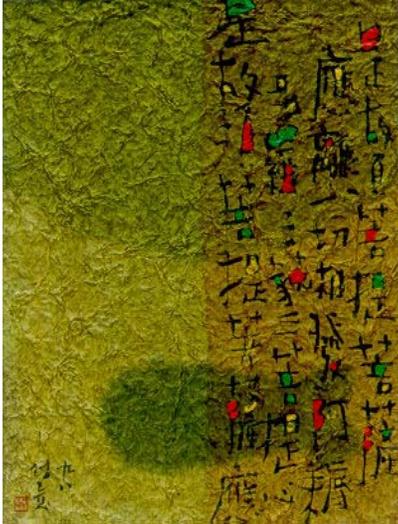


## Research Article

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### Sakyadhita: A Transnational Gathering Place for Buddhist Women

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Research Article

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*Abstract:* A gathering of Buddhist women in Bodhgaya in 1987 saw the establishment of Sakyadhita, a transnational Buddhist women's organization. Its conveners outlined an ambitious set of objectives, including improved opportunities for women to study *dharma* and the establishment of a full *bhikshuni* ordination in the Theravada and Tibetan traditions. Central to Sakyadhita's mission has been a series of biannual international conferences that provide opportunities for Buddhist women across cultures to come together to share their experiences and learn from each other. The interactions and exchanges that occur at these conferences highlight the issues and concerns the Buddhist women bring to a transnational forum, while also offering insight into the feasibility of Sakyadhita's purpose. This paper considers that purpose by examining the events of the Sixth

International Conference in Nepal in 2000, the Ninth International Conference in Malaysia in 2006, and a related gathering, the First International Buddhist Congress in Hamburg in 2007. Discussion focuses on what these conferences accomplish and the way they have helped Sakyadhita redefine its goals. Special attention is given to Sakyadhita's continued involvement in the issue of nuns' ordination. The paper's conclusions address the challenges a transnational organization like Sakyadhita faces.

## Introduction

Founded in 1987, Sakyadhita is a transnational Buddhist women's organization. Its objectives have included the creation of a network of communication for Buddhist women, lay and ordained from all traditions and regions; the promotion of education and the improvement of facilities for women to study, practice, and teach Buddhism; a campaign for the full ordination of women in every Buddhist tradition; the facilitation of understanding among the various Buddhist traditions; and the fostering of world peace through Buddhist teachings.(1)

Central to Sakyadhita's purposes has been a series of bi-annual international conferences held primarily in Asia. Because Sakyadhita strives to be a transnational forum facilitating Buddhist women's interests, these conferences serve as a gathering place where Buddhist women across cultures and traditions can come together. The conferences provide the only occasion where major face-to-face interaction among Sakyadhita's members occurs. They offer an opportunity to track exchanges and interactions, and provide a window on the vitality of the organization. What happens at these gatherings articulates Sakyadhita's objectives.

This paper considers their function by examining the activities of two conferences, the Sixth International Sakyadhita Conference held in Lumbini, Nepal, in 2000 and the Ninth held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in 2006, with additional materials drawn from the International Congress of Buddhist Women held in Hamburg, Germany, in 2007.<sup>(2)</sup> Discussion will focus on what such conferences accomplish and the way they have helped Sakyadhita redefine its goals. Further, since the campaign for the revitalization of nuns' orders remains an important concern for Sakyadhita, special attention is given to Sakyadhita's continued involvement in the issue of nuns' ordination. The paper's conclusions address the challenges a transnational organization like Sakyadhita faces.

#### History of Sakyadhita

Sakyadhita came into existence at a 1987 conference in Bodh Gaya, India, organized by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, an American Tibetan nun; Ayya Khema, a German-born Theravadin nun (now deceased); and Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (now Bhikkhuni Dhammananda), a professor at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand.<sup>(3)</sup> The conference was historically significant as it was the first international gathering of Buddhist nuns. Geographically and linguistically isolated, Buddhist women and members of *bhikkhuni* orders were under-represented at monastic gatherings up through the latter part of the twentieth century; the Bodh Gaya conference sought to rectify that.<sup>(4)</sup> Drawing together ordained Buddhist women, the conference also saw male monastics, both male and female Buddhist laity, and people from other religious traditions in attendance. Its main purpose was to promote understanding and solidarity among women from various Buddhist traditions and to encourage other Buddhist

women in the practice of *Dharma*. The last session, convened to take stock of the conference's accomplishments, ended with the launching of Sakyadhita, "Daughters of the Buddha," an organization that would continue to promote the empowerment of Buddhist women. Since its inception, it has organized a series of nine international conferences in Asia. In addition, Sakyadhita has convened conferences in North America and Germany that have focused primarily on Western practitioners.<sup>(5)</sup> The organization has produced a series of books based upon these conferences, a newsletter and developed a website. <sup>(6)</sup> It has further engaged in a wide variety of projects for the improvement of women, and worked towards the re-establishment of the full ordination of women in the Theravada and Tibetan traditions.

#### The Sakyadhita Conferences of 2000 and 2006

Like all of the conferences Sakyadhita has convened, the 2000 and 2006 conferences had overarching themes intended to link presentations and foster discussion among participants. In 2000 Conference, Buddhist women gathered in Lumbini, Nepal, the birthplace of the Buddha – a fitting site to mark the shift from one millennium to another. The theme of this, the sixth Sakyadhita conference, was "Women as Peacemakers: Self, Family, Community and World." Its venue, the recently completed Gautami Nunnery, had literal as well as symbolic significance. A well-respected Nepali nun, Dhammavati, had coordinated the construction of the nunnery. Further, the nuns had raised all the building funds themselves.

