

The 13th Sakyadhita Conference on Buddhist Women

Vaishali, India. January 5th-12th, 2013: A Reflection

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Pre-conference

The drama began a few days before the conference with an urgent email. It was unusually cold this winter. We should bring warm clothing, jackets, hats, sleeping bags and an extra sweater or two. I did, although I was skeptical. I had been to India before and had been following the weather which, for a Canadian, seemed spring-like according to the weather reports.

The flight was fine. There was some talk of fog at the Delhi airport but I didn't think too much of it until we landed and the pilot reported that, while we had been cleared to land, he could see nothing and we would have to wait for a truck to come out and guide us in. It is foggy in the winter but this was something else. We landed at 1:30 AM and you could see only fog, obscuring even the darkness. The temperature was around 7 degrees Celsius, below the usual nighttime temperature. Over the next few days it would go lower, dropping to 2 and 3 degrees Celsius overnight (usual 7) with a daytime high of 12-16 degrees Celsius as opposed to the normal 21 degrees Celsius. Some flights never arrived, delayed overnight due to the fog.

Breakfast at the hotel in Delhi was chaotic as old friends connected and new friends were made. Having been to several previous conferences, I have 'conference friends,' women I have met over the years. We meet only at conferences and in a remarkably short period of time we are caught up on careers and current projects, children, relationships, and Buddhist news. This is one of the things I enjoy most about these conferences, spending time with a group of women of all ages. My brain is usually on overload with the intelligence, creativity, wisdom and wit of my sister participants. Bringing together women from all types of backgrounds creates fertile ground for discussion of complex problems.

Conference

The conference was being held at the Mahaprajapati Temple (Vietnamese) in Vaishali, a pilgrimage site in the state of Bihar. Vaishali was chosen primarily for its association with Mahaprajapati, foster mother and aunt to the Buddha. She was the first Buddhist nun to be ordained and as such she is the model for those who have followed in her footsteps. The story of the difficulties she encountered in founding the bhikkhuni sangha present her as a devoted and determined woman. The story is told in Cullavagga X of the Pali Vinaya and is available in various translations and on the web, and it forms the basis of many current discussions regarding female ordination today. As well as a translation, you might like to read *Dignity and Discipline* ed. by Thea Mohr and Jampa Tsedron, a volume that contains articles written for the International Congress on Women's Role in the Sangha held in Hamburg in 2007.

The 13th International Sakyadhita Conference was held in a tent erected over the courtyard of the under-construction monastery. Thus, while participants were protected from the wind, they were basically 'outside.' I have included a few pictures of bundled up participants including one of the author taken on the roof of the temple that gives you an idea of the fog and wind. Mid-morning and mid-afternoon tea was most welcome. Lunch and dinner (Indian and Vietnamese) were held at the temple. Due to the cold and early darkness, many did not return for dinner. Eventually, workshops and evening events (movies, cultural presentations) as well as the morning meditation and evening chanting sessions were moved to the hotel. Those staying in the hotel made their shower and bath facilities available to those staying in the surrounding temples.

The Theme of the conference was "Buddhism at the Grass Roots," highlighting the efforts and achievements of Buddhist women "on the ground" (Conference pamphlet). As is the practice at Sakyadhita conferences, the papers were varied: some were scholarly in nature while others discussed practical applications of Buddhist dharma in society, family, and personal development. Because the number of papers was quite large (43 according to the conference volume which contained the papers) and the papers require permissions to cite, I can only provide a sense of them. Simultaneous translation was

provided in several languages and so, for the most part, the papers were accessible to all participants.

There were papers on the changing role of Buddhist nuns and laywomen in Asia and the West, on the female presence in Buddhism both historically and currently, the role of laywomen, Buddhism and social activism, Buddhism and personal development, the Transnational Bhikkhuni movement, and the ways in which women are changing Buddhism.

The workshops were varied as well: the dance of Tara, meditation, LGBT issues, children's books and the tea ceremony, to name a few. Various traditions provided chanting before dinner, and there were movies and cultural presentations in the evening. Most evenings also found women (and a few men) gathered in the dining room laughing together, planning projects, exchanging email addresses or trying to get an internet connection.

The conference ended with a tour of Vaishali Buddhist sites. Some participants left for Patna to take the plane to Delhi and home, others boarded buses the next day for another week of touring the major Buddhist sites in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Nepal. As each group left, there were hugs and promises, "See you in 2015 in Indonesia."