

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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Susan Pembroke

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Design & Layout
Sandi Hampton

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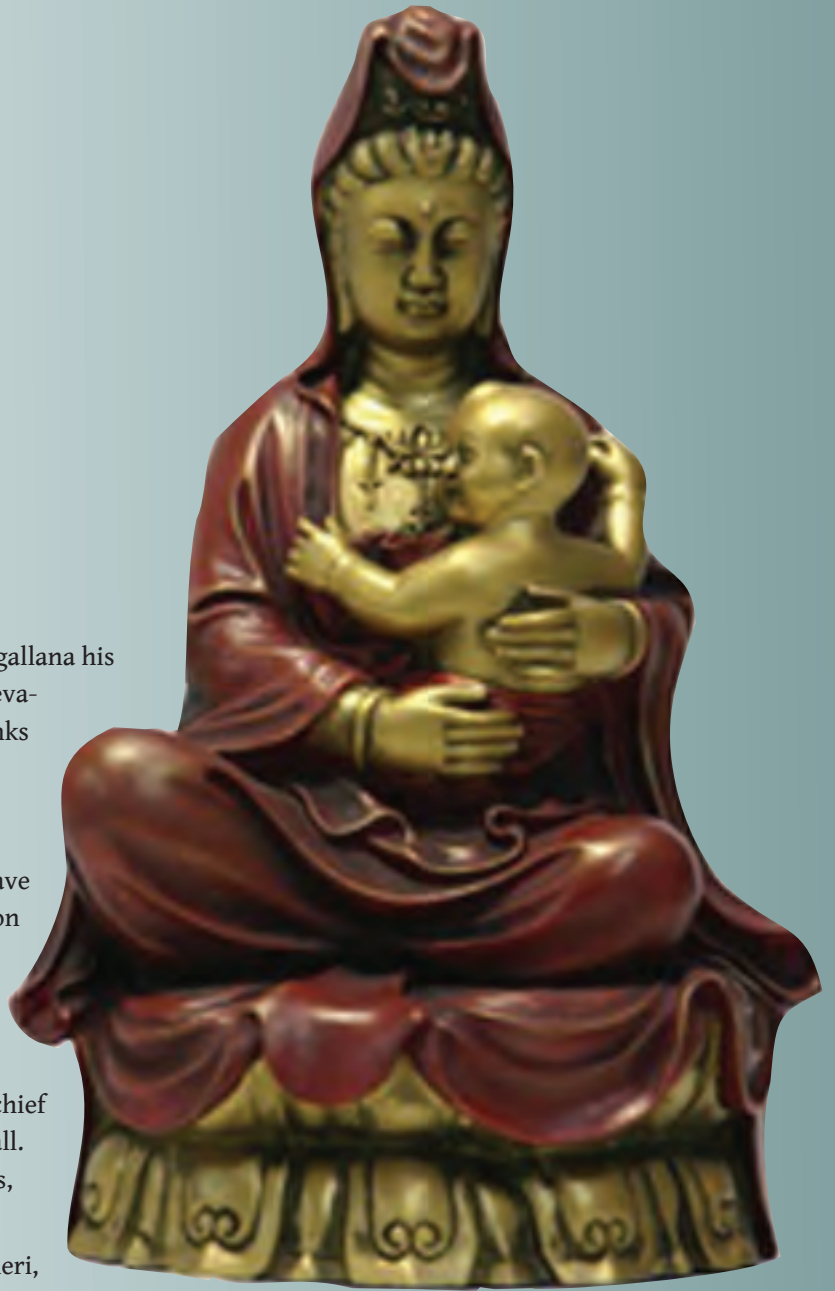
Honoring and Celebrating Monastic and Laywomen

By Susan Pembroke

When the Buddha named Sariputta and Mahamoggallana his chief disciples, a number of monks objected to the elevation of these relative newcomers. The protesting monks argued that there were more deserving monks, such as the group of five who first received the Buddha's instruction. These initial arahants had to be worthier than those arriving later. The Buddha's reply must have come as a jolt. He explained that it was not his decision or preference. Sariputta and Mahamoggallana had formed the aspiration many lifetimes ago to take on these roles. When the conditions were right, when their efforts and training had ripened, they were able to realize their intentions and become his chief disciples. Their sudden ascension was not sudden at all. What they achieved made them the inevitable choices, not the Buddha.