Pomp and ceremony opened the conference and then the activities settled into a daily pattern of meditation, breakfast, morning presentations and discussion groups,

lunch break, afternoon presentations and discussion groups, tea, chanting and meditation, cultural presentations and the evening meal. The meditation sessions were conducted by both lay and monastic women and included representatives from Australia, Nepal, Canada, Burma, Sri Lanka, Japan and Korea, representing a variety of meditation styles. The presentations were divided into themes: Understanding Women in Buddhist Cultures, Women's Health in the Buddhist Community, Women for a Peaceful Millennium: Learning Peace Building Skills, Leadership and Empowerment—Practical Skills and Paths to Enlightenment—Monastery and Family. The style of presentations varied from scholarly talks to workshop presentations that focused on developing practical skills, and others on how to integrate Buddhist values and practice into daily family life. The final day included a Sakyadhita Council meeting whose purpose was to discuss visions, dialogue, and make resolutions.

The Ninth International Conference took place in the Buddhist Sau Seng Lum Temple and Exhibition Centre in Selangor, Puchong, just outside Kuala Lumpur. With its theme of "Buddhist Women in a Global Multicultural Community," the conference's focus was "primarily on the effects of globalization caused by growing international connections that affect various aspects of society."<sup>(7)</sup> Panels were organized around topics of race, class, and gender in the Buddhist diaspora; Images of Enlightenment; *Dharma* and crosscultural communication; dialogue across cultures: links and common ground; *Bhikshuni Vinaya* and full ordination for women; *Sangha* or lay: what is the Buddhist way; and translating the *Dharma*: Buddhism, multiculturalism, and language. The program followed the same format as that in Nepal, with the balance of presentations weighted towards the scholarly.

In contrast to the unnamed private individuals who helped underwrite the costs of the Nepal conference,(8) the Malaysian program listed nine sponsors additional to Sakyadhita.(9) The increase in financial sponsorship from Nepal in 2000 to Malaysia in 2006 was evident in the translation services provided. In Nepal translation services were largely limited to one overworked Tibetan translator. The Malaysian conference had an active business centre with full Internet access where translators worked on translating the papers into Chinese, English and Tibetan. Headsets were available so people could hear the translations. Many events were also filmed.

Some of these differences can be accounted for by the rural setting of Lumbini and the urban setting of Kuala Lumpur and the differing standards of living in the two countries. Still, the organizers of the ninth conference had more resources available to them than those of the sixth. Increased sponsorship indicates awareness of Sakyadhita and a willingness from other organizations to support its work. However, as the organization is largely dependent upon outside funds, external sponsorship adds another level of stakeholders investing in the social capital generated by the international conferences. Such sponsorship could influence the choice of venues, themes and indeed the purposes of the gatherings.

#### Conference Attendees

According to organizers, over 300 people attended the 2000 conference, with about 500 attending the 2006.(10) Participants at the Nepal conference came from about twenty-four countries with the largest numbers from the United States, India and Australia .(11) They largely identified themselves as laywomen and the majority listed themselves as Vajrayana/Tibetan with Theravada being the second choice by a small margin. A few identified as

Chinese, Ambedkarite or Zen. Some identified as “non-denominational” (combining several streams of Buddhism) and a few had attended due to an inter-faith connection.(12)

Participants in Malaysia generally conformed to this profile, with a few differences. The countries represented were slightly larger (twenty-five as opposed to twenty-four)(13) and more women identified themselves with the Theravada tradition than the Vajrayana/Tibetan. The proportion of Ambedkarite, Zen and non-denominational was about the same. Women at the Malaysian conference ranged in age from 29-62 with the largest number being in their fifties. This demographic is somewhat older than at the Nepal conference where the largest number of women were in their forties.(14) One woman at the Malaysian conference listed herself as a *mae chi*. As was the case in Nepal, women who attended the conference in Malaysia were well-educated and included professionals, management and social service workers.

The 2006 conference was not the first for several of the women who had come from outside of Malaysia to attend. Indeed, one of the women attending the conference had also been to Nepal six years earlier and subsequently to Taiwan. She has maintained some of the relationships made at that conference, including visits. Another had been to Nepal, Cambodia and Malaysia. Three had been to Korea in 1995, one to Cambodia and one to the conference in the United States in 1998. Nonetheless, the conference in Malaysia was a first conference for half the women surveyed; in Nepal the figure was 65 percent.(15) Only half the respondents at both conferences had been associated with Sakyadhita for more than a year.(16) Anecdotal evidence suggests that membership in Sakyadhita arose from wanting to attend a conference that they had heard about in a variety of ways: from friends,

local Buddhist societies, journal publications, invitation or brochure, website, word of mouth or from personal interaction with one of the organizers.

Discussion with participants who had attended both the Nepal and Malaysia conferences suggests that participation in Sakyadhita is not only spurred by the desire to attend a conference but maintained by it. The level and type of participation, however, varies. Ongoing research indicates that individual donations to Sakyadhita tend to be sporadic and fairly modest, with a small number of women especially active during conference planning and preparation. As acts both of volunteerism and *dana*, a means of engendering selfless generosity, they donate the labor and services needed for the large-scale undertakings of the international conferences. The work of an even smaller core of individuals committed to Sakyadhita's purposes has sustained the organization in the twenty years since its inception.

#### Reasons for Attendance

Women cited a variety of reasons for attending these conferences; most in fact had more than one reason for attending.<sup>(17)</sup> Some presenters, for example, cited academic, "research" and personal, "spiritual growth" as reasons for participating. Common reasons given for attending the conference in Nepal included: the international make-up of the conference, its combination of different streams of Buddhism, laity and nuns; support for the improvement of living conditions, educational access, and full ordination for Buddhist women; and an interest in the theme of the conference and its venue, Lumbini.<sup>(18)</sup>

Reasons given for attending the conference in Malaysia were similar: the international aspect of the conference

and the opportunity to connect, or reconnect, with Buddhist women from other cultures; “to support the objectives of the nuns,” and to learn more about the different streams of Buddhist practice. Intertwined with this question was the more emotive one concerning what it meant to the respondent to have been at a conference. The most common response to this question was that they had benefited from meeting new people and networking, and sharing their ideas and experiences with others. One nun who works in rural Burma and who attended the Malaysian conference commented, “Having been living quite secluded in Burma, I appreciated [the opportunity] to connect to a larger (worldwide) *sangha*.”

