

# 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

New Turns Toward Ancient Paths: The Ordinations in California

Bhikkhuni Education Today: Seeing Challenges as Opportunities

Venerable Kusuma and the Power of Literacy Education

Turning Back Towards Freedom

Wearing White in the West ■ Bhikkhunīsaṃyutta





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# *To Do Our Work, We Need Your Help*

**T**his letter is a status update to our stakeholders, to you who have invested in the Alliance for Bhikkhunis (AfB) in one way or another and wish to know whether your trust in us was justified. As you may know, AfB was created more than three years ago and is the only non-profit that exists solely to support the international revival of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. Initially, it seemed our primary task was fund raising so that bhikkhunis had the needed requisites to ordain and remain in robes. Though that remains a critical task, other equally vital undertakings have emerged, such as the need to disseminate accurate information on bhikkhuni history and activities, as well as contemporary challenges and achievements.

Through our digital library and online magazine, *Present*, we correct misinformation about bhikkhuni history, much of which has been accepted uncritically for centuries, and also highlight the truly remarkable women who have played essential roles in safeguarding the Dhamma for future generations. By writing about women, their journey to ordination, and their reflections about how becoming a bhikkhuni has been transformative for them, we hope this empowers women who want to ordain to find the courage to do so.

Our lead article on the Buddha's stepmother and aunt, Mahapajapati Theri, is a prime example of digging deeper into the texts left to us in order to unearth their significance. When the Buddha named the woman who mothered him, and was his first teacher, the head of the newly-created Bhikkhuni Sangha, his action was a public statement about her spiritual attainments and ability. Not just any woman would do. The Bhikkhuni Sangha was essential to the survival of his dispensation. The woman selected had to be remarkable in the myriad ways his chief male disciples were. We are left to infer that Gotami was no ordinary woman.

The Buddha also left us with clear instructions about how to treat mothers and women in general: if you honor me, honor my mother. Gotami's courageous story inspires men and women to this day. Her enlightenment poem can be found in our Poetry section. In it, she proclaims: "I have reached the state where everything stops...This is my last body."

Also in this issue is a piece on Venerable Bhikkhuni Kusuma Theri, a respected scholar who ordained in Sarnath in 1996 and continues to champion the cause of bhikkhuni ordination. Roseanne Freese's feature on the Patimokkha is another effort to dispel

misunderstandings and educate. In her interview of seven bhikkhunis, the monastics explain why the 311 rules found in the Patimokkha are treasured by them and how these rules bind a community and create a safe container for the journey to enlightenment.

Women are finally able to take full ordination in the West. Bhikkhuni Sobhana has written a moving account of her participation in two recent California ordinations.

Carudhamma's account of how wearing white protects her may well prove a revelation for people who have not grasped the role of precepts in making progress on the path to enlightenment. We are again extremely grateful to Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi for his ongoing support and contributions. Please take the time to see his translation of the Connected Discourses with Bhikkhunis and the text of a lecture he gave on the subject of bhikkhuni education.

When I began AfB, I was struck by how disconnected bhikkhunis were from each other. Many lived by themselves, with limited contact with other bhikkhunis. When they did communicate, it was often restricted to emails. Their numbers were too small to allow them to live in the communities the Buddha envisioned. Periods of discouragement and doubt hit any career; a monastic vocation is no exception. In becoming acquainted with these isolated women, I realized the stress and challenges for monastic women went beyond merely wondering if they would receive adequate financial support. They were lonely. They needed the kindness and encouragement of their sisters.

Aware of the emotional and spiritual needs of ordained women, AfB assists bhikkhunis with travel expenses so that they can spend Vassa together or participate in monastic conferences. Our Facebook page also brings monastics and lay practitioners together in a central meeting place. Bhikkhunis from as far away as Thailand or Indonesia announce what they are doing and exchange information. Breaking news in the bhikkhuni world appears here as well as reports of small triumphs.

The elephant in the room of contemporary Buddhism is the unspoken, and sad to say, even spoken, disparagement of women's spiritual capabilities. One of the ways we hope to combat that is through launching International Bhikkhuni Day, a day set aside annually to honor and celebrate bhikkhunis as well as all of our women teachers, including our

mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, or other women who have taken us under their protection and brought out the best in us. (See the article in this issue on The 1st Annual International Bhikkhuni Day.)

A little about the magazine. We are changing our issues from Spring and Fall to Summer and Winter to work around Vassa which dominates the fall and makes it difficult for us to communicate with monastics. We are adding a section entitled Women at the Forefront to showcase lay and monastic women from all Buddhist traditions. The Zen Roshi Joan Sutherland is featured in this issue. We would also love to post any comments or observations coming from our readers. Please feel free to send us letters. We want you to be part of the larger conversation. Let us know what things we are doing right and what things we need to improve on. This is a work-in-progress as well as a collaboration.

Like all start ups, we are going through some expected growth pains. Relying exclusively on volunteer staff to perform key functions is no longer feasible. We have moved forward with hiring key professional staff so that we can maintain the volume and quality of work we are doing. We need your ongoing help to make it possible for us to do our job.

To have a dependable cash flow, we are inviting everyone who benefits from coming to our site, whether they are searching for the location of a bhikkhuni monastery, doing research on a paper, or reading an article from our magazine or library, to Donate A Dollar, or more, if their circumstances allow. We are committed to keeping our services freely available for anyone who wishes to access them. For us to do this, though, we all need to do our part. If you think the work we are doing is beneficial, then please contribute \$1, \$5, or \$10 online. That may not seem like much, but over 56,000 people read our Spring 2010 issue within the first two weeks of its publication, and many thousands have been reading our magazine monthly since then. When thousands of people give a mere dollar, immense good ensues.

**Susan Pembroke**  
President  
Alliance for Bhikkhunis

**Present**

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Help celebrate and support Present/Alliance for Bhikkhunis!

This copy has been made available to you through the generous donations of our readers. If you enjoyed this issue, then please consider a tax-deductable donation to help support Present/Alliance for Bhikkhunis. 90% of donations are allocated for bhikkhuni ordination and training costs; bhikkhuni medical, dental and health insurance expenses; and providing requisites, including books and computers, to bhikkhuni viharas. Donations can be made quickly, easily, and securely [online here](#).