

# SAKYADHITA CONFERENCE REFLECTIONS - 2011

## "LEADING TO LIBERATION"

A reflection from the past - twenty years ago I attended the first Sakyadhita conference in Thailand (1991). Although the very first conference took place in Bodhgaya, India in 1987 the idea of holding international conferences on Buddhist women (ordained and laywomen) was born, and I was invited, by the late Venerable Ayya Khema, to attend the next conference as the Canadian representative.



1st Sakyadhita International Conference 1991

There were three outstanding women who initiated this organization:

Sakyadhita - Daughters of the Buddha:

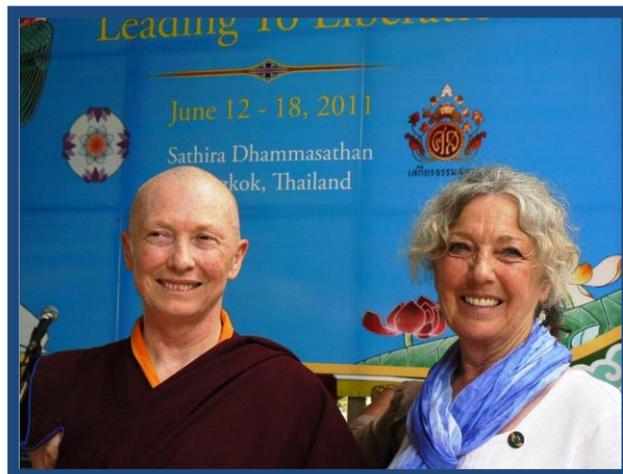
The late Bhikkhuni Ayya Khema, Bhikkhuni Dr. Karma Lekshe Tsomo & Bhikkhuni Dr. Dhammananda- then known as Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh.

The conference, held at Thammasat University in Bangkok, offered a rich and inspiring gathering of Buddhist women (and a few men) from many countries, cultures and Buddhist traditions, and for me personally, I was hooked!



Jump ahead 20 years (June 2011) -once again in Thailand - the 12<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita conference, held at Sathira-Dhammasathan (SDS), Bangkok.

Although this is a different venue it is yet another rich and inspiring experience as Buddhist women from 32 countries, (about 300 international delegates and approximately 1500 participants) gather together.



Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo & Jayanta

I have attended other Sakyadhita conferences, each one having its own distinct flavour and yet the cross-culture mix is much the same. Gathering together is a diverse group of female monks (in a wide range of monastic robes) and laywomen from all around the world. Female monastic representatives, from the traditions in



Some of the conference volunteers

Thailand, India, Korea, Vietnam, Myanmar, Sri Lanka among others, were present. On the surface and behind the scenes there was an abundance of activity. There were a very large number of volunteers and all their time and energy was most impressive and greatly appreciated.

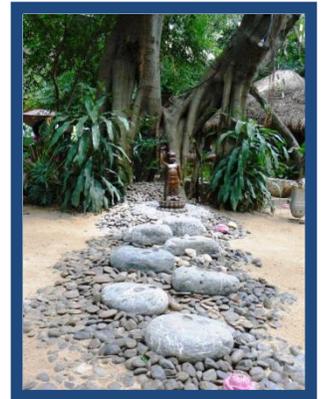
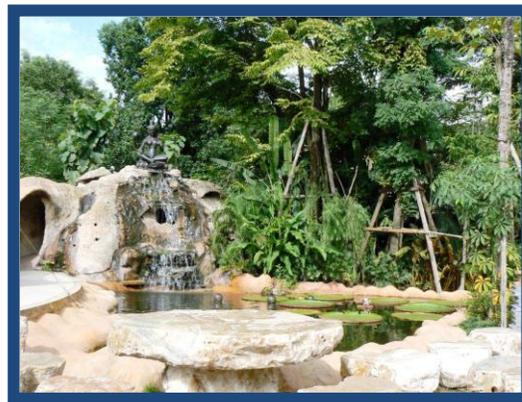
There is so much to share but I will only touch upon some of the highlights that I experienced.



Korean Bhikkhunis during opening ceremonies

I arrived in Bangkok a week before the conference so that I could help with the preconference organizing, recover from jet-lag and adjust to the extreme climate change (and believe me the hot-humid weather played a significant role in the conference!). The venue, Sathira Dhammasathan, is a learning community developed by Mae Chee Sansanee Sthirasula, and has been serving humanity for over 24 years.