#### The Function of the Conferences

During one of the open discussions at the 2006 conference, a Malaysian laywoman observed that she did not know what Sakyadhita actually did except offer Western female scholars the chance to build their careers by presenting papers. In contrast, a scholar who had attended a few conferences stated that she thought the quality of the presentations was better than on previous occasions. These comments provide some insight into the tension that emerges between participants as to the central purpose of the conferences. Three agendas emerge: the conferences should be a scholarly venue; they should provide forums for discussion and networking that will result in projects and programs in specific areas, especially the education and training of young nuns; and they should serve as a means of promoting cross-cultural Buddhist practice. Tension as to which agenda is primary is longstanding and, in our opinion, reflects the different purposes of an organization that bridges educational and practical endeavours. In Malaysia, as in Nepal, organizers tried to reduce this tension through informal workshops

that focused on listening, leadership skills and meditation workshops. Given that the majority of the day was devoted to presentations, many of which were academic, and there was at least one workshop on *vinaya* issues, it is not surprising that some were dissatisfied with the program. There was also a concern expressed that the “nuns’ issue” took up too much of the program.

#### Sakyadhita’s Objectives: Conference Participants’ Comments (Malaysia)

Whether members of Sakyadhita or not, respondents at the Malaysian Conference were very familiar with the organization’s objectives when asked to comment on Sakyadhita’s work. Most respondents felt that Sakyadhita had made concrete progress in two areas. One was increased access to education for all Buddhist women and improved facilities for the training of Buddhist nuns; the other, full ordination in the Tibetan and Theravada Buddhist traditions. There was some difference of opinion on the objective of building an international, inter-cultural network of Buddhist women across the various Buddhist traditions.

Several projects devoted to the improvement of Buddhist women, both lay and ordained have been instituted since 1987. The Jamyang Foundation, founded by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, has six educational projects for Buddhist women in the Himalayan region, Sakyadhita Sri Lanka founders Ranjani de Silva and Dr Kusuma Devendra (now Bhikkuni Kusuma) established the Sakyadhita Training and Meditation Centre, and Sakyadhita branches in Europe, initially represented by another Sakyadhita International founder, Jampa Tsedron, support several nuns’ education projects. Recently, Sakyadhita in Europe has established a website linking the French, German and British branches of Sakyadhita

(<http://www.sakyadhita-europe.org/EN/index.php>) The international conferences appear to act as catalysts for change. After the Lumbini conference one of the presenters was invited by the Ladakhi nuns to lecture on women's health issues; and after the fifth conference in Cambodia, the Cambodian government committed itself to increased spending in women's health and education.(19)

The prime movers for the projects noted above have been primarily senior nuns or laywomen who have been active in the organization for some time. The extent to which the conferences spark smaller, local endeavors is yet to be determined. Further, the cost of these projects necessitates outside funding and ongoing donations from individuals. The Jamyang Choling Institute receives funding from the Office of the Dalai Lama and the Department of Religion and Culture, Tibetan Government-in Exile and the Sakyadhita Training and Meditation Centre in Sri Lanka receives funding from the Heinrich Böll Foundation. Given this, long term sustainability may be an issue in the future.

Respondents polled at the Malaysian conference were divided about the objective of establishing a worldwide network of communication between Buddhist women. Some felt this had been accomplished and pointed to the non-sectarian and multi-ethnic component of the conference; others felt there was still much to do in this area. There are now several Sakyadhita websites and newsletters and the availability of e-mail worldwide has stimulated interaction between Buddhist women. How intercultural that interaction is, is not quite as clear. English remains the main language of the organization at the international level, an impediment to Buddhist women who have not had access to English-language training. And, while some of the Western nuns, scholars, and laywomen have facility in one or more Asian

languages, most Western women involved in Sakyadhita do not. E-mail interaction between Asian women who are not English speakers is undetermined to date and even less is known about communication between Asian and non-Asian women in languages other than English.

#### Ordination

All of the respondents in Malaysia mentioned the increased numbers of women who were now considering ordination as nuns and there does appear to be progress in this area as well. The need for women to have access to full ordination in the Theravada and Tibetan traditions has been a major focus of Sakyadhita from the beginning. Karma Lekshe Tsomo and Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (now *Bhikshuni* Dhammananda), both of whom were founders of Sakyadhita have been extremely active on this front. While novice ordination (taking of the ten precepts) has been available in the Theravada tradition in Sri Lanka, until recently full ordination has not been available as it requires ten fully ordained nuns (*bhikkhunî*) and ten fully ordained monks (*bhikkhu*). While the *bhikkhu sangha* has been reinstated once and revitalized once historically in Sri Lanka, the *bhikkhunî sangha* died out around the eleventh century.(20) The traditional argument by those opposed to the reinstatement of full ordination is that it must wait until the Buddha of the future, Maitreya, establishes it again. Many senior Theravadin monks have rejected the full ordination available in the Chinese tradition because that is a Mahayana lineage, although the *vinaya* (monastic discipline) used is Dharmagupta, a cousin school of the Theravada.(21)

The tide has changed on this issue in Sri Lanka and there is evidence that Sakyadhita conferences may have contributed significantly to this change, putting pressure on senior monks to support the reinstatement of full ordination.(22) When Dr Kusuma Devendra and Ranjani

de Silva organized a Sakyadhita conference in Colombo in 1993 the Supreme Advisory Council of the Ministry of Buddhist Affairs, whose permission was required to hold the conference, insisted that there should be no discussion of the full ordination issue as it would raise “false hopes.”(23) The Sakyadhita Training and Meditation Centre has played a major role in transforming such “false hopes” into reality. Candidates for ordination are carefully chosen and secular study, social work and health care, is encouraged along with traditional Buddhist studies.

