Buddhism and Gender Workshop

Rita Gross conducted a weekend workshop on Buddhism and Gender on 27 & 28 February 1999 at the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies in Palo Alto, California. The workshop was meant for both women and men on issues of gender in Buddhism past and present.

(Women aren't the only ones who have gender, she says) Many women (and men) are attracted to Buddhism because its practice and teachings seem to be beyond gender. Yet many Buddhist traditions, and even the Buddha himself, seemed to have had problems in their attitudes toward women. For women especially this can be a barrier to Buddhist practice.

Rita Gross discusses these issues from a historical perspective and considers what they mean for contemporary practitioners. On the first day, participants were asked to seek a history of Buddhism that is both accurate and usable. An accurate history considers what has been left out,
what voices have been silenced. A usable history remembers the stories and events that help participants constitute themselves as practitioners and as a community.

On the second day, participants focused on what was needed for Buddhism to become truly free from “the prison of gender roles.”
(Rita Gross has written "Buddhism after Patriarchy: a Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism.” She has also worked closely with Sakyadhita.)

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SAKYADHITA GOES TO THE UN
Buddhism and Reproductive Health

by Karma Lekshe Tsomo

The end of the millennium signals significant changes for women around the world. Sakyadhita's goal of empowering Buddhist women was reflected by its participation at the United Nations Conference on Population and Development held in Hague, the Netherlands, from 6 to 10 February, 1999.

I was invited to attend this conference as a member of Religion Counts, which is a group of international religious leaders and scholars who presented a crucial message. It was aimed for international population and development efforts to be successful, and the message conveyed that the voices of world's women must be heard and their religious, cultural, and ethical values must be understood.

Among the important things I learned at the conference were:
1. Although women do 60% of the world's work, only 10% of the world's production go to women. Women own only 1% of the world's land.
2. The world's population will reach six billion this year.
3. This year the largest generation of human beings ever in human history will reach their reproductive years.
4. Program of Action that grew out of the historic Cairo Conference on Population and Development did not mention the term 'religion'.

At a daylong forum leading up to the conference, 25 representatives of the world's religions discussed their unique perspectives on reproductive health. From a Buddhist point of view, I explained that all one's actions (karma) are a matter of personal responsibility, or choice. There is
no bar to non-violent means of contraception in Buddhism, but contraception is not being actively promoted in many Buddhist societies.

This is because of huge population losses in recent decades due to war and genocide: 13 million in Mongolia, 1.2 million in Tibet, 2 million in Cambodia, untold millions in China, and so on. Traditionally abortion has not been approved, since life is thought to begin at the moment of conception.

Making feminist sense of the world's religions requires us to be aware that, although women are the most active participants in the world's churches, temples, and synagogues, there are virtually no women in the higher ranks of the world's religious institutions.

In many cases, although these institutions rely for their existence on women's time, energy, and financial resources, women are barred from leadership, education, and ordination. The solution for women is not necessarily to reject religion and spirituality altogether, but to forge alliances to work for a total restructuring of religious institutions to fairly reflect women's participation.

International efforts to benefit humanity cannot ignore the spiritual component of human experience. Many such efforts have failed because they have been out of touch with people's values and needs, especially women's. For example, since 1968 Nepal has received over 150 million dollars in foreign aid for population activities, yet the annual growth rate has barely changed. Women still have an average of 5.2 children, and only 24% of all married couples currently use contraception.

To understand why family planning programs have been unsuccessful, we need to understand the influence of religious beliefs.

Religious traditions today face two crises - a crisis of ethics and a crisis of relevance. I feel that women's contribution is essential for addressing both these critical issues. As transmitters of ethical values in the home, women must have access to education that enables them to develop their full spiritual potential. To be relevant, women must be empowered to integrate spiritual values not only in the home, but also in society. Religions cannot pretend to be concerned with humanity as a whole if they are not being fair to their own women.

The Buddha affirmed women's equal capacity for liberation and Buddhist texts record the stories of many enlightened women. But in reality in Buddhist countries, women often experience poverty, neglect, and a lack of education, especially religious education. Boys are considered a financial asset and are privileged in education; girls may be considered a liability, so they are married off or kept at home to work.

