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# Sakyadhita Pilgrimage in Asia: On the Trail of the Buddhist Women's Movement

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# SAKYADHITA PILGRIMAGE IN ASIA

## ON THE TRAIL OF THE BUDDHIST WOMEN'S NETWORK

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### Karma Lekshe Tsomo

**ABSTRACT:** Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women was established in 1987 to address issues of gender equality in Buddhist societies and Buddhist institutions. Since then, through a series of innovative biannual conferences, Sakyadhita has worked to link women from different Buddhist traditions and cultural backgrounds and provide them with a forum where women's voices can be heard. These conferences have generated a vibrant international Buddhist women's movement that works for the welfare of the world's estimated 300,000 Buddhist women. Because Buddhist institutions in Asian countries typically function independently and there is no central authority to oversee them or create policies, Sakyadhita's intra-Buddhist communications network for women represents a major breakthrough. To keep their fingers on the pulse of this rapidly expanding movement, Karma Lekshe Tsomo and Christie Yu-ling Chang, Sakyadhita's current president and vice-president, traveled to Malaysia, Vietnam, and India in 2005-06 for a month to document changes in the making for Buddhist women.

With more than a third of the world's population, Asia is currently taking center-stage in world affairs, in terms of politics, economics, and development. All eyes and ears are turned to what is being called the "Asian century."<sup>1</sup> In the excitement of trade and treaties, dangers and dialogue, however, women's voices are still often muted and unheard, with Buddhist women barely visible on the global screen. Yet, in the last two decades, a current of women's empowerment and quiet dissent has been stirring and is causing ripples throughout Asia and the Buddhist diaspora. As a founder and current president of Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women, I have had high hopes for the emerging global Buddhist women's movement that began in Bodhgaya, India, in 1987 with the First International Conference on Buddhist Women. Since that time, members and allies of Sakyadhita (Daughters of the Buddha) have worked tirelessly to improve the lives of Buddhist women internationally, especially through education and training, and, despite limited resources, have achieved tremendous gains in just two decades. Even so, the achievements and awakening of awareness I discovered on a recent tour of Asia exceeded even my most optimistic expectations.

### AN INTERLUDE IN THAILAND

The journey over the 2005-2006 winter break began quietly enough. Around 1:00 A.M., in the dead of a tropical night, I arrived in Bangkok and taxied to We Train, home of the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women. We Train was founded in 1982 by Khunying Kanitha, an attorney who established the first women's shelter in Thailand and later the first college for Buddhist nuns there.<sup>2</sup> We Train houses a shelter for abused and abandoned women and children, a vocational training center, conference center, research center, and a refuge for women and children with HIV/AIDS. The driver was amused that, instead of checking into the trendy International Tourist Hostel, I directed him to the humble Nuns' Cottage at the back of the property. Alighting and edging around the back of the cottage to a lighted window, I called out the name of Sunee, a young Thai nun who has become accustomed to being awakened in the middle of the night and graciously finding space for me to recover from interminable trans-Pacific flights. Sunee is now completing her Master's thesis in statistics and teaching at Mahapajapati Theri College, the first college for nuns in Thailand, established by Khunying Kanitha in 2000.<sup>3</sup>

The next morning, Sunee accompanied me to Mahachulalongkorn University, where I had been asked to give a talk on "The Ordination of Women: Buddhist and Christian." Although the faces of the students in the international graduate

program had changed, this talk was a follow-up to a lecture given on women in Buddhism in the same classroom in 1998. The issue of women in Buddhism, and especially the issue of ordination for Buddhist women, is hot copy throughout the Buddhist world today, but especially in Thailand, where conservative monks strongly oppose and even deny the possibility of higher ordination for women. Male and female Buddhist novices receive ten precepts: to refrain from sexual activity, killing, stealing, lying, and so forth. Unlike nuns in China, Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam, nuns in Thailand are ordained as *mae chee* (a Thai nun with eight or ten precepts), but do not have access to full ordination as a *bhikṣuṇī*. They observe eight to ten precepts very strictly, but are not formally novices or recognized as members of the Saṅgha. Nuns in the Tibetan tradition are recognized as members of the Saṅgha as novices, but still do not have access to full ordination in their own tradition. I received novice ordination from Tibetan *bhikṣus* in 1977 and wear the robes of the Tibetan tradition, but had to go outside that tradition to receive the *bhikṣuṇī* precepts, traveling to Korea in 1982. An estimated 200 nuns practicing in the Tibetan tradition, who have been ordained as *bhikṣuṇīs* in other traditions, are now technically qualified to conduct a *bhikṣuṇī* ordination themselves.<sup>4</sup>