Some senior monks have given their support to reviving the *bhikkhunī sangha*. The Deputy Chief of the Amarapura sect, Talale Dhammaloka, led a group of monks, nuns, and ordinands to Taiwan for an ordination ceremony in 1998.(24) The new *bhikkhunīs* were concerned about protests at the airport on their return but were instead met by a large group of supporters who offered *dana* (gifts) and accompanied them to the villages.(25) Nuns are now getting respect in the villages for their work with the ill and elderly.(26) Likewise, in conjunction with initiatives by the Bhikkhuni Training Center, leadership of the Dambulla Syamopali Sect has organized ordination for *bhikkhunīs* regularly since 1998.(27) This work towards gaining recognition of full ordination for Theravadin nuns has not, however, been without backlash, as letters and accounts citing monastic opposition to nuns’ ordination continue to circulate. One account even reports monks warning laypeople that “supporting the *bhikkhuni sangha* will lead them to hell.”(28)

As an umbrella organization for Buddhist women, Sakyadhita offers support for women in Theravadin communities to continue their efforts to work towards the reinstatement of *bhikkhunīs* ordination in Thailand and Burma. But, without the hard work done by women on the

ground in these communities, no gains could be made. As *Yasodhara*, the newsletter published by Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (now Bhikkhuni Dhammananda), documents, the gains that have resulted have been due to the combination of local and international efforts by dedicated individuals. The circulation of knowledge about this work, effected by not only the large conferences organized by Sakyadhita, but also by newsletters such as *Yasodhara*, helps to encourage others to continue their efforts.

#### Nuns Orders in Tibetan Traditions

The other Buddhist tradition in which full ordination has not been available is the Tibetan. The *bhikkhuni sangha* appears never to have reached Tibet. The tradition has, however, provided novice ordination for women. Within the past thirty years women ordained as novices within the Tibetan tradition have been able to receive full (*bhikkhuni*) ordination administered by *bhikkhuni* of Chinese lineage (Dharmagupta *vinaya*). The conditions of women practitioners have always been much more difficult than that of monks. Karma Lekshe Tsomo notes the many obstacles that Tibetan nuns face: poor access to teachers, inadequate educational facilities and lack of financial support. Because they have not had access to education in the highly valued scholar-monk tradition, they have had few or no resources allocated for them. Instead, their practice has consisted primarily in devotional activities, prayers and rituals that are time consuming but bring little financial support.(29) And of course, resistance on the part of some monks has hindered advancement in the education of nuns. One example given by Tsomo is the case of Tsering Tashi, a scholar-monk who left retreat in order to teach the nuns at Yangchen Choling Monastery in Spiti. Although matters

appear to have been progressing well, Tsering Tashi was ordered to stop teaching and return to his home monastery. Two years later, risking a loss of financial support, he resigned from his monastery and returned to teach philosophy to the nuns.<sup>(30)</sup> As one woman at the Malaysia conference observed, “it will be a very slow process without [the] support of monks and community.”

The Dalai Lama has encouraged female novices to take full ordination and he has repeatedly stated that such *bhikkhunî* are accepted as full members of the monastic community. There is a distinction however, between male and female ordinations. Like the Theravada nuns, the *vinaya* in which Tibetan *bhikkhunî* have been ordained is the Dharmagupta, the *vinaya* of Chinese monastics. Tibetan monks are ordained with the Mulasarvastivada *vinaya*. Several senior nuns involved with Sakyadhita would like to see this changed. There has been considerable research on this issue over the years and at least one report on the issue presented to a monastic council. At the Malaysian conference one very senior Tibetan nun expressed frustration at the fact that many monks had not read the report on female ordination that had been submitted to them prior to a meeting to discuss this issue in 2006.

### *Mae Chee*

The conference in Malaysia also saw some discussion of the *mae chee*. These Thai women, like the *dasa sil matavo* of Sri Lanka and the Tibetan *ani*, are women who undertake religious practice but are not fully ordained nuns. *Mae chee* take eight vows, the others ten. Many people (both lay and ordained) do not accept these women as novice nuns but as laywomen wearing robes. Their living circumstances are generally poor as donations to them are not considered to produce as much

merit as giving to monks. They are frequently older, poorly educated women who may live at a temple, cooking and cleaning for the resident monk. Sakyadhita has always supported ordination for these women as an important step in improving the lot of Asian Buddhist women in general. Their argument is that the increased social status of being fully ordained will bring increased finances and therefore increased opportunities for education in Buddhism and practice of the tradition.(31) Proponents of full ordination argue that the “words of the Buddha” provide a clear statement of equality in spiritual matters between men and women and that it is time the tradition lived up to the founder’s words.(32)

Not all *mae chee*, however, want full ordination. Some accept the Maitreya argument; others feel their lack of ordination does not affect their religious practice; others reject full ordination for themselves as they see it as a loss of independence because they would come under the supervision of monks.(33) The Malaysian conference included a presentation on the “Buddhist Women at the Wat Paknam Temple in Bangkok” by Mae Chee Amphai Tansomboon, currently executive officer and student advisor of the International Program at Mahaculalongkorn University. She described how *mae chees* at Wat Praknam differ from the average in that they are ordained at an early age and have opportunities for meditation, social service and higher education that are not available generally.(34) She discussed the work she and others have done to better the conditions for *mae chee* and to provide support for young women who decide early on a religious life.

The questions that followed the presentation however, focused on why Mae Chee Tansomboon chose not to be ordained. Her argument, that in Thai culture it was important for a man to be fully ordained but not a woman, was soundly rejected by the lay questioner; her further

comment that she did not feel ordination necessary in her case brought another to suggest that it was better for all women if *mae chee* were ordained. While these lay women were focused on the ordination issue, the monastic women at the conference were quite supportive of the work being done in Thailand. Indeed, the organizers had invited Mae Chee Tansombom to share her experience with others. Although Sakyadhita has long campaigned for full ordination for all Buddhist spiritual women (*maecheei*), the recognition given to the work by women such as Mae Chee Tansombom indicates heightened sensitivity to the decisions made by Buddhist women from a variety of cultural backgrounds and a broader perspective on the process of raising the status and living conditions of Asian practitioners.