Women's access to education and their health are integrally related. Only by understanding the religious, cultural and ethical values that frame women's health and reproductive choices (or lack thereof) can we help them empower themselves.
One of the most powerful experiences of the conference in Hague was a series of performance pieces by a Caribbean group.

They began with an energetic celebration of life, then illustrated the dilemmas faced by young women as they enter their reproductive years. One poignant piece portrayed the tragedy of a young girl who was raped by her father. She became pregnant, then was rejected by family and society, and finally expelled from school. Next the group dramatized the symptoms of the major STDs (sexually transmitted diseases), culminating in the appearance of the "Big Mama of All STDS," HIV/AIDS. The performance ended with a resounding chorus of “The right to choice is the right to life” - the right to choose from a range of contraceptive methods not only empowers women, but also prevents abortions.

Members of Religion Counts will continue to meet and work to assure that liberal religious voices are heard in international forums. Many of the concerns voiced in Hague will spark new ideas for discussion at the 6th Sakyadhita Conference in Nepal.

Through Sakyadhita, the views of Buddhist women will continue to be heard. Close cooperation between Buddhist women and international development agencies will be fruitful on all sides, integrating the spiritual and the practical for the benefit of all living beings.

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From the Editor

The date for the next International Conference has been set for February, 2000. If you have any time and energy to help with the preparation, please contact the Conference Committee. In this issue, I have included Book Reviews. If it is popular, I hope to give it more space.

I also hope to have a section for Recent Research on Women in Buddhism. We already have a section on Activities and I realise that it is essential to strike a balance between theory and practice, between research on Buddhist women and practical activities they engage in. The Newsletter will try to accommodate and cater for the needs of Sakyadhita members who are both practitioners and scholars interested in the same subject but from different angles.

I would like to encourage members from non-Western countries to write to the Newsletter so that no one feels that her voice is muted. Please let us know about your life, activities and your views.
Sakyadhita's strength is its worldwide network and members from different cultures and traditions. There are nuns, monks, students, grass-roots activists, social workers, teachers, scholars who are all interested in a variety of issues that concern Buddhist women.

Some are males and not all members are Buddhists but they all have their respective experiences to contribute. I would also like to encourage inter-faith dialogue in this Newspaper. Please send me articles, news about your recent activities and research, book reviews, information you would like to exchange, anything that you would like to have in the Newsletter. We can activate this space. If you can help with typing and any other work, that would also be very much appreciated. After all, you are Sakyadhita International.

I would like to thank Alison Platt for typing and June Green for being the language editor for this issue. I am also grateful to Kyoko Hirano for her drawings.

Yours,
Koko

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Karma and Rebirth

Extract from a talk given at the Buddhist Vihara in London on Sanghamita Day 6 December 1999

by Koko Kawanami

Have you ever thought about what may happen at the point of death? How do Buddhists visualise the final moment? Well, you may have heard about the “Tibetan Book of the Dead” which gives some indication as to what may happen when the physical body gives away. According to the Theravada tradition, there is a medieval work of significance, the Abhidhammattha Sanghaha (c.900), that is not only widely used but has given the Southeast Asian Buddhists an understanding of how karma works at the point of death. The law of karma stipulates that if one has done good deeds, one will reap good consequences thus good rebirth, and bad consequences follow bad deeds.

According to this text, however, it is not so straightforward. Even if one has done good deeds and accumulated much spiritual merit during his/her life, one can spoil the chances for a good rebirth if one does not die well. 'Dying well' means dying peacefully. That is if one's last moment or vision is taken over by greed or anger or hatred, and we hear that people often get angry when
they are dying, these negative emotions are believed to bring about rebirth in one of the lower abodes. Thus Buddhists prepare themselves for the last moment by practicing meditation.

In villages, people help a dying friend or family member to calm down and be mindful just in the same way that they may help a woman whilst giving birth. Birth (rebirth) is believed to come with death and it is nice to know that people are not left on their own at such crucial moment. The notion of karma and rebirth works in many strange ways, and even if one has been a bad person, there seems to be a drop of hope at the end of his/her physical life if one can die well. The text seems to tell us the importance of meditation and having good helpful friends.

