

BOOK REVIEW

Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha. Edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo. Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, New York, 1988. Paperback, \$14.95.

Reviewed by Ellen Sidor

The proceedings of the first International Conference on Buddhist Nuns held in Bodhgaya, India in 1987, have been collected into a unique and fascinating book. One gets a sense of Buddhist history in the making: gritty and squalling. The editorial process was hair-raising: transcribing and typing in Dharamsala, India, amid monsoon rains, scorpions, rodents, hepatitis, thefts of typewriters, tape failures. But as Editor Bhiksuni Tsomo states, the participants "aim at nothing less than the spiritual awakening of half the human race — women's liberation in the truest sense — so a few stumbling blocks can no doubt be expected."

Some 150 people, about equally divided between nuns, monks, and laypeople, assembled for the week-long conference, which opened with 1,500 people taking refuge and precepts, followed by a keynote speech by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in which he linked the struggle for women's rights with the struggle for world peace, and affirmed his personal commitment to helping establish full ordination for women in Tibetan Buddhism. During the week, papers, talks and discussions alternated with periods of practice.

Since the participants were quite diverse — ranging from women who had never left their own countries before to affluent Westerners — so is the style of the chapters, and there is some information overlap from one to the next. This repetition actually helps one remember some of the torrent of detail. As if you were watching a complex and slowly revolving chandelier, the same elements keep coming into view but each time from a slightly different angle, giving the book considerable depth and richness.

The conference focused on four questions: what it means to be a nun, to be a Buddhist woman, to follow an Asian religion in Western countries, and to follow an ancient spiritual path in the modern world. Among these are some controversial issues. For example, the issue of full ordination for women — an idea which would hardly be questioned by Western women, especially feminists — aroused great concerns from women and men in countries like India and Sri Lanka, where it is a highly volatile topic. Full ordination for women challenges traditional men's roles, and raises concerns and expectations about women's access to education and the power structure. As the conference opened, there were concerns that "the gathering could be misused as a platform for Western feminists in a blind battle for equal rights that would damage Buddhism." But this pitfall was avoided by the tack the conference took, providing factual information about women and Buddhism worldwide, and encouraging a reasoned approach to the issues.

In the chapters on full ordination, benefits and obstacles are discussed, and a call for action is issued: "Buddhist women, numbering in the millions, possess considerable public relations potential. The rate at which improvements can be made for Buddhist women and recognition gained for Buddhist nuns depends to a great extent on the skill with which the better informed and better educated among those millions wield that potential."

There are reports from Buddhist laywomen, chapters on the importance of vows, and details from all the countries in which there are Buddhist nuns, showing a wide variety of lineages, practice styles

and degrees of acceptance in their cultures. Fascinating details abound, as in the following: "[In the Buddha's time in India] The first renunciates were instructed to retrieve rags from the trash bin, join them together in a designated pattern, and dye the resultant garments a yellowish hue which was then considered highly unattractive."

The chapter on celibacy is worth the price of the book. Exceedingly well-written, wise and thought-provoking, it provides a refreshing view of relationships for those tired of being caught in the mire of Western materialist, sex-oriented culture. For example, "Celibacy . . . represents a decision to rely on one's own inner authority." And, "the decision to remain celibate is particularly significant for women. It is the ultimate rejection of life as a sex object . . ."

The suppression of Buddhism by Communism in Tibet, China and North Korea is among the noteworthy topics discussed. Also, the book shows why Buddhist nuns flourished in some countries and were discouraged in others. For those of us puzzling over how to help Buddhism take root in the West, we can learn a lot by seeing how much has depended on women's place in their particular culture, on whether a life of renunciation is seen as a threat to society and family life, or whether a nun sangha is seen as competing with an already established monk sangha.

Bhiksuni Pema Chodron, Abbess of Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia, contributes an important chapter about the Abbey's training schedule, philosophy and three-year course of work, meditation and study during which ordination is possible at several different levels. In another chapter, living by the Vinaya (the original rules for monks and nuns) in the present day is discussed, and a warning issued: "If we wish to create lasting monasteries and a stable sangha, relaxing the rules unnecessarily may prove to be a big mistake."

Another set of chapters addresses the "delicate topic" of livelihood for nuns and monks. People in traditional Buddhist countries are accustomed to supporting the monastic sangha, while new Buddhists in Western countries are not. There are problems of women dropping out because of depression, lack of support, and the necessity of getting a job. A sprinkling of excerpts will give you the flavor: "Western sangha members are caught in a bind between their vows and their cultural context." "As yet, there is a startling scarcity of monasteries and nunneries in Western countries. Even a person who is strongly inclined toward ordination would be wise to consider seriously the question of livelihood before deciding to take vows." However, such cautions should not deter anyone with a strong calling, as evidenced by this comment from an established nun: "Although it is difficult to live as a nun in the West without a supportive monastic environment, I am happy to have been a pioneer and I want to investigate with others how we can best implement the Buddha's teachings in the West."

This book — a treasure trove of facts, insights and unfamiliar points of view — is highly recommended for anyone concerned about Buddhism, the development of practice, and women's place in it today. The editors and participants are to be commended for their heroic efforts. To be sure, Buddhism's growth in the West as well as the East will depend heavily on its daughters. □