If we apply this same template to Mahapajapati Theri, can we entertain the possibility that the Buddha, in ordaining Gotami and making her the founder of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, was merely acknowledging an aspiration Gotami had cultivated for many lifetimes, working as diligently towards this position as had Sariputta and Moggallana theirs? Perhaps like the chief disciples, her actions and unswerving commitment over eons placed her in this historic role. For the Buddha to deny her would go against the natural order of things, go against how people's actions over time create their destiny. If anyone knew this, it was the Buddha. When the Buddha's aunt and stepmother requested ordination, is it possible her mission was simply to claim what was rightly hers?

In the case of Sariputta, numerous anecdotes and legends about him have been handed down to us. The many examples of his wisdom, humility, concern for others, industry, and helpfulness motivate us to this day to achieve his level of purity and compassion. We even have some of the discourses he gave. But, for the founder of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, a fully enlightened woman with many attainments, including the ability to recall past lives, we have next to nothing. In the Pali Canon, there are many concrete examples of how skillfully Sariputta handled diverse challenges. We can only assume that Mahapajapati was equally adroit, but the solutions and strategies she deployed in the face of various conflicts and problems are lost to us.



Denied examples of the feminine expression of sila, samadhi, and panna, we are all limping along whether we know it or not. Men, as much as women, benefit from the infusion of feminine energies and qualities into their practice. There are times, for example, when adapting and receptivity are more skillful approaches than a rigid, blind determination, the latter more often than not triggering blowback and a more intense struggle.

In an interview in the Spring 2010 Buddhadharmā, Bhikkhu Bodhi speaks to this point. He states: “A significant aspect about Buddhism in the West is not simply the ordination and greater participation of women, but that the feminine presence is going to transform the expression, understanding, and presentation of Buddhism significantly. It strikes me that the classical presentation of Buddhism has a very masculine flavor. One struggles against defilements, to defeat them, cut them off. As the feminine aspect becomes more prominent, it’s going to soften the presentation, but not in a compromising way. It will bring to manifestation certain elements already embedded within the Buddhist tradition that have not yet come to full expression.”

When we neglect to recount stories about women, not only do we disrespect our teachers, mentors, and family, but we deprive future generations of the embodied wisdom of these exemplary women. We deny them their inheritance. International Bhikkhuni Day is a way of righting the minimization or exclusion of women in Buddhist history. Once a year, from this point forward, we set aside an entire day for the expressed purpose of telling stories about monastic and laywomen whose lives are instructive and inspirational. In honoring them, we replenish and cultivate the highest in ourselves, encourage our contemporaries to realize their loftiest spiritual potential, and leave to those who follow a rich and complex legacy.

Please unite with fellow practitioners in writing a history that has women and men equal partners in protecting and spreading the Dhamma. On September 17, 2011, join us in a day of sharing stories about women who taught us how to be moral, responsible, and contributing citizens of the world, women who opened our minds to truth and moved us to care about the welfare of others.

If you are organizing a retreat, design a day that combines meditation, quiet reflection, journaling, and a storytelling circle that focuses on the feminine in all its manifestations. The women you choose to discuss may be arahant bhikkhunis, enlightened bhikkhunis, found in the Therīgāthā and elsewhere in the Pāli Canon. Or, they may be Dhamma teachers or women you have read about or study with now. They may also be family members and friends who shaped your character.

As I have written before, one of my first teachers was my

Czechoslovakian grandmother. She entered the country through Ellis Island, with suitcases her only belongings, and with English a foreign tongue. Her kitchen smelled from cinnamon and pastries on Saturdays and chicken soup on Sundays. I was happy to accompany her on her weekly shopping trip because I knew it would include a vanilla ice cream cone at Goldblatt’s. As we passed beggars on the street, she deposited a coin in every person’s cup or hat. In the many pilgrimages we made on those busy Chicago streets, I don’t recall her ever skipping a single person in need even though she suffered through the Great Depression and had little money herself. Equally remarkable, she never talked about why it was important to care for those less fortunate. She just did it. I can still see her in her babushka, smiling and having a kind word for everyone. Living simply, easily contented, soft-spoken, what little she had she generously shared. Before I heard of the Metta Sutta, she showed me how it was done.

Be a part of vowing to never forget the loving and noble deeds of women, monastic and lay alike. On September 17, 2011, please join with fellow practitioners in creating a history and tradition that acknowledge women and men as equal partners in protecting and spreading the Dhamma.

But now I’ve seen the Blessed one!

This is my last compounded form.

The on-flowing of birth has expired.

There’s no more re-becoming now.

(Maha Pajapati, Therīgāthā 6.6, translated by Andrew Olendzki)

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Susan Pembroke

President, Alliance for Bhikkhunis

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

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