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RECENT ACTIVITIES
Seminar for Asian Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka

International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) organised a seminar during 20-28 February 1999. The theme was "Breaking the Silence - the Role of Buddhist Nuns Reconsidered". It was the second seminar of this kind. Nuns from Asian countries interested in linking with Asian nuns from other Buddhist traditions (Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana) were invited.

The participants exchanged information about their situation, talked about problems and needs, shared their experiences in both their spiritual practice as well as their social work. The seminar enabled them to identify the type of programmes needed to improve their skills and conditions in their respective countries. The trip to various nunneries in Sri Lanka showed examples of how Ten- precept nuns (dasa sila matas) in Sri Lanka were trying to empower themselves.

“I am determined to do some service to our country with the experience I've got from the programmes I participated in. Even by now I have planned to build a building to be used as a pre-school, a Dhamma school, and a place for meetings. It was a great pleasure to work with all of you for the five days we had our programmes like the members of one family. I think that it is very important that such programmes are held in each country every year.” (Ven. W. Dharma Sri Theri, Sri Lanka, in a letter to INEB.)

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RECENT ACTIVITIES
Social Work Training Programme for Sri Lankan Nuns

The first phase of a three-year training programme (Training of Trainers Programme in Social Work and Leadership) for Buddhist nuns was launched on 20 February 1999 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The objective of the programme is to train as trainers a selected group of nuns who have already demonstrated leadership skills through social work in their communities.

The training programme which is funded by the Heinrich Boell Foundation, Germany, is being conducted by the Sri Lanka Professional Workers Association in collaboration with National Institute of Social Development. This is the first ever professional training given to Buddhist nuns. 34 nuns were selected on a district basis to follow the six months training which includes classroom teaching as well as field work.

The curriculum includes social work intervention methods, communication skills, and leadership training, human rights, conflict resolution, ethnic harmony and peace with an emphasis on Buddhist perspectives on social development. Counseling will form a major component of the course.

In the second half of the year, another selected group of nuns will be trained in first aid, home nursing, and nutrition and sanitation education. They will also be assisted to organise community health centres in their own nunneries. Two programmes in social work and leadership, and two programmes in first aid and home nursing will be conducted in the first two years.

In the third year, 12 nuns with the best performance, selected from among the four batches, will form three teams of trainers - four in each team, and train nuns from nearby districts at specially set up training centres at a district level.

By this time, Sakyadhita Training and Resource Centre is expected to be in place. Eight nuns selected from among the four batches of trainees with an aptitude for planning and management, as well as those with skills in writing and networking will be given a six-month course in planning and management, and desktop publishing conducted by the National Institute of Business Management, Sri Lanka. These nuns will be in charge of the management of Sakyadhita centre in Sri Lanka, including the administration of training programmes, and the dissemination of information through a Newsletter.

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Time To Breathe

by Asoka Bandarage

I was sitting in the waiting room at the chiropractor's office the other day when I heard a woman lament over the radio “How can I look for meaning in my life? I have no time to breathe.” More and more of us are feeling this way as we try desperately to keep up with the accelerating pace and increasing demands of modern life. When we increase the doing, however, there is less and less time for just being. Those seemingly simple things like going for a walk, smelling the flowers, watching the stars or talking with a friend, seem to elude us more and more.

We tend to blame ourselves individually for having 'no time to breathe'. However, to try to understand and resolve this contemporary dilemma, we need to develop a social and historical perspective of our own evolution as a species. Human beings have spent about 99% of our history as gatherers and hunters foraging in the forest. Foragers had plenty of time at their disposal for just 'being' because they spent relatively little time meeting minimum needs for food and shelter. Certainly, their existence was primitive by modern materialist standards. They did not have an endless choice of products and services to purchase or access to the conveniences some of them bring.

However, the foraging life was freer in that it was not bound by the cash nexus or the mechanical clock, the calendar, the technology and the bureaucracy which regiment our lives today.