There are two main branches of Buddhism in the world today, the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna. The Theravāda tradition is followed in Thailand and there are two main *nikāyas*, or monastic orders. Aligned with the royal family, aristocracy, and government, the Thammayut Nikāya is regarded as orthodox and highly conservative. The Mahā Nikāya is regarded as more progressive and open-minded, notably on women's issues. In 1997 a well-meaning Thai friend ushered me in to meet Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara Suvaddhana Sangharaja, the patriarch of the Thammayut Nikāya since 1989. Although I am a fully ordained *bhikṣuṇī*, she introduced me as a *mae chee*, the term used for Thai renunciant women.<sup>5</sup> Her reticence to broach the topic of full ordination for Buddhist nuns reflects both the antiquated attitudes of conservative Thai monks, who seem out of touch with society's changing attitudes toward women, and the reluctance of ordinary Thai Buddhists to challenge the monks on controversial issues.

The argument against the full ordination of women states that a *bhikkhūṇī* must be ordained by ten *bhikkhus* and ten *bhikkhūṇīs*, but since the Theravāda lineage of *bhikkhūṇīs* has died out, there is no one to ordain Buddhist nuns in Thailand today. If confronted with the fact that tens of thousands of *bhikkhūṇīs* are alive and well in Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, China, and other countries today, opponents respond that these nuns belong to the Mahāyāna tradition and there is no Theravāda lineage for nuns in existence today.<sup>6</sup> When reminded of the fact that neither Theravāda nor Mahāyāna traditions existed at the time when the Buddha established the order of fully ordained nuns, even the most conservative would have to agree. But when confronted by the fact that hundreds of Theravāda nuns are practicing in Sri Lanka today, having received *bhikkhūṇī* ordination via Korea or Taiwan, the conversation typically comes to an abrupt end.<sup>7</sup> The fact that the dean and students of Mahachulalongkorn University, monks as well as nuns, were so anxious to hear an update on the issue of *bhikkhūṇī* ordination is a positive sign.

While waiting to give a second lecture, on "Death and Dying in the Buddhist Traditions," I met a *bhikkhūṇī* from Indonesia named Pannavati Padma. She is one of a growing number of Theravāda nuns from other countries who have received *bhikkhūṇī* ordination in Sri Lanka in recent years. Since their ordination, she and her two companions, Santini and Silavati, have created a small *bhikkhūṇī vihāra* (monastery) in a town near Jakarta, Java. The fact that Theravāda nuns like these have traveled from Indonesia to Sri Lanka illustrates how far the contemporary Buddhist women's movement has reached. Until recently, nuns lived in the shadows of the monks, cooking and cleaning in the temples, especially in remote corners of the Buddhist diaspora. Most Buddhist nuns in Indonesia are ethnically Chinese and practice in the Mahāyāna tradition, but Pannavati and her two *bhikkhūṇī* friends have chosen to follow the Theravāda tradition, because of its emphasis on meditation. For this reason, they periodically travel to Thailand to listen to the Dharma and join meditation retreats. Although these three Dharma sisters are negotiating the situation very carefully, their ordination has stirred controversy in both Indonesia and Thailand. Their courage to travel abroad and to brave the controversy indicates the new visibility and improved status of nuns in Buddhist societies today. *Bhikkhūṇī* Pannavati and her sisters have been following news of the Buddhist women's movement and hope to attend the next Sakyadhita conference.

## **BUDDHIST DIVERSITY IN MALAYSIA**

The next stop on the trip was Malaysia. At Kuala Lumpur International Airport, I met up with Christie Yu-ling Chang, who teaches linguistics and translation at National Taiwan University in Taipei and was the local coordinator of the Seventh Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women in Taipei in 2002. We became friends more than ten years ago when we were both doctoral students at the University of Hawai'i, and have worked closely together on a number of projects since then. She is the vice-president of Sakyadhita International and is in the process of founding Sakyadhita Taiwan. We decided to travel together to Malaysia and Vietnam to help promote awareness of Buddhist women's activities and to expand the Buddhist women's international network.

Malaysia is a Muslim country with strong religious traditions. Every morning at 5:30 A.M., we awoke to the call to prayer broadcast by a muezzin. Malaysia is also a multicultural country with a policy of religious tolerance, where members of various ethnic and religious groups—Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Taoists, and Sikhs—are free to follow their own heritages and beliefs. It is illegal to proselytize other faiths among Muslims, however, so to avoid possible misunderstandings, Buddhist publications are usually stamped with the words: “Not to be given to Muslims.”