Nonetheless, support for monastic women remains a central purpose of Sakyadhita. This is one of the primary reasons for holding the conferences in Asia; it makes it easier for Asian nuns to attend. Many receive sponsorship to attend the conferences, and believe themselves to be “sent” by a benefactor, a comment made by one nun in Nepal. A frequently given reason for sponsoring a nun, according to Lekshe Tsomo, is to provide her with a broader perspective on the Buddhist tradition and to recognize the importance of nuns to the tradition. This was certainly true for Bhikkhuni Dhammavati, the head of a nunnery in Kathmandu and founder of the Gautami nunnery in Lumbini. Prior to attending a Sakyadhita conference she did not believe in the full ordination of women nor did she value secular education for her nuns. She changed her mind on both issues and with the contacts she made at the conference she was able to make arrangements to have some nuns study abroad.(35)

Activity on ordination since the 2006 conference

Jampa Tsedron, one of the founders of Sakyadhita International and representative in Europe for several years, was one of the prime organizers (along with Dr Thea Mohr) of an historic congress of *vinaya* scholars and senior monks and nuns held in Hamburg, Germany (June 2007). While not specifically billed as a Sakyadhita event, the Congress, convened at the request of the Dalai Lama, was largely organized and staffed by Sakyadhita members. The impetus for the Congress was to further the cause of complete ordination within the Tibetan tradition, a central Sakyadhita objective.

The question of what constitutes full ordination is technically complex. As noted above, the Dalai Lama has for some time encouraged nuns to take full ordination in Taiwan (36) and he stresses that nuns who do so are considered to be fully ordained. Regardless, the *vinaya* in which nuns are ordained is the *Dharmagupta* and monks are ordained within the *Mulasarvastivadin vinaya*. They may be fully ordained but some have the sense that the ordination is not fully recognized within the Tibetan tradition. Thus, the congress was expected to make a resolution calling for the ordination of women in the Tibetan tradition and to recommend the *vinaya* under which this would occur. (37)

The congress attracted nearly 400 people for the first two days and about 1200 for the third day in which the Dalai Lama was a participant. (38) Following numerous presentations on the technical issue, the historical issue and the social implications of complete ordination for Tibetan nuns, there was consensus that complete ordination was both possible and desirable. A working committee of six monks and eight nuns, including several nuns historically or currently active in Sakyadhita, was struck to formulate a proposal for presentation to the Dalai Lama on the concluding day of the conference.

The intense and extensive proceedings over the first two days of the congress culminated in a sense of heightened anticipation by the third day. It became clear early on that the hoped-for decision on the part of the Dalai Lama would not be forthcoming. The working committee presented its conclusions and suggested their preferred option for ordination that senior nuns ordained in the *Dharmagupta vinaya* be given the *Mulasarvastivadin vinaya* by the monks. Future nuns could then be ordained in the *Mulasarvastivadin vinaya* by a full complement of monks and nuns. Although this was the preferred option, the Committee also acknowledged the recommendation of the Tibetan government-in-exile's Department of Religious Affairs of single ordination by Tibetan monks and dual by monks and Chinese *Bhikshunis*.<sup>(39)</sup> The Dalai Lama responded that while he would make a strong declaration of support, he could not make such decisions on his own but required *sangha* approval.

He also made reference, as he had on previous occasions, to the "international *sangha*," an odd reference that was commented on by at least one presenter. The various traditions in Buddhism have not sought each others' agreement in these matters historically. Why is it necessary to have international agreement now for the Tibetan tradition to make decisions regarding its ordination of nuns? Another oddity was the Dalai Lama's suggestion that the Western nuns have the *vinaya* translated into Tibetan and teach it to the nuns in India for regular use. When asked to clarify precisely which *vinaya*, *Dharmagupta* or *Mulasarvastivadin*, he initially said they were the same but when later pressed, he responded that it should be the *Dharmagupta vinaya* as that is the *vinaya* under which the nuns had been ordained.<sup>(40)</sup> This was certainly not the transition organizers had hoped for, although the strategy seems to be designed to accustom monks to the idea that nuns are full monastic participants.

Perhaps sensing the disappointment of the organizers and presenters, he met with several of them the next morning.<sup>(41)</sup> He suggested they secure endorsements from the Thai and Burmese Sangharaja and invited the “international *Sangha*” to meet with the Tibetan *Sangha* in the winter of 2008. This assumes that there is an international *sangha*. Had the Theravadin nuns had the endorsements of their Sangharajas, the conference in Hamburg would have not been as important for them as they were clearly hoping a decision from Tibet would help their cause.

The experience of the 2007 Hamburg conference tempers the optimism expressed by many women at the 2006 Malaysian conference who felt Sakyadhita was on its way to seeing institution (Tibetan) or restitution (Theravada) of the full ordination of women. Like the Venerable Tenzin Palmo who, when asked at Hamburg if she was disappointed, responded “I wasn’t expecting much,” some women within Sakyadhita are not yet convinced that the Buddhist *sangha* and Buddhist society in general are ready to support complete ordination.

#### The Challenges Sakyadhita Faces

Our conclusion after attending the conferences in Nepal and Malaysia and the follow-up surveys and interviews, was that the gatherings provide a microcosm of the stresses and strains as well as the accomplishments of Sakyadhita. The 1987 conference was intended to address issues pertaining primarily to ordained women but participants clearly expressed a desire for a “sisterhood” of all Buddhist women.<sup>(42)</sup> Sakyadhita’s mission—seeking to address the concerns of both lay and ordained women—poses some inherent problems, as do its global aspirations. One respondent in Nepal felt that the presentations were too Western and lay oriented for

the large number of nuns present. She would have liked to have had more presentations in which the nuns were able to “share the strength of their practice.” That comment was echoed in Malaysia in the complaint about the number of academic presentations. And, in addition to the controversy generated by Mae Chee Tansomboom’s presentation, several women complained that the “nuns’ issue” took up too much of the program.