With the so-called Neolithic revolution some 10,000 years ago, many of our ancestors evolved a sedentary agricultural way of life. This represented greater technological and material development. The peasantry and artisans in agricultural societies, however, had to work harder than the foragers whilst the fruit of their labour was appropriated by the ruling classes. Still, by living according to the rhythms and cycles of nature and by treating the passage of time with a sense of submission without attempts to master or save it, they enjoyed a much more balanced pace of life than us.

With the victory of Judaeo-Christian teleology over paganism and animism, Europeans developed a new approach to time as non-repetitive and linear and a view of humans as the conquerors of nature. With the Scientific Revolution in Europe in the 17th century, the cyclical vision of life of earlier societies was further undermined by a mechanical quantitative approach to life. This rationalist outlook laid the basis for the emergence of the ideology of unbridled economic growth - 'free trade' - and the intertwined forces of western science, the industrial revolution, the bureaucratic state and the capitalist mode of production. The forces of modernity were exported across the world with promises that they would free individuals from the limits of nature and the bondage of tradition. Yet, it is questionable if they have actually made us more equal, secure or happier as a species.
Worker discipline and control, especially time management, became essential for exploitation of labour and nature under the new economic systems driven by competition and profit maximisation. The Protestant ethic played a crucial role in reconstructing human nature to fit the needs of factory production by inculcating new valuations of time. Children were taught even in their infancy to improve every shining hour, their minds saturated with the notion that time is money.

The domination imposed by the modern world order over the last 500 or so years was resisted from the outset by various individuals and groups. Viewing the haste and acceleration that accompanied modernisation as a lack of decorum combined with diabolical ambition, some foragers and peasants refused to comply with the clock referring to it as the 'devils' mill'. The Luddites and Levellers struggled to restore workers' control over production and labour processes just as women midwives and herbalists have attempted to regain their authority over human reproduction usurped by male doctors and modern science.

Despite continuing popular resistance, the simultaneous control of the market, technology and bureaucracy is broadening and deepening. This globalised control is now penetrating at frantic speed into the very structure of life through new developments such as genetic engineering and biotechnology. These forces are making the handful of megalithic corporations that control the world still more powerful, whilst most individuals are feeling increasingly powerless and robbed of time.

The total commodification and technological and bureaucratic manipulation of time make people experience time and life itself in quantitative and monetary units. Success is defined more and more by an individual's ability to keep up with the speed of technology and the ability to act as an extension of the machine.

As we live increasingly in the machine and market created 'virtual reality', our connections to the ecosystem, to each other and to our inner selves weaken. As we lose the 'timeless order of experience' essential to our identity as human beings, we become physically and psychologically unbalanced, sick and easily prone to anger, despair and conflict. We can't seem to find empty spaces in our lives to ponder the meaning of life. We are suffocating. As the woman on the radio said, there is 'no time to breathe'.

Women as a group experience the pressures of time more sharply than men because of the gender specific ways in which we have been incorporated into the modern society. The work women do in the home taking care of families is unrecognised and unpaid. When women work outside the home they are largely relegated to underpaid and undervalued so-called 'women's work'. As a result, women work longer hours and have less leisure time than men globally. According to United Nations data, women account for about two-thirds of the work hours in the world but they only earn one tenth of the world's income and own one hundredth of the world's property. Economic upheaval in many countries is contributing to a widening gap in hours worked by men and women.
The multiple and conflicting roles and demands placed on women exacerbate the tensions and contradictions in our lives. On the one hand, success in the competitive professional world requires mobility, impatience, firmness, efficiency and a total commitment to self. But, on the other hand, success as a parent requires the qualities of stability, patience, gentleness, a tolerance for chaos and commitment to others. As both men and women everywhere are forced to value paid work outside the home over parenting, the emotional foundation of human society is undermined.

The weakening of our capacity for nurturance and the disintegration of our primordial identity as a species in nature connote not progress and development but extinction. Despite its claims to moral superiority, the dominant world order is driven by ignorance, greed and hatred and a need for control stemming from a deep fear of impermanence and death. It is also built on a view of human nature as inherently aggressive and violent and the notion that individualism, competition and conquest are essential for survival. When taken to extremes, these values can only result in human and planetary destruction as can be seen in the worsening global crisis of environmental collapse, social inequality, poverty and militarism.