Thanks to the policy of religious tolerance, we were able to hold the Ninth Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women in Kuala Lumpur from 17-22 June 2006. After a year of feverish email communications, Christie and I arrived in person on 28 December 2005 to assist with the conference planning. This conference is the latest in a series of global exchanges among Buddhist women from countries as far afield as Finland, Mongolia, New Zealand, South Africa, Peru, and Bangladesh. International Sakyadhita conferences have been held regularly since the initial gathering in Bodhgaya, India in 1987—in Bangkok, Thailand (1991); Colombo, Sri Lanka (1993); Ladakh, India (1995); Phnom Penh, Cambodia (1997-98); Lumbini, Nepal (2000); Taipei, Taiwan (2002); Seoul, Korea (2004); and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (2006). Bringing together lay women and men, nuns and monks, from so many different countries and so many cultural, economic, social, and religious backgrounds to discuss topics of interest to Buddhist women, has generated innumerable research projects, books, social action projects, and spin-off conferences. The intangible benefits—cross-cultural exchanges, interreligious dialogue, intra-Buddhist dialogue, and the transformation of attitudes toward women in Buddhist societies—have reached far and wide. Perhaps the most significant advance of all has been transforming Buddhist women’s attitudes toward themselves and their capabilities.

Over the years, a number of women and men from Malaysia have attended Sakyadhita conferences, but Buddhist women have never formed their own organizations in Malaysia. Regardless, Buddhist women play essential roles in the many Buddhist temples and Dharma centers of Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Melaka, and other towns. Buddhists constitute about 25 percent of the Malaysian population and may belong to Chinese temples, Buddhist Maha Vihara and its affiliates, Tibetan centers, or remain unaffiliated.

The Chinese temples of Malaysia all follow the Mahāyāna tradition and are bustling centers of Buddhist practice and social activity. Buddhist services are held regularly, with chanting in various dialects of Chinese. Each temple tends to attract a following from its particular language group—Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka, or Mandarin—with many crossovers. The twentieth century saw a resurgence of Buddhist devotion and temple building with the arrival of monks from China. Many of these monks traveled to Malaysia to strengthen the local understanding of Buddhism and to distinguish it from the admixture of Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist beliefs and practices labeled Chinese folk religion or Chinese popular religion. Among these immigrant Chinese monks were several widely admired Buddhist scholars and teachers, such as the Bhikkhu Du Mu and Bhikkhu Kuang Ming, who worked to establish the Malaysian Buddhist Association in 1959. The disciples of these esteemed monks are prominent in the current generation of Chinese Malaysian Buddhist leaders, and many among them are *bhikkhunīs*, or fully ordained nuns. Many young nuns have gone abroad for education and training, mostly to Taiwan, but only a few have returned to teach in Malaysia. The future vitality of Malaysian Buddhism may depend on reversing this Dharma brain drain.

A second group of Buddhist temples in Malaysia is affiliated with Buddhist Maha Vihara (BMV), established by immigrants from Sri Lanka in 1894. BMV was revitalized in 1952 by Bhikkhu Dhammananda (1919-2006), a Sri Lankan monk who arrived with the specific aim of spreading Buddhism in Malaysia. Most of the temples in this group have been started by his disciples. Bhikkhu Dhammananda, referred to as Chief Reverend (or simply “Chief”), belonged to the Theravāda tradition that prevails in Sri Lanka, although he preferred to refer to himself simply as Buddhist. Until his recent death, he was a dynamic speaker and popular mentor, with many publications to his credit. He taught in English, which meant that his message reached English-speaking people of various ethnic backgrounds. Every year he held a huge ordination of Buddhist novice monks. In Theravāda countries, however, nuns with ten precepts are not accorded the formal status of a *sāmaṇerī* (novice nun), but are considered Buddhist laywomen (*upāsikas*) with shaved heads. We were happy to learn that in 2005, for the first time Bhikkhu Dhammananda ordained a group of eight women as *sāmaṇerīs*. Although most of these novice ordinations were for a limited period of time,<sup>8</sup> the ordination of Theravāda nuns as *sāmaṇerīs* is a significant step toward gender equality in Buddhist institutions.

