

A New Dawn for Women's Rights

**After a Millennium, World Buddhists Affirm Equality for Women
In Unprecedented Internal Ordination Ceremony Under the Tree of Enlightenment.
February 15-23, 1998 - Bodhgaya, India**

*Hsi Lai Temple's Web Site, California,
<http://english.hsilai.org/english2/newdawn.htm>*

February 15, 1998 marked the first time ever in Buddhism's history that Buddhists representing diverse traditions and schools from around the world joined together for a truly international and ecumenical ordination. The ceremony took place in Bodhgaya, India. It was especially significant because it was a joint effort by Buddhist leaders to re-establish the order of nuns in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Tibet, and India, where no women had been ordained as a nun for over eight centuries.

For nine days, 140 novice monastics from 23 countries (including India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, the Congo, Germany, Belgium, France, Italy, Denmark, Spain, Canada and the United States) congregated near a descendant of the Bodhi Tree under which Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, is said to have attained enlightenment some two and a half millennia ago. In order to provide instruction to this polyglot assembly, the text of the Vinaya (Buddhist monastic precepts) was provided in five languages: Chinese, English, French, Nepalese, and Sinalese. The renunciation ceremony, organized by Venerable Master Hsing Yun and Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order, marshaled the cooperative efforts and support of Buddhist leaders, including the His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Maha Ghosananda Maha Thero (Sangha Raja of Cambodia), Thich Nhat Hanh (Abbot of Plum Village, France), Venerable Dr. M. Wipulasara Maha Thero (President of the Maha Bodhi Society), and Venerable P. Somalankara Nayake Thero (Chief Secretary of Sarvodaya Bhikkhu Congress, Sri Lanka). (See list of patrons and organizers at the end of this article)

The legitimacy of ordaining women as bhikkhuni (nuns) has become a major topic of debate within the Buddhist community. All Buddhists agree that the Buddha created an order of bhikkhuni after his foster mother, Mahaprajnapati, and 500 other women displayed a deep commitment to becoming his disciples. Buddhists disagree, however, about whether or not there should be, or even can be, such an order today. Sila, the laws of Buddhist discipline, stipulate that the ordination of women to become bhikkhuni requires the presence of both ordained monks (bhikkhu) and nuns. Since the 11th century, however, when the bhikkhuni order died out in India and Sri Lanka, conservatives have stymied any attempts to revive it in those countries by citing the lack of qualified nuns to legitimize the proceedings. Similarly, in Thailand and Tibet, where there has never been an order of nuns, efforts to institute such an order have faced difficulty for the same reason. Fortunately, in such places as mainland China, Taiwan, Japan, and Korea, bhikkhuni orders have continued down to today.

To overcome this obstacle, the ordination ceremony in Bodhgaya was officiated by both Buddhist monks from around the world and by 15 Buddhist nuns who received their ordination

in Taiwan. The idea of bringing together bhikkhu and bhikkhuni from a diverse range of Buddhist traditions and schools to solve the ordination problem gradually took shape during a series of annual international monastic seminars. At the conclusion of the fourth such conference, held in May of 1997, the participants requested Venerable Master Hsing Yun, the founder of Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order, to organize a renunciation ceremony to reintroduce a bhikkhuni lineage in those countries currently lacking one. Fo Guang Shan was asked to spearhead this effort because it has branch temples worldwide, a large contingent of nuns, and extensive experience teaching Buddhist women from South and Southeast Asia. Subsequently, during the Dalai Lama's visit to Taiwan in the Spring of 1997, which he undertook primarily to learn more about the island's thriving bhikkhuni order, he too endorsed the plan, a support he has reaffirmed several times hence. Unfortunately, His Holiness was unable to personally attend the Bodhgaya ceremony.

The women from India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand who received ordination in February did not expect a warm welcome from all of their Buddhist brethren when they returned to their respective countries. More conservative members of the Southeast Asian monastic communities were not expected to even recognize the authenticity of their ordination. This was expected as a result of the historical treatment given to Buddhist nuns from East Asian countries who go to Thailand to conduct religious work. Unlike Buddhist monks, who can receive work visas from the Thai government to carry out their special tasks, Buddhist nuns can only enter the country as tourists, having no status as religious professionals.

The sponsoring organizations continue to do all that they can to aid the nuns in overcoming obstacles that they might encounter after ordination. Fo Guang Shan, for instance, fully paid the expenses for their transportation, room and board for the ordination ceremony, and also offered free education in any of its 16 monastic colleges worldwide to any of the nuns who would wish to strengthen their knowledge of Buddhist practice. Efforts were also made to provide long-term housing for those who might have required it. The Ladakh, India chapter of Buddha's Light International Association (BLIA) has already built a nunnery and the Ananda Buddha Vihara Trust of Andhra Pradesh, India is currently constructing a temple which will include a dormitory for nuns.

The American Buddhist scholar Rita Gross has recently published a book entitled *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, in which she examines how best to reshape the Buddhist tradition so that it provides equal opportunity and dignity to women and men of all races. What Gross has done in theory, those gathering in Bodhgaya in February intended to realize in practice. The nuns of Taiwan, who played a role in organizing the Bodhgaya event, regard renunciation as a potent means for women to express their capabilities and leadership qualities, allowing them to make great contributions in social, philanthropic, cultural, and educational pursuits. They therefore see the re-establishment of the bhikkhuni order in Southeast Asia as a significant advancement for women's rights in that region. Their hope is that the ordination will serve as a catalyst to spur not only all Buddhists, but all people, to awaken to the truth that the Buddha himself realized under the Bodhi Tree so long ago: that all beings are inherently equal and inter-dependent, and may attain enlightenment through cultivating a mind of kindness, compassion, equanimity, gratitude and wisdom.

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. -Article 18, Universal Declaration of Human Rights: United Nations

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