**Paradigm Shift**

Cliché or not we need a paradigm shift, a change from the currently prevailing worldview towards an alternative view that honours human wisdom, compassion and generosity. We need a global that sees trust and co-operation among people as essential for survival. We need to acknowledge the reality of impermanence and our inherent limits in controlling the forces of nature and life.

The alternative worldview must begin with a radically different approach to time. Time is not money or a linear, fragmented entity to be tightly controlled. Time is the ever-changing process of life itself, life is in the here and now; we cannot take it for granted. As Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh puts it beautifully, we must breathe to savour life, moment by moment:

**Breathing in, I calm my body.**
**Breathing out, I smile.**
**Dwelling in the present moment,**
**I know this is a wonderful moment.**

This alternative approach to time allows us to walk, smell the flowers, watch the stars and talk with a friend. To live in more organic and fulfilling ways, we have to create spaces in our lives where we can be free from the tyranny of artificial constructs like the mechanical clock, the linear calendar, mass media, the cash nexus and private property. But, in so doing, we become cultural rebels; we invoke the wrath of colleagues, we risk our jobs and our livelihoods.

Ultimately, the cultural rebellion needs to go beyond random acts of freedom to creating new, more harmonious ways of living in the world. It calls for creating life styles that connect us more
to the earth, to each other and our inner selves. In this task, we have much to learn from our forager and peasant ancestors. But, it does not require that we give up all modern technology and return to the forest or what, if any, is left of the forest. Rather, what is required is that we develop what in Buddhism is called a Middle Path can overcome all forms of extremism and dualism.

To resolve the dilemma of having 'no time to breathe' and the broader psycho-social crisis it represents, we need to honour and satisfy our spiritual and emotional needs in addition to our material and intellectual needs. To achieve greater balance and harmony within our individual selves, we need to simultaneously work towards greater balance within humanity and the planet. Isolated efforts at individual stress management do not suffice; they do not address the roots of the problem.

Balance and harmony in the world calls for sharing of resources more equitably among all people including men and women. It calls for limits on economic and technological growth through infusion of ecological, ethical and social criteria into economic decision making. Social criteria must include not only the right to work for all but improved quality of work for all people. It calls for democratic participatory approaches which take into account human costs of downsizing, work speeds up, productivity increases as well as social support for parenting.

There is, however, a great deal of fear surrounding anything that sounds like socialism. Certainly, this fear is justified given the suffering that was imposed on people under authoritarian Communism. Still, the current crisis in the world requires that we consider an alternative Middle Path that transcends the destructiveness of both Communism and unbridled capitalism.

To move to more shared and collectivist modes of living, the privileged social groups do have to give up some of their advantages, privacy and autonomy. Yet, there is also much to gain from bioregional economics, job sharing, shared housing, car pooling, public transportation and other such arrangements. Not only would such measures contribute to environmental sustainability, but they would also help build community and free up more time for individual leisure.

Greater sharing of child rearing and housework between men and women and among extended communities will allow women more 'time to breathe'. It seems that all societies around the world today are fast giving up sustainable and communal ways of living in emulating the United States, the main agent of the global 'free trade' culture. It is interesting therefore that the leadership in some important efforts to curb this culture and change its underlying values is also being taken by some concerned citizens in the U.S. Efforts towards voluntary simplicity, co-housing, barter exchange, war tax resistance, socially and environmentally responsible investing, voluntary redistribution of wealth, campaign finance reform are some of these vital efforts.

Many of the leaders of contemporary social change movements are also women. As the
overworked, underpaid and overstressed sex, women as a group have more to gain from a fundamental change in the status quo. Lois Gibbs and her efforts to clean up Love Canal, which was polluted by corporate toxic dumping, comes to mind here. Gibbs was 'just a house wife' until she got sick and tired of the pollution and stress and decided to change herself and her environment.

The woman I heard on the radio at the chiropractor's office, like countless other women and men around the world, has the potential for similar transformation.