The third group of Buddhist temples in Malaysia consists of numerous small centers that dot the towns and countryside. Over the years, BMV spawned many such centers in various parts of Malaysia. The majority of these centers follow the Theravāda tradition and were founded by ethnic Chinese who are English-educated university graduates. Most members of these centers are young people with families who speak several dialects of Chinese, but do not read Chinese, so they prefer to study Buddhism in English. These are modern-minded Buddhists who welcome English-speaking teachers from around the world, and invite female and male teachers equally. The leaders of these centers generally grew up attending services at BMV and therefore feel most comfortable chanting in Pāli, the language of Theravāda Buddhism. Women form the backbone of these centers and have established cutting-edge programs for teaching

Buddhism to children.

Other small Buddhist centers belong to the Tibetan tradition. Most of these centers were founded by Tibetan Buddhist teachers (*lamas*) who travel periodically to Malaysia to gain support for monasteries in India and Nepal. After receiving teachings and initiations from visiting teachers, groups of devoted Malaysia followers have gradually set up permanent centers for inviting teachers and hosting Dharma events. These centers generally belong to particular Tibetan Buddhist schools, whether Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu, or Gelug. Although the majority of the center members and organizers are women, almost all of the Tibetan teachers are male. As these centers gain members and support, they hope to buy land and construct permanent structures. But the gender imbalance in these centers is not likely to change until the generation of nuns currently doing Buddhist studies in India and Nepal emerge as fully qualified Dharma teachers and are recognized as such.

Our time in Malaysia was divided between conference planning work, meetings with Mahāyāna nuns at their temples to request support for the Ninth Sakyadhita Conference to be held at Kuala Lumpur, and talks at various Buddhist centers, with a view to publicizing the conference. The conference planning was progressing well, with different cultural expectations among the Chinese Mahāyāna nuns, Sri Lankan Theravāda laywomen, and English-educated Chinese Malaysian laywomen providing opportunities for self-reflection. We learned that Buddhist organizations in Malaysia are almost all led by monks or laymen, so women have had few opportunities to develop leadership skills. A dynamic nun named Bhikṣuṇī Chang Heng headed the Malaysian Conference Planning Committee and donated her newly completed Sau Seng Lum Exhibition Hall as the venue for the Sakyadhita Conference. The center contains depictions of 500 *arhats* (liberated beings) in *bas relief*, Tibetan Buddhist prayer wheels, and numerous Buddhist artifacts on view. It can house several hundred participants during the Ninth Sakyadhita Conference, and is large enough to accommodate and feed 1,000 people at the opening ceremony. In addition, Bhikṣuṇī Chang Heng has established centers for kidney dialysis and HIV/AIDS patients. These achievements demonstrate the vitality, mettle, and organizational abilities of Malaysian Buddhist nuns.

The Ninth Sakyadhita International Conference of Buddhist Women began 17 June 2006 with a traditional lion dance from the Chinese tradition. At the opening ceremony, participants from around the world were welcomed by Malaysian government officials, Malaysian and international Buddhist leaders, and chanting by nuns from the Theravāda, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Tibetan, and Vietnamese traditions. The conference theme, “Buddhist Women in a Global Multicultural Community,” was introduced by Dr. Sharon Suh, a professor of Religious Studies at Seattle University, in her keynote, “Roots/Routes – Transmitting the Buddha Dharma across Time and Place: Challenges and Implications for Contemporary Buddhist Women.” The five-day program included a blessing from the Hawaiian tradition performed by Malia Dominica Wong, a Dominican sister from Honolulu, panel presentations, workshops, and group discussions on topics as diverse as “Buddhism, Shamanism, and Women in Korean History,” “Understanding Buddhism through Fiction Films,” “Starting a Tibetan Learning Center for Nuns in South India,” “Buddhist Monasticism in a Consumer Culture,” “The Language of Tibetan Nuns in the Indian Himalayas,” and “What Does Buddhism Have to Do with Black Women?” As is customary at Sakyadhita conferences, the program included daily meditation practice, chanting from the various Buddhist traditions, and gourmet vegetarian meals. After the conference, a three-day tour of Malaysian Buddhist temples and sites of cultural interest in Penang and Melaka gave participants time to network further with colleagues from countries as diverse as Korea, Mexico, Burytia, New Zealand, and Indonesia. The conference was lauded in the Malaysian press as a breakthrough in inter-cultural, inter-religious dialogue, with women in the vanguard.