While recent conferences such as the one in Malaysia were well funded, this too is not without difficulty. It gives the appearance that Sakyadhita is a large organization with solid financial resources. Thus, to note the comment of the laywoman above, it should “do” things with its resources, not just hold conferences. But financing of the organization continues to be an ongoing challenge. Convening conferences has become easier with the participation of several large Buddhist organizations such as the sponsors of the Malaysian conference, but it is still a volunteer organization. As with all volunteer organizations, shortage of labor and burnout are common. At the conference in Lumbini for example, translators for several language groups failed to materialize, and many Asian nuns could not fully benefit from the workshops and sessions. One Western participant stated that the effect was to make it seem as if the Asian nuns were “on display” for the Western lay women. The Malaysian conference had excellent facilities and an abundance of well-organized volunteers. This highlights the increased support for Sakyadhita and its objectives within the broader Buddhist community but also indicates its dependence on those who host such conferences. As long as the primary organizers are nuns and their supporters, the “nuns’ issues” will remain a top priority. Should other agendas demand more attention however, there is a danger that financial support and volunteer dedication may soften.

The major role taken by large Buddhist organizations has enhanced the intercultural composition of the conferences. Buddhist organizations, especially the Taiwan based, are largely run by well-educated nuns and laywomen. Their energetic and efficient organization served to highlight the presence of Asian women and their agency in dealing with affairs of concern to them. This, in turn, lessened the perception, evident in Nepal, that there was too much Western influence.

One of the primary functions of the conferences is to bring people together to discuss issues and to act as a catalyst for activism on a more local level. This has occurred on numerous occasions and at the Malaysian conference there were several tables devoted to displays about projects in various areas. Beneath the slogan “Think globally, act locally,” is an increasing shift in the structure of the organization and a recognition that specifically local needs cannot be subsumed under a universal mandate.<sup>(43)</sup> At the same time, the profile of Sakyadhita as a transnational organization can add legitimacy to local projects and enhance the public profile of women’s issues. Local chapters may be able to facilitate sustained media coverage of events and issues to supplement the sporadic coverage allotted to conferences. The organization is in the process of creating a guide for those who may wish to start a local branch of Sakyadhita.<sup>(44)</sup> The guidebook will likely provide a clearer articulation of Sakyadhita as an umbrella organization.

The conferences give Buddhist women a sense of global identity as they learn about Buddhism around the world. As one Malaysian organizer noted, the conference “helped women from different countries to meet and contribute their work with their community.” It is also of great help to nuns who may live in isolated areas or who do not have a sense that they are an important part of their

religious tradition. Again from Malaysia, “Bringing women together to share knowledge and confidence that they can expect ‘more’ from their tradition.” The conferences bring prominence to women’s issues and the issue of ordination. This can, however, be somewhat episodic—a brief flurry of activity and press coverage. Sustained pressure is required to advance Sakyadhita’s objectives. In the words of one attendee in 2006, “Women are still in the process of becoming empowered and the organization lacks public prominence.”

An ongoing issue that may test the intercultural composition of Sakyadhita is that of the subsidization of Asian nuns to enable them to attend the conferences. Western nuns only occasionally have sponsors (both Nepal and Malaysia saw a few Western nuns attending because of sponsorship), and many cannot afford to travel to Asia where the conferences are generally held. In Asia providing for monks and nuns is a means whereby laity can attain merit for a better rebirth, so giving to monks and nuns is expected. The comment above by the Asian nun that she had been “sent” to the conference by her benefactor is an example. Western laity are not familiar with the practice of direct giving to support religious. Following a western religious model of gifting, they give to the temple (the “church”) which then provides for the needs of their monastics. In addition, many Western laity are not supportive of “making merit,” seeing it as a magical or superstitious part of folk Buddhism. (45)

At the Malaysian conference, the question of subsidization opened into general discussion regarding financial support of nuns. Some nuns felt that working in a paid position was not in accordance with *vinaya* rules and that as nuns they should be focusing on religious practice. Other nuns, at least two of whom were engaged in professional work, felt it was both financially necessary and an acceptable accommodation to

Buddhism as practiced in the West. The nuns primarily engaged in this discussion were Western and the discussion, as well as one comment made by a Western laywoman concerning aid as a means of prolonging the dependence of Asian nuns, reflects cultural differences.

The question of financial aid is a serious and growing issue. In North America, monastics are few and spread out over a large geographic area. There is no chapter of Sakyadhita in either the United States or Canada, nor is there any interdenominational monastic organization that might deal with this issue. Failure to deal with this issue may result in a serious division between Asian and Western monastics, and it may also result in a loss of monastic presence in the West.

### Conclusions

In 1987 Sakyadhita set out an ambitious set of objectives. Re-institution or establishment of the *bhikshuni* ordination where it did not exist; working for improvements in education and training for Buddhist women; establishing an intercultural network of Buddhist women, and fostering good relations between the various Buddhist traditions were four major objectives. The central means of achieving these objectives has been to mount a series of nine international conferences where women could meet, network, learn about other Buddhist traditions and their connection to a worldwide *sangha*. A consideration of the activities of two of these conferences, 2000 in Nepal and 2006 in Malaysia, indicates that although not without difficulties and tensions, Sakyadhita appears to be sustaining its mission.

There has been progress on the reinstatement of full ordination in the Theravada tradition, particularly in Sri Lanka. This is in large part due to the strong local

Sakyadhita chapter headed by Ranjani de Silva, a long time member of Sakyadhita. Thailand, whose clergy is quite conservative, will prove to be more difficult, although gains continue to be made.<sup>(46)</sup> Central to the drive for full ordination in Thailand is Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (now Bhikkhuni Dhammananda) who was one of Sakyadhita's founders.<sup>(47)</sup> And, while there is not yet *bhikshuni* ordination completely within the parameters of Tibetan monastic tradition, efforts continue.

Although the results of the Hamburg conference must have seemed disappointing to Tibetan Buddhist nuns, the placing of full and traditionally complete ordination at the forefront of issues in Buddhism by Sakyadhita has focused attention on the concern. Scholars, both male and female have been studying the various *vinayas* in an attempt to discover similarities and differences <sup>(48)</sup> as a prelude to establishing the discipline under which ordination would be most appropriate. Their arguments may erode longstanding but unexamined objections. Not only have Sakyadhita's efforts spawned this research but several of its founders, Karma Lekshe Tsomo and Jampa Tsedron to mention two, were directly responsible for convening the congress in Germany and have a close association with the Dalai Lama. Despite his assertion that he is only one monk, his public presence can bring additional pressure on the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchy to deal with the ordination issue.