It is a delightful and inspiring tropical oasis in the heart Bangkok, and we were fortunate to have Sathira Dhammasathan hosting this 12<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita conference. The theme for the conference was "LEADING TO LIBERATION", and this year - 2011 - celebrates the "Bhuddajayanti" or the 2600<sup>th</sup> year of the Buddha's Enlightenment.



It was heart-warming to connect with friends and to greet new participants to the conference. It was a time of coming together to share and support each other, and thereby strengthen harmony and peace throughout the world.



3rd Floor SDS - visiting



Opening Ceremonies: there was a great deal of preparation for the arrival and security of Her Royal Highness Princess Sirasmi. There was a procession throughout the centre that was led by Dr. Christie Yu-Ling Chang, President of Sakyadhita International (carrying an emerald statue of Kwan Yin,) followed by a baby elephant, welcoming remarks and chanting from each of the Buddhist traditions (beginning with the Theravadan).

One of my 'jobs' was to organize the chanting for the formal opening ceremonies on the first morning of the conference. The heart opening sounds of the chants filled the atmosphere with a message of peace and sisterhood and set the stage for the conference.

Opening Ceremonies- Malaysia



This offered a wonderful opportunity to personally connect with the monastics and lay-women from the various traditions and countries, some of whom I knew and others that I was meeting for the first time.



Theravada nuns

These are just a few of the groups that chanted for the opening.



Tibetan Nuns

The daily format: it was a great beginning to each day as we all gathered at for meditation. The mornings began with a different tradition and so we were able to experience a wide variety of



techniques

Morning Meditation



Plum Village Meditators

Following morning meditation we were generously offered breakfast, followed by the morning panel presentations. Lunch for all participants and sanghadana for monastics was offered before noon, and then the afternoon panel presentations would begin. We then gathered in smaller groups for the participatory workshops. Dinner was offered for those who were eating in the afternoon, and the evening cultural program concluded each evening. The days were very full and seemed to just 'fly' by all too quickly.



Dr. Christie Chang (in centre) President of SI

The conference program offered a diverse selection of topics given in the form of academic panel presentations with interpretation into different languages (eg English, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Tibetan etc, and also 'signing' for the hearing impaired !). There were many topics presented by both scholars and female Buddhist practitioners.....Please go to [www.sakyadhita.org](http://www.sakyadhita.org) to review the abstracts and conference presenters as there were many different backgrounds, cultures, social identities, abilities & perspectives.



Panel Presentation

The pursuit of knowledge was not the sole reason why so many travelled great distances to attend the conference. As well as the panel presentations, various workshops brought together, in smaller groups, women who met, interacted, and discussed on a personal level. There were a wide variety of workshops: mindfulness yoga, taichi, art, writing, singing, broadcasting, listening workshops, discussions about meditation, compassion, social issues, service, violence, and on and on. There were so many interesting topics that it was difficult to just pick one workshop each day.

Modern technology offered large screens & a sound system (a first for a Sakyadhita conference) so participants could spread out and found comfortable, spacious sitting areas. This was an area where the hearing impaired met during the panel discussions.



The conference offered an opportunity for intellectual and spiritual enrichment, as well as a time of fun and laughter. It provided an opportunity to engage in educational and enlightening experiences which were both challenging and rewarding. It

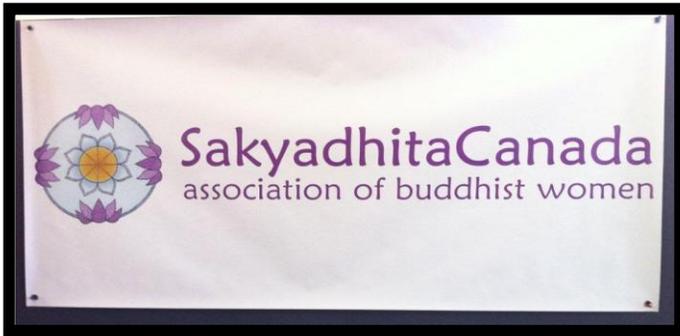


definitely created a platform where Buddhist women shared their experiences and learned from each other, a time to cross-culture and cross-traditions. I was indeed happy, and humbled, to interact, and walk side-by-side with such dedicated and sincere women. There was respect and an open heart without discrimination.



Tibetan nuns worked diligently, every day, on creating a mandala - patiently, calmly and with persistence. It truly was an artistic work of love that we could witness changing daily.

Mandala Meditation



Although small, a section was allocated for the National Sakyadhita Branches to gather and set up displays, banners etc and have a booth where those interested could talk with various countries and share what was happening in national branches.