## THE REVITALIZATION OF BUDDHISM IN VIETNAM

The next stop on the 2005-06 trip was Vietnam. Christie and I were met at Ho Chi Minh International Airport by the abbess, vice-abbess, and several young nuns from Huê Lâm Temple holding bouquets of brightly colored flowers for each of us. They wore grey robes and head coverings similar to Catholic nuns—a tradition among Vietnamese nuns that owes nothing to Roman Catholicism. The nuns offered us bottled water and chattered cheerfully as I reported my missing bag to Vietnam Airlines and learned more about its bureaucratic procedures than I ever wished to know.

One of the nuns, Bhikṣuṇī Nguyet, is currently working on her doctoral dissertation on Buddhist women in Vietnam in the Department of Buddhist Studies at Delhi University. She is one of dozens of young Vietnamese nuns, monks, and laypeople who have been studying in India in recent years. I first met Bhikṣuṇī Nguyet when I was invited to give a talk on women in Buddhism at Delhi University in 1999. To my astonishment, more than fifty students showed up for the talk, including a large contingent of Vietnamese nuns who crowded into the front rows. Talking to these nuns afterwards, thanks to the kindness of our skilled interpreter Le Thi Hang Nga, I discovered that they were deeply interested in the roles of women in Buddhist history and women’s potential according to Buddhist philosophy. Over the years, several of these nuns have taken up themes related to women in Buddhism in their graduate research and some have published

their work. A few months after this talk in 1999, I invited these nuns to attend the Sixth Sakyadhita Conference to be held the next year in Lumbini, Nepal. Although Sakyadhita and the Buddhist women's movement receive little financial support from any quarter, the reasonable cost of train tickets from Delhi to Lumbini made it possible to sponsor nine nuns and one laywoman to attend the conference. The conference was inspiring to these participants not only as the place where Mahamaya gave birth to the future Buddha, but also as the site of the newly constructed International Bhikkhūṅī Monastery, built by a determined band of Nepali Theravadin nuns who are followers of Bhikkhūṅī Dhammawati of Kathmandu.<sup>9</sup> The Sakyadhita conference opened the eyes of the Vietnamese participants to the dynamism, achievements, and struggles of Buddhist women in other parts of the world.

Bhikṣuṅī Nguyet and her colleagues drove us to Huê Lâm Temple, an impressive temple for women in the center of Ho Chi Minh City. We were greeted by laywomen offering huge bouquets of fresh flowers and girls and boys from the temple's Buddhist school. Dressed in their Buddhist school uniforms, white shirts neatly tucked into grey pleated skirts and trousers, they lined up on either side of the entrance, singing the refuge prayer ("I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Saṅgha."). As they sang, we were led upstairs to a formal reception room, where Buddhist laywomen presented more flowers, children studying in the temple's school sang more Buddhist songs, and introductions and words of greeting and appreciation were exchanged. We noticed several teenage novices, their heads half-shaven, flitting inconspicuously here and there, providing whatever was needed to make everyone comfortable.

There have been many eminent Buddhist nuns in Vietnamese history. Bhikṣuṅī Nhu Thanh, who founded Huê Lâm Temple and several others, was renowned for her educational reforms for nuns. In 1956 she proposed the establishment of the Vietnamese Bhikṣuṅī Saṅgha to unite nuns throughout Vietnam and work for their welfare. The association for nuns worked parallel to, but independent of, the Vietnamese Buddhist Saṅgha, the leading monks' organization. In 1992 when the Vietnamese Buddhist Saṅgha was founded, monks took the leadership and a separate association of Buddhist nuns was not established. Nuns and their monasteries continue to function independently, but administrative responsibility for Vietnamese Buddhism as a whole is now concentrated in the hands of monks.

Vietnamese nuns and their lay disciples have distinguished themselves through their simple lifestyles, their education programs for children, and their charity work among the poor. Bhikṣuṅī Nhu Thanh led by example throughout the war years and the difficult period that followed independence and the social and economic adjustments of Communist rule. Nuns and monks were told to leave their monasteries and return to their home villages, and many disrobed as a result, but she and many stalwart Buddhist followers maintained their monastic precepts, even as they worked in the fields to fulfill the proletariat requirements of the new regime. The traditional custom of supporting Buddhist temples through contributions from the laity was no longer allowed and everyone, whether monastic or lay, was expected to pull her own weight.