Education and facilities are improving for Buddhist women in Asia. Projects directly instituted by Sakyadhita and those inspired by Sakyadhita conferences, are providing education, training and health education for both nuns and laywomen throughout the Himalayan region and coordinating with other organizations in Thailand, Sri Lanka and India. Knowledge of Sakyadhita and its objectives has grown between the time of the two

conferences profiled evidenced by the far greater awareness expressed by participants at the Malaysian conference. The overall numbers of women attending the conferences has increased over the last six years, as has the presence and agency of Asian women, both lay and ordained. Conversation with participants indicates that many do stay in touch and encourage others to attend conferences. Sakyadhita conferences have also spurred an ecumenical spirit and inter-cultural curiosity. Asian women were very interested in the practice of Buddhism in the West and were interested in comparing notes about Buddhist practice across traditions. These events and their outcomes do amount to a network of Buddhist women worldwide and each conference adds to that network.

Many challenges remain. While the foundation of a universal *bhikshuni sangha* appears to be a realistic possibility over time, the question of financial resources remains. Nuns receive far less financial support than monks worldwide. This will have to change if equality of spiritual opportunity is to be more than a false promise. Related to this is the question of whether or not nuns can engage in work, professional or otherwise, in order to support themselves. To date, nuns and their teachers appear to be divided on this. The issues of ordination and financial resources are painful and potentially divisive, but must be faced in the spirit of cooperative work.

The educational, health and training programs stimulated directly or indirectly by Sakyadhita will require sustained financing to maintain; making these projects self-sustaining is not feasible at present. Stable finances are likewise necessary to establish local units, and to organize and mount conferences. Should the organization grow, it would require some paid staff and an operating budget. Our surveys indicate that this simply cannot be done by means of donations. Membership in Sakyadhita

is closely tied to the conferences; women take out a membership prior to registering. They tend to send little, or no, money to the organization in between. And, while we spoke to women in both Nepal and Malaysia who attended several conferences, most of them did not participate in any Sakyadhita volunteer work at those conferences or in between. Reliance on unstable outside finances or major contributors who may have their own agendas could pose future problems.

In addition, Sakyadhita faces organizational challenges. Nonetheless, regardless of this and other future challenges, it is fair to say that in the twenty years since its founding Sakyadhita has come a long way. Recently, Karma Lekshe Tsomo (President) and Christie Yu-ling Chang (Vice-President) of Sakyadhita toured parts of Asia to see how the women's movement was progressing. They began in Thailand where the dean and students of Mahaculalongkorn University requested an update on the ordination issue, attended the Malaysian conference, referred to in the Malaysian press as "a breakthrough in inter-cultural, inter-religious dialogue, with women in the vanguard,"(49) on to Vietnam which will be the site of the 2010 conference and finally to Bodh Gaya, the site of the first. While there, Sakyadhita was offered land to build the only international Buddhist women's center in the midst of many monasteries, to be named the Sanghamitta Foundation.(50)

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(1) Sakyadhita's founding statement.

<http://www.sakyadhita.org/index.html#sakwho>. These objectives were revised in 2004.

(2) We attended the Sixth International Sakyadhita conference held in Lumbini, Nepal, in February 2000,

meeting with a wide variety of women and describing our research. Upon our return, we surveyed the attendees of the conference (conducting follow-up interviews with some) concerning their participation, their understanding of the goals and accomplishments of Sakyadhita, its strengths and limitations and their vision of it for the future. The analysis of those attending the Nepal conference was published, Kay Koppedraayer and Mavis Fenn, "Sakyadhita: Buddhist Women in a Transnational Forum," *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies* #2 (2006), pp. 143-181). In 2006 Fenn attended the ninth international conference in Kuala Lumpur, surveying and talking with presenters and attendees, some of whom had also attended the 2000 conference in Nepal. A small number of participants were surveyed at the conference (12) and a follow up mailing produced a few more surveys (6).

(3) See Karma Lekshe Tsomo (ed.), *Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion 1988), 32.

(4) *Ibid.*, 31.

(5) The conferences are Bodh Gaya, India, 1987; Bangkok, Thailand, 1992; Sri Lanka, 1993; Ladakh, India, 1995; Phom Penh, Cambodia, 1998; Lumbini, Nepal, 2000; Taipei, Taiwan 2002; Seoul Korea, 2004, and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2006. The North American conference on Buddhist women was held at Pitzer College, California in 1998 and the European conference on Buddhist Women was held in Cologne, Germany, 2000.

(6) <http://www.sakyadhita.org>. The website <<http://www.sakyadhita.org>> contains back issues of the newsletter starting at the second issue. Publications include Karma Lekshe Tsomo (ed), *Sakyadhita:*

*Daughters of the Buddha* (Ithaca, New York. Snow Lion, 1988); *Buddhism Through American Women's Eyes* (Ithaca, New York. Snow Lion, 1995); *Innovative Women: Swimming Against the Stream* (Surrey, U.K.: Curzon, 2000); *Buddhist Women Across Cultures: Realizations* (Albany, NY.: SUNY, 1999); *Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, Challenges, and Achievement* (Albany, NY.:SUNY, 2004) .

(7) Bhikshuni Jampa Tsedron, "Ninth Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women in Malaysia" *Sakyadhita:International Association of Buddhist Women* 15.2 no.2 (Winter 2006)

(8) Lekshe Tsomo, personal communication.

(9) Main organizers: Buddhist Maha Vihara, Malaysian Buddhist Society; co-organizers: Buddhist Gem Fellowship, Buddhist Light International Association, Buddhist Missionary Society Malaysia, Jatavana Monastery, Than Hsiang Temple, Vajrayana Buddhist Council of Malaysia and the Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia.

(10) Information provided by Sakyadhita International.

(11) Koppedrayar and Fenn: 2006, 147.

(12) Ibid., 149.

