

THE BLESSINGS OF A PILGRIMAGE

The 12th Sakyadhita conference was held in Thailand, June 2011. Following the conference a number of temple tours were offered which offered a rich experience of visiting, connecting and learning about some of the monasteries, nunneries and educational centers available to women in Thailand. All of the pilgrimage was offered freely by the hosting groups and their hospitality and kindness was greatly appreciated by everyone. We also appreciated the volunteer translators who joined us on this journey. Our gratitude extends to everyone for their help at countless levels, for their coordinating skills and priceless generosity. May all receive the wholesome fruits by these many great acts of goodness.

June 20th, the first tour, was to **WAT SONGDHAMMAKALAYANI BHIKKUNI MONASTERY** in Nakhonpathom, which is about 60 km. west of Bangkok. This was the first temple in Thailand to have fully ordained bhikkhunis (nuns), and the abbess is Dr. Dhammananda Bhikkhuni. Before her ordination Ven. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, was known as Dr Chatsumarn Kabilsingh. She received her education from India and Canada and spent almost 30 years teaching Buddhism both at McMaster University in Canada, and Thammasat University, a prestigious Government University in Bangkok.



Since her ordination she has been engaged in building a strong foundation for a better understanding of bhikkhuni ordination and leading a life as a Buddhist. She has written many books and further information is available at: www.thaibhikkhunis.org/eng.

Ven. Bhikkhuni Ta Tao Fa Tzu (Voramai Kabilsingh – Venerable Dhammananda’s mother) was the founder of Wat Songdhammakalayani and built the Uposathagara (Main chapel) as well as Dhammapisamai school (an international Buddhist women’s training centre).

In front of the temple there is a golden laughing Buddha, built some 20 years ago. Inside the main temple is a very large and beautiful blue Medicine Buddha, the surrounding area is beautifully landscaped with many buildings and a recently completed mud house.

The volunteers at Wat Songdhammakalayani prepared and offered all the participants a delicious meal. Venerable Dhammananda then gave us a personal tour of her temple, followed by a visit to Pathom Asoke, a Buddhist community where the lifestyle is very simple and basic.

Ven Dhammananda was our guide throughout the day as we continued our tour to the Golden Pagoda where we saw: Pra Pathom Jedi, the largest stupa in Thailand, Pra Ruang, a beautiful gold plated standing Buddha, and also a very large reclining Buddha.



June 21st, Maechee Nalinrat Sutthithamvit and Dr Sauvakon Junphongsri of **BUDDHA SAVIKA MONASTERY** hosted us for the day. Buddha Savika Temple is often called *the Daughter of the Buddha Temple* and is known for offering meditation retreats. The founder of the temple is MaeChee Nalinrat, an 8 precept nun of 38 years, who was honored as an Outstanding Woman in Buddhism in 2009. Her goal in

life is to promote the continuation of Buddhism. She has practiced meditation intensively, and is now an adept meditation master. Her offerings of educational scholarships to monastics and the community display her compassion and generosity.

The monastery/retreat centre is located in a quiet and remote area of Chonburi (about 100 km east of Bangkok), with beautiful new buildings, a large garden, kutis (dwelling places), a school, and a retreat centre. It is a training centre for higher education and has much to offer, especially in the way of meditation retreats.



We were graciously welcomed with lunch, gifts and a tour of the area. Afterwards we were taken to Wat Sothon Wararam Worawthan, a newly renovated, beautiful and gigantic temple on the Bang Pakong River. On our return journey back to Bangkok we chanted, in Pali.....and this became a heart-warming part of all our travels in Thailand.

From June 22nd – 25th the pilgrims traveled by van to **MAHAPAJAPATI THERI NUNS COLLEGE** located in a mountain range in Nakhon Ratchasima's Pak Thong Chai district (about 5 hours NE of Bangkok), a place with plenty of trees, fresh air and tranquility.



Mahapajapati College plays an important role in educating nuns and underprivileged women and currently has about 100 students. The country's first and only college for Buddhist nuns was established 15 years ago by the late Mae Chee Khunying Kanittha Wichiencharoen as Mahapajapati Buddhist College (MBC) under the Supreme Patriarch. The college has two faculties that give students a bachelor degree. The curriculum is set by Mahamakut Buddhist University in Bangkok, and offers courses in many academic disciplines similar to those of mainstream universities. The students stay in dorms and the teachers (mostly nuns) stay in the kutis in the surrounding forest. Early in the morning (4:30 AM) we would wake up to the chanting of the students.

Across the street from the college is the nunnery and the retreat area, with private dwelling places (kutis) among the trees, and a huge lush garden (we were gifted with large fresh mangos right off the tree).



Maechee Srisalab Upamai , who so graciously hosted us, and Maechee Yupin Duangchan are the nuns in charge of the college.

ASHRAM MATA.

Miss Tipawan Tipayathat and her sister, Maechee Dr. Pairoh run a beautiful retreat centre in Pakthongchai (north-east of Bangkok) called **Ashram Mata**, which is very close to MBC. The centre was established in 1996 and is nestled amidst a natural forest setting, with small kutis (cabins) scattered in the forest.



Mae Chee Dr Pairoh Thipayathasana is a scientist, a Buddhist nun and an educator. With a doctorate degree in biochemistry, Dr Pairoh taught for several decades at Chulalongkorn University while studying dhamma, particularly the teachings of the late monk, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. After her retirement, she received ordination as a Mae Chee (a holder of eight precepts). As spiritual director of Mahapajapati Theri College, she teaches Buddhist philosophy and guides her students in spiritual cultivation. She has written dhamma articles regularly for the Buddhist Journal of Suan Mok Monastery in Surat Thani, where she also teaches dhamma and meditation.

KHAO PHU LUANG NUNNERY

We had a tour of Khao Phu Luang Nunnery which has been established by Nun Aree Kieatthubthew & Maechee Ratri . A lot of hard work and dedication have gone into this relatively new nunnery which has buildings and kutis scattered in a very mountainous and isolated forest area. The nuns are to be commended for their dedication and the work done to establish a place of support for those who want to practice meditation.



The next stop of the day was at the **Mutchada Mai Thai - Silk factory** which is famous for its handmade silk. This was very educational and interesting, as well as a great opportunity to do some gift shopping to bring home to Canada.

We had a visit to Mai Sunti Temple – a retreat centre - which was highlighted by the van getting stuck in sand! A few stories could be told about the ‘outing’. Our lunch stop on this day was at the beautifully landscaped gardens and ponds surrounding the Somdet Puttachan temple. We paid our

respects to the world's largest figure of the Venerable Somdet Puttachan (referred to as Luang Pu To) at an area known as the **Somdet Puttachan Foundation**.

The experience of this pilgrimage offered us the opportunity to be with the nuns and bhikkhuni's and to share their lives and in particular their dedication and commitment to the Buddhist teachings. To see the various temples, meditation centres, study centres, nunneries and to learn about what is available to Buddhist women was very rich. These particular places are well run, and organized, and although education is of primary importance, they are also offering community service, research, conservation and preservation of Buddhist art and culture, meditation retreats, Buddhist Sunday schools, counselling, and Buddhist camps just to name a few. The monastics dedication, practice, and fantastic work is to highly commended – and as pilgrims on this Thailand adventure - we were greatly honoured and blessed, and so deeply appreciative - of the kindness, goodness and generosity that we received from everyone. The organizers wish to anumodana and thank everyone who has helped and may the results of their wholesome deeds be a contributing factor for awakening.