Those who were determined to remain nuns and monks covertly maintained their vows of celibacy, while engaging in manual labor. They worked in the paddy fields like everyone else, but many continued their Buddhist practice as well, rising early to meditate from 4:00 to 6:00 in the morning and taking time to meditate again from 6:00 to 8:00 in the evening. From 1975 on, by pressing themselves doubly hard this way, many Buddhist monastics managed to avoid imprisonment and re-education and were also able to preserve the essence of their Buddhist practice. Because of the hardships of war, the destruction of the country, and the personal sufferings they experienced, many people developed insight into the Buddha's central teaching about *dukkha*, the painful nature of human existence, and decided to renounce family life to live as a nun or monk. So many people flocked to the monasteries, in fact, that graduation from twelfth grade, a substantial achievement, was made a prerequisite for entering monastic life.

Our first stop the next day was to pay respect to Thich Trí Quang, a highly respected monk in the Vietnamese Buddhist Saṅgha, and abbot of An Quang Temple. He and his venerable companions listened as we briefly explained the history and objectives of Sakyadhita, and our hopes that a Sakyadhita conference could be held in Vietnam. We then visited Thich Hien Phap, head of the Vietnamese Buddhist Saṅgha, and again presented Sakyadhita and reasons to support our hope that a Sakyadhita conference could be held in Vietnam. He asked us to draw up a proposal outlining our objectives, which we finished in the early hours of the night and delivered to his temple at the crack of dawn. He promised to forward our proposal to the concerned government authorities and said he would inform us of the results.

The following day we appeared at Van Hanh University, where I was invited to give lectures on the history of Buddhist women to 350 monks in the morning and 400 nuns in the afternoon. Vietnam has three Buddhist universities: Hanoi in the north, Hue in the south, and Van Hanh in Ho Chi Minh City. The talk was translated by Le Manh That, who completed a doctorate in Buddhist studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and currently serves as vice-rector of the university. Both the monks and the nuns were clearly intrigued by a discussion of why women are subordinate to men in Buddhist institutions and disadvantaged in terms of opportunities for Buddhist education and ordination in many Buddhist societies. The question-and-answer sessions were jovial and spirited. A few monks challenged my

position, basing their arguments on passages from Buddhist texts, and appeared nonplussed when I returned the challenge, asking them to question the sources and authority of those texts.<sup>10</sup> In discussions afterward, I discovered that, according to Vietnamese government records, there are 14,000 nuns in Vietnam and 9,600 monks. More than 10,000 nuns belong to the Mahāyāna tradition and the rest follow the Theravāda and Mendicant traditions.

That very day, we set out for Hanoi, where we began visiting one temple after the other, despite the chilly weather. At the first temple we visited, we met the abbess, Bhikṣuṇī Dam Hao, a senior nun who oversees the *bhiksuni* order in northern Vietnam. The temple had been classified as a World Heritage site, but the task of maintaining and repairing this huge temple complex was clearly a challenge to the aged abbess. The next temple, Bo De, was also huge, but thriving under the care of its dynamic abbess, Bhikṣuṇī Dām Lan. She listened intently to our recounting of Sakyadhita's work, immediately grasped its import, decided to become a member of Sakyadhita, and expressed her hope to attend the Sakyadhita conference in Malaysia. The next temple we visited was located at the end of a small crowded alley of shops in the heart of downtown Hanoi. Currently under reconstruction, it was run by a jovial nun who is clearly good friends with all the shopkeepers in the neighborhood. She soon herded us toward a vegetarian restaurant, the meeting place of choice for many Vietnamese Buddhists. On the way, we stopped at Kuan Su Temple, an ancient, well-restored temple that is also the grounds of the city's Buddhist university. Like Vietnam's other two Buddhist universities, nuns are not only admitted, but comprise fully half the student population. This level of equal educational opportunity is a welcome anomaly in Buddhist cultures, where monks are generally given precedence over nuns.

From Hanoi, we traveled to Hue, the ancient capital of Vietnam, where we were hosted at Kieu Dam Temple, a *bhikṣuṇī* training center with forty friendly young nuns. The afternoon we arrived, we visited the well-kept grounds of the Buddhist University of Hue and found hundreds of student nuns taking exams in large halls upstairs. Downstairs, we had the opportunity to discuss the goals and achievements of Sakyadhita with the deans and professors, who seemed delighted to make connections with Buddhists from other countries. Later, we visited Dieu Duc, a nuns' training center that is the oldest in Hue with a 100-year history. At another active nuns' temple, we found people eager to talk about the many illustrious Vietnamese nuns who devoted their lives to practicing the Buddhist teachings and serving human society. The nuns' hard work pays dividends not only for their own spiritual development, but also generates tremendous respect for nuns among the laity. On the road from Hue to Danang, the van suddenly stopped and we were unexpectedly whisked by motorbike up to the top of the hill. There, a nun engaged in social work in Hue is constructing a Buddhist temple for the people of the local commune. A dozen men from the commune carted supplies and oversaw construction, while as many women sat inside reciting the Buddhist *sūtras*. In Danang, a flight delay became an opportunity to visit several more temples for nuns, all of them scrupulously maintained and independently supervised by competent, well-educated nuns, who work ceaselessly to benefit their local communities.