(13) Sakyadhita newsletter, *Sakyadhita: International Association of Buddhist Women* .15.2 no.2 (Winter 2006) and personal observation.

(14) Participant profiles of women who attended the Nepal conference can be found in Koppedrayar and Fenn, 2006: . 148-150.

(15) Koppedrayar and Fenn: 2006.

(16) Ibid., 151

(17) Statistics for Nepal can be found in Koppedrayar and Fenn: 2006, 153.

(18) Ibid.

(19) This information was conveyed to Fenn in a conversation with one of the organizers of the Cambodian conference. There are several organizations that work with NGOs concerning religious education. One of these is the Association of Nuns and Lay Women (est.1995) that works with the Heinrich Böll Foundation on education projects. It has received the support of the Supreme Patriarch and the Queen of Cambodia which has given it legitimacy. <http://hbfasia.org/southeastasia/thailand/projects/anlwc.htm>.

(20) Nancy Barnes, "Buddhist Women and the Nuns' Order in Asia," in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, eds. (New York: SUNY, 1996), 263.

(21) Bhikshuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "Prospects for an International Bhikshunī Sangha," in Tsomo: 1988, 237

(22) A good survey on this can be found in Ranjani De Silva, "Reclaiming the Robe: Reviving the Bhikkhunī Order in Sri Lanka," in Tsomo: 2004

(23) Ibid. 125.

(24) Ibid.

(25) Ibid., 129. For a firsthand account of the proceedings by an ordinand see Charlotte Sudhamma Bhikkhuni "A Radiance of Nuns," [www.dharma.org/ij/archives/2003a/radiance.htm](http://www.dharma.org/ij/archives/2003a/radiance.htm).

(26) "Reclaiming the Robe," Tsomo: 2004, 131.

(27) Ven. Dhammananda (Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh), "Ordination in Dambulla, 2007. Report from Sri Lanka," *Yasodhara: Newsletter on International Buddhist Women's Activities*, vol. 23/4 (no. 92) , July-September 2007: 6-7.

(28) Ven. Dhammananda (Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh), "Theravada Bhikkunis in Indonesia," *Yasodhara: Newsletter on International Buddhist Women's Activities*, vol. 23/4 (no. 92) , July-September 2007: 18.

(29) Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "Family, Monastery, and Gender Justice: Reenvisioning Buddhist Institutions." In Tsomo: 2004, p. 15. Because women are considered 'lesser' than males in the karmic hierarchy, giving to them produces less merit. The question of devotional practice is somewhat more complicated. While some Western and Western educated women see this as a restriction and envision more socially active nuns, many of those who are not fully ordained do not share this vision. "Buddhist Women and the Nuns' Order in Asia," p. 279. See also Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, "The Role of Women in Buddhism," In Tsomo:1988, 230-31.

(30) Tsomo: 1999, 185

(31) The example here is the Taiwanese nuns who are well-educated and involved with social service. They are, however, able to accommodate other vocations. See Barnes in King and Queen: 1996

(32) While the narrative of the founding of the female *sangha* shows ambivalence on the part of the Buddha, he affirms the spiritual equality of women. *Cullavagga X*.

(33) Barnes in King and Queen: 1996, 265.

(34) Ninth Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women, Program, 35-40.

(35) Sarah Levine, "Dharma Education for Women," Tsomo: 2004, 148 and endnote 31.

(36) In order to establish a *bhiksuni* lineage in the Tibetan tradition, the various *vinayas* must be examined, especially on the manner in which the precepts are administered. According to the Dalai Lama this is currently being researched by the Tibetans. "Opening Speech of His Holiness The Dalai Lama," in Tsomo: 1988, 44. For more details on this matter see "An Interview With His Holiness The Dalai Lama," also in Tsomo: 1988, 267-76.

(37) <http://www.sakyadhita.org>;  
<http://www.sakyadhita-srilanka.org>;  
<http://www.sakyadhita-europe.org>;  
<http://www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org> Accessed July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007. As well as being a founder of Sakyadhita International and Sakyadhita Sri Lanka, Ranjani de Silva also established the All Ceylon Women's Buddhist Congress and was president of Sakyadhita International from 1995 to 2000.

(38) <http://www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org/index.php?id=143> (Feb.21, 2008). See also Sri Dhammanada (Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilasingh), "Report from Hamburg Congress, July 2007," *Yasodhara* Vol. 23/4 (no. 92) July-September 2007: 13-16.

(39) Sri Dhammanada (Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilasingh), "Report from Hamburg Congress": 14.

(40) *Ibid.*, 15, 16.

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[http://thaibhikkhunis.org/eng/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=It](http://thaibhikkhunis.org/eng/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=It)

(42) Tsomo: 1988, p. 36.

(43) Koppedrayer and Fenn: 2006, p. 175.

(44) Sakyadhita newsletter, *Sakyadhita: International Association of Buddhist Women* 15.2, no.2 (Winter 2006).

(45) No one objected to subsidizing Asian nuns in order to dramatize their presence, agency and to provide them with a transnational view, and support was expressed for having the conferences in Asia so as to make sponsoring them more affordable but some Western nuns felt that they should be eligible for some subsidy as well. They felt, correctly, that more Western nuns would attend if there were financial assistance.

(46) Karma Lekshe Tsomo “Sakyadhita Pilgrimage in Asia: On the Trail of the Buddhist Women’s Network,” *Nova Religio* 10 no. 3 (Feb. 2007): 102-117.

(47) In a recent piece in *Yasodhara*, the newsletter she publishes, Ven Dhammananda (Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilasingh) writes of her early work with Sakyadhita, taking note of how the Bodhgaya gathering that led to Sakyadhita’s founding “provided a fertile ground for us women to grow both physically and spiritually.” In “Coming Together of Buddhist Women,” *Yasodhara*, vol. 23/4 (no. 92) July-September 2007: 19.

(48) *Sisters in Solitude: Two traditions of Buddhist Monastic Ethics for Women*. Karma Lekshe Tsomo. Delhi: Sri Sat Guru, 1996.

(49) Tsomo: 1996, 109.

(50) Ibid., 115.