Cultural enrichment at its best was organized by the host country (Thailand) which provided such a wonderful time for us to learn about, experience and participate in the local culture. There were also performances from other countries who generously shared their culturally diverse talents with us. They were greatly appreciated and enjoyed by all!!



Evening Culture Presentation

Networking, sharing,  
connecting, and  
coming together for  
peace and freedom.

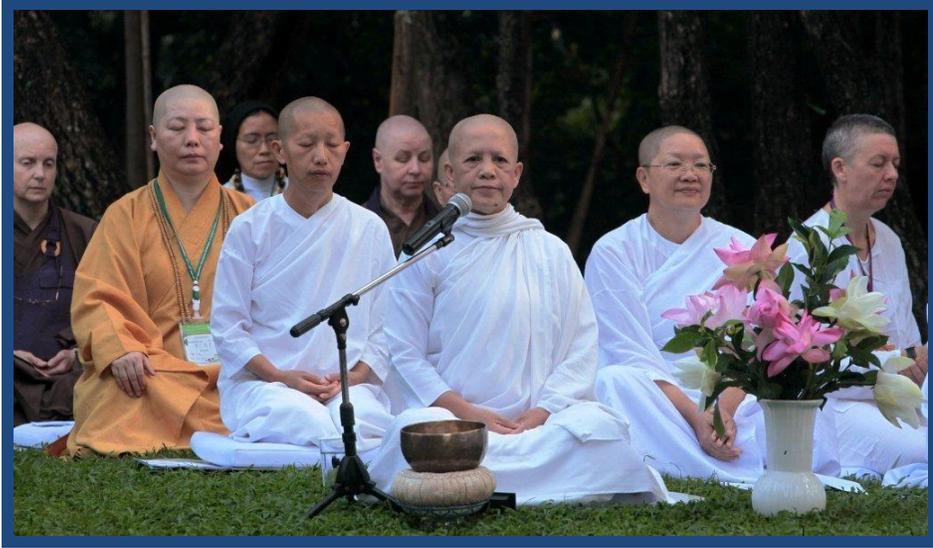


The donations of time, organizational skills, resources, teaching etc. from the conference organizers (in particular Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo, president Dr. Christie Chang, Mae Chee Sansanee & all the staff/volunteers of Sathira Dhammasathan, the International volunteers, the many translators, those that prepared and offered the meals ,arranged & set-up the venues....the list goes on....and to be part of multiple Buddhist traditions and many languages coming together was heart-warming and generous. We all have so very much to be grateful for!



Many Buddhist Traditions

The Sakyadhita conferences give us the opportunity to experience the diversity of world cultures and to share our different lifestyles, making us more aware of the issues and challenges facing our Dhamma sisters from around the world. It fosters a sense of community, respect, co-operation and solidarity among peoples of diverse Buddhist traditions, languages, ethnic and educational backgrounds. Being in the presence of all these women was deeply satisfying and inspiring.

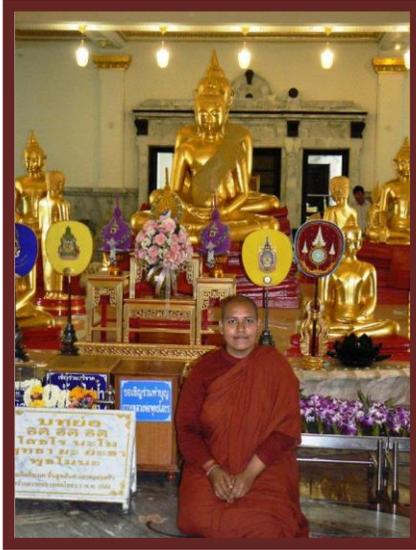


Closing Ceremonies - Mae Chee Sansanee

The closing ceremonies led by Mae Chee Sansanee were highlighted by the placement of Buddha relics high up in the newly built stupa.

SDS organized, for the International delegates, a visit to the beautiful ancient capital of Ayutthaya which is known as the epitome of Thailand's unique cultural heritage. This was a rare opportunity to experience the richness and beauty of Thai art history and Buddhist culture.

The vision of Sakyadhita is to inspire, to educate, and to empower Buddhist women so as to help them engage in compassionate social change, and to help relieve suffering.



Sakyadhita Canada was very happy to sponsor a Theravada Bhikkhuni from India who is studying in Sri Lanka. I was delighted to spend a lot of time with Venerable Upekkha as we travelled together on the pilgrimage following the conference. I organized and hosted the post conference tours - and this was another enlightening experience and I will write about it later!



Dhamma Wheel at the Grand Palace

**"MAY THE DHAMMA PROTECT YOU"**