By the time we returned to Ho Chi Minh City a week later, Buddhist circles seemed abuzz with the prospect of a Sakyadhita conference in Vietnam. Thích Nhật Từ, a young monk who speaks fluent English and is the abbot of Giác Ngô Temple, assured us that the proper authorities had received our proposal and would respond within a few weeks. He asked whether he might translate books documenting the Sakyadhita conferences into Vietnamese.<sup>11</sup> His proposal sounded like a fine idea, so Bhikṣuṇī Nguyet and I rounded up a computer printer and printed out a copy of one manuscript that very night, so that the translation could begin as soon as possible. Time had no meaning when it came to accomplishing our aim and fortunately the temple's abbess was understanding about our odd hours. By the time we headed to catch the plane to Kolkata, we had met hundreds of Vietnamese Buddhists who were sympathetic to the cause of women and had achieved far more than we dreamed. After some weeks, we were pleased to receive news that permission had been granted to hold the Eleventh Sakyadhita Conference in Vietnam in 2010.

## THE FUTURE: A BUDDHIST WOMEN'S INSTITUTE IN BODHGAYA

The last stop on the trip was Bodhgaya, India, the sacred site where the Buddha attained enlightenment. From Kolkata (Calcutta) Airport in the dead of night, a taxi sped along the chaotic city streets and deposited us at the YWCA hostel. The next evening, our rickety taxi ran out of gas on the "freeway" and we were rescued just in the nick of time to catch an overnight train to Gaya. Arriving in Bodhgaya the next morning was like coming home, for it was here that the very first Sakyadhita conference was held in 1987. At that time, Bhante U Nyaneida, the abbot of the Burmese Vihara, was one of the few people who understood what we were doing in gathering people from around the world to discuss the concerns of Buddhist women. He spontaneously allotted rooms for the participants and allowed us to use the monastery courtyard for making jam, painting signs, and all the tasks of organizing the conference. At 3:00 A.M. on the morning the conference was to begin, I answered a knock on my door to find the renowned Cambodian peace activist monk Maha Ghosananda standing with a small bundle. He had flown all the way from Massachusetts to bring an American nun to attend the Sakyadhita conference. Later in the morning, we were as incredulous as everyone else when 1,500 people

appeared to hear His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama present the inaugural address of this historic conference.

One morning years later, Bhante U Nyaneida told me about a Korean nun who had asked him to find her some land to build a monastery. He found some land, but the nuns got too busy to build the monastery. He approached me that morning with a level gaze and asked, “What should I do with this land?” A bit stunned, I replied, “Could I get back to you in the morning on that?” As luck would have it, I had been teaching at various centers and had received donations precisely in the amount of the asking price.<sup>12</sup> It suddenly dawned on me that hundreds of monasteries had been built in Bodhgaya, but in more than 2,500 years there had never been one for women. More astonishing than that, no one had ever noticed this oversight. The time had come for Buddhist women to have a place of their own, so I told Bhante I would like the land for an international Buddhist women’s center. Now, ten years later, after four years of delays, we were able to register Sanghamitra Foundation in a day and a half, surely a record in Indian legal history. The name of the new foundation commemorates Emperor Aśoka’s daughter Sanghamitra, who transmitted the *bhikṣuṇī* lineage from India to Sri Lanka and thereby preserved it for posterity. The dream is for this land to become a place where women from around the world can dialogue with each other, learn together, and take their rightful place at the Buddhist table. If Buddhist women’s achievements since 1987 are any indication, this is not an empty dream.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The origin of this term is unclear, but it heralds developments in Asia that were expected to supersede the “American century.” See Greg Austin and Stuart Harris, *Japan and Greater China: Political Economy and Military Power in the Asian Century* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2001) and Christopher Lingle, *The Rise and Decline of the Asian Century: False Starts on the Path to the Global Millennium* (Hong Kong: Asia 2000 Ltd., 1998)

<sup>2</sup> For details about her life and work, see Karma Lekshe Tsomo, “Khunying Kanitha: Thailand’s Advocate for Women,” in *Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, Challenges, and Achievements*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 173-91.