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Valuable Experience

by Alison Platt

It seems, from recent ceremonies, that the campaign for Buddhist women to be afforded the opportunity to ordain as bhikkhunis is, at last, making headway. The ordination of 22 nuns on the 12 March 1998 in Sri Lanka, is most definitely an expression of what the ongoing campaign has achieved. However, despite such victories, it still seems that it will be a long time before such ceremonies become commonplace. Then how can such a goal be achieved?

This is a complex question and one that I doubt will be resolved in the near future. However, that is not to say that we cannot explore new campaign alternatives. I, for one, believe that Buddhist campaigners can learn a great deal from the experiences of those who have also campaigned for gender equality within their respective religious traditions, for example, the campaign within the Church of England for women to be allowed to ordain as priests.

Prior to November 1992 Anglican women in England could not become priests. This meant that they could not consecrate the bread and wine, one of the most significant aspects of Anglican worship. However, the campaign for female ordination to the priesthood was not just about who should be allowed to perform such tasks, it was an appeal for equality throughout the Church.

The campaign for equality in the Anglican Church was lead by groups such as M.O.W. (the
Movement for the Ordination of Women). M.O.W., along with other Anglican movements, started their campaigns by petitioning Synod (the Church of England's governing body) for change. They quoted portions of scripture in which women played a central role in the development of the Church, and debated with those whose views were opposed to their own.

Yet they never criticised or attempted to ostracise their opponents. In 1987, almost sixty years after M.O.W. was formed, Synod decided that women should be allowed to ordain as deacons. However, despite this concession campaigners wanted more. They wanted women to have a higher status, to become more involved in the Church of England's hierarchy. They wanted women to be allowed to ordain as priests.

Partially due to their success in 1987 the campaign for women to be allowed ordination to the priesthood became headline news. National newspapers debated the issue and polls were conducted to ascertain people's views. Such forms of open public debate provided the evidence that campaigners needed to prove that the Church of England, in refusing to allow female ordination to the priesthood, was no longer in step with public opinion. For example, according to the results of a poll conducted by the Times in 1990, 75% of respondents were in favour of female ordination to the priesthood.

Eventually the weight of public opinion, in combination with the continued petitioning of the Synod, culminated in, during the month of November 1992, Synod declaring that women were to be allowed to ordain as priests.

However, the battle was far from over. Many people still maintained that women should not be allowed ordination and dissenters demonstrated their anger at Synod's decision in a variety of proactive ways. For example, over two hundred disillusioned male ordinands applied to the Catholic Church for ordination - the Catholic Church being a prime example of one strand of Christianity which still forbids any form of female ordination.

The unrelenting opposition of certain members of the Church of England led to Synod introducing legislation associated specifically with the ordination of women. For example, a dictate was issued stating that it was only with a diocese bishop's full approval that ordained women could minister in his area. Unfortunately, this has resulted in certain parts of the country, such as Lancashire, becoming a 'no-go' area for women priests. In addition, the Synod also made it possible for ordained clergy who wished to leave the Church as a result of their decision to allow women to become priests, to apply for financial recompense.

Despite continued dissension there have been over 2,000 women ordained as priests in the Church of England since 1994. Therefore, I believe that, as campaigners for equality, we too should rejoice in the victories secured thus far, in the Church of England. Let us join in celebration at the fact that centuries of male dominance of the Church of England's hierarchy has been eradicated.
The Anglican campaigners have shown what persistence combined with a belief in the fact that women do have a role to play in the religious hierarchical order can achieve. And I would suggest that Buddhist campaigners can learn a lot from the Anglican campaign. For example, despite the fact that Buddhism does not have a governing body such as Synod, it could be a good idea for international or national forums to be convened to discuss the issue of female ordination. In addition, Buddhist campaigners could meet with their Anglican counterparts and share experiences and ideas.

Buddhist campaigners must, however, never lose sight of their goals, and continue to press for universal change however long it may take. In addition, let us celebrate each victory. Let us rejoice in our present achievements. And, finally, let the example of the success achieved by campaign groups such as M.O.W. inspire us all.

(Alