was a deflating series of caveats. His Holiness could not move unilaterally even with his own Tradition as it is composed of no less than four independent lineages; that ordination for Tibetan women had to be not only recognized by all Tibetan lineages, but also by the Theravada and Mahayana Lineages. Further, there was the final—and bureaucratic—conundrum that



Tibetan mandala

since there were no Mulasarvastivada Bhikshunis, thus Tibetan novice and candidate nuns could not be taught and physically ordained. While the first two concerns accurately yet unfortunately reflected the true political reality, His Holiness did at least urge that the world Sangha meet together to deliberate. After all, Hamburg was an academic conference and not a Sangha council.

As to the third issue, no women to ordain women, many of us were left dumbstruck. Had His Holiness missed the point of the presentations? Did he not just hear Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi’s careful epistemological and doctrinal arguments that the Buddha did not intend women to be Ten Precept Nuns but Bhikshunis; that gender discrimination is unjust, that there is no prohibition of Bhikshunis of one lineage ordaining those of another lineage, and that in short, would the Buddha not want “what is kind and generous”?

With heavy hearts, we returned to our hotels and host temples. No one was in the mood to eat or drink, not even the lay people who would normally use the last

night of a conference to dine out and say farewell to new friends and old acquaintances. Had we not heard the young Tibetan Ani in the meeting of the two hundred the night before say that she did not want ordination? Had the Dalai Lama heard our answer to the question, “What does the community want?” Perhaps, His Holiness really was listening but hearing, “We the Community Are Not Ready.”

Fortunately, the story does not end here. During the



Tibetan prayer flags

meeting of the two hundred, the young Ani also said that she did not want ordination because it would change her relationships with her teachers and lay supporters by making interaction much more formal and the risk of infraction much greater. It would change her world and she could not see how it would be for the better. It would be a change led not by her people but outsiders. While some in the audience angrily asked why did the university spend money to support such ingratitude and others urged that we women go on with ordination even without consensus, eventually one Tibetan lay woman did stand up and offer a new perspective.

“Sister,” began Rinchen Khando Choegyal, former Minister of Education of the Tibetan Government in Exile and current Director of the Tibetan Nuns Project, “it may be true that you are not ready for ordination, but it may not be true for all of your sisters. Many have studied long and hard and want to receive higher ordination. Can we really disregard their intention to follow in the footsteps of Mahaprajapati? Please, think of them. Also, I ask you to consider this rare karmic opportunity. Can we afford not to consider ordination? Can we afford not to think of our sisters worldwide and our own sisters in the future? Please, if you need more time, then take it, but allow your sisters, who are ready, to proceed.”

Somehow, that hope manifested the morning after His Holiness’ underwhelming conclusion. At six am, the phone rang in my room. It was the Office of His Holiness and the venerable was looking for my roommate, the laywoman who gave those healing words of encouragement to the young nun. I passed the phone to her and after a flurry of Tibetan, I

learned that His Holiness had decided to call a special audience with all the scholars who had presented at the Congress. As our room had two phone lines, my job was to get the word out to the Westerners and to help Madame Rinchen field her return calls from the Asian community.

After breakfast, like buzzing dragonflies we assembled in a white, bare room in a fashion unlike any I had seen before. Arranged in a horseshoe, the nuns sat in the first rows, followed by us laywomen, followed by the monks, and lastly the laymen. Despite the centuries of scholarship and old world decorum that filled the room, we chattered like magpies and woodpeckers. Our joyful cacophony fell to awe and silence as the one door to the room opened and the familiar and warm presence of His Holiness filled its frame. Now in the intimacy of a mere meter, the great elder nuns relaxed their bodies and leaned in as if to embrace their beloved uncle while His Holiness humbly and attentively began by apologizing for the mistaken impression he had left the day before. We soon realized that the Dalai Lama did not mean “if” there would be higher bhikshuni ordination for Tibetan women, but a question of “how” and he had come to us to consult on the kinds of mechanisms to be considered. Ordination is a community, and not a unilateral or private, process and by his very presence he demonstrated this noble intention in word and deed. After all, bhikshuni precepts are given as well as received; and, they require being heard as well as being said, in order for their intention to bear fruit as action. His Holiness was listening to us... as we had listened to the young nun.

Postscript: On November 7, 2010, six Tibetan Ten-Precept Nuns from Europe and Australia received Sramaneriika Precepts in the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya from Venerable Chao Yin at Pu Yi Yuan Temple, Taipei County, Taiwan. In November of 2012, once they have finished their trial period as novices, they will receive their Candidate and Bhikshuni Precepts and then return to their home viharas to pursue study of the Mulasarvastivada Vinaya.

Ms. Roseanne Freese received the Three Refuges from Venerable Tian Yi at the Temple of the Vermillion Cloud in Chiayi County, Taiwan in 1980 and is currently the Secretary for Sakyadhita U.S.A. She also participated in the Hamburg Congress, presenting on “The First Bhiksuni Ordination in East Asia—Giving Birth to a New Way of Life,” which examined the historical, textual, canonical, and lineage issues surrounding the transmission of bhikshuni ordination from Theri Sara and her Sri Lankan sisters to Hui Guo and her Chinese sisters in Nanjing, China, in 434.



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