<sup>3</sup> The college is named after Mahāprajāpatī, the Buddha’s stepmother and aunt, a pioneer who agitated for the admission of women to the Saṅgha. She became the first Buddhist nun and led the Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha for decades in its early years.

<sup>4</sup> These *bhikṣuṇīs* have not ordained other Tibetan nuns. The main reason is the lack of support for such an ordination from the recognized authorities, namely, the Tibetan-Government-in-Exile and the Tibetan Bhikṣu Saṅgha. The main obstacles seem to be questions regarding the origins of the existing *bhikṣuṇī* lineages and proper procedures for conducting *bhikṣuṇī* ordinations. A conference on Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya requested by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and scheduled to be held at Hamburg University in July 2007 may signal a shift in policy on the part of the Tibetan religious authorities that would allow nuns of the Tibetan tradition to receive *bhikṣuṇī* ordination from monks of their own tradition. The first generation of Tibetan nuns to be thoroughly educated in Buddhist studies has just begun to study the Vinaya, but thus far they have not been permitted to study the *bhikṣuṇī* precepts and ordination procedures.

<sup>5</sup> The Pāli terms *bhikkhu* (fully ordained monk) and *bhikkhunī* (fully ordained nun), used in the Theravāda tradition, are equivalent to the Sanskrit terms *bhikṣu* and *bhikṣuṇī*, used in the Mahāyāna tradition.

<sup>6</sup> The history of nuns in Thailand is discussed in Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991). The ordination of women in the Theravāda tradition is discussed further in Senarat Wijayasundara, “Restoring the Order of Nuns to the Theravāda Tradition,” in *Buddhist Women across Cultures: Realizations*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 79-87.

<sup>7</sup> Accounts of the restoration of the Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha in Sri Lanka are given by Ranjani de Silva, “Reclining the Robe: Reviving the Bhikkhunī Order in Sri Lanka,” in Tsomo, *Buddhist Women and Social Justice*, 119-35; Hema Goonatikake, “Women Regaining a Lost Legacy: The Restoration of the *Bhikkhunī* Order in Sri Lanka,” in *Out of the Shadows: Socially Engaged Buddhist Women*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 2006), 42-47; and Nirmala S. Salgado, “Unity and Diversity among Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka,” in *Innovative Buddhist*



*Women: Swimming Against the Stream*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Surrey, England: Curzon Press, 2000), 30-41.

<sup>8</sup> In some Theravāda countries, notably Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, there is a tradition of receiving ordination temporarily, generally as a means of creating merit to repay the kindness of one's parents or as the fulfillment of a vow.

<sup>9</sup> Bhikkhunī Dhammawati and her work are described in Sarah LeVine, "At the Cutting Edge: Theravāda Nuns in the Kathmandu Valley," in *Innovative Buddhist Women*, 13-29; and Sarah LeVine, "Dharma Education for Women in the Theravāda Buddhist Community of Nepal," in Tsomo, *Buddhist Women and Social Justice*, 137-54.

<sup>10</sup> In the Buddhist sources, when Mahāprajāpatī became the first Buddhist nun, she was asked to observe eight special rules (*gurudharmas*) as the condition of her admission to the Saṅgha (monastic community). These rules include, for example, the injunction that *bhikṣuṇīs* must pay respect to *bhikṣus* regardless of monastic seniority. According to Pāli scholars, however, the passage that recounts the institution of the eight *gurudharmas* was apparently written considerably later than the passage into which they have been inserted and contain numerous contradictions. Bhikkhunī Kusuma discusses this in "Inaccuracies in Buddhist Women's History," in Tsomo, *Innovative Buddhist Women*, 5-12.

<sup>11</sup> The talks from the Taipei conference are included in Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed., *Bridging Worlds: Buddhist Women's Voices across Generations* (Taipei: Yuan Chuan Press, 2004) and the talks from the Seoul conference are included in Tsomo, *Out of the Shadows*.

<sup>12</sup> Buddhist nuns and monks observe a precept to refrain from handling silver and gold. In the Theravāda interpretation, this means to refrain from handling money or instruments of financial exchange. In the Mahāyāna tradition, monastics are more flexible about this precept, provided the funds are utilized in accordance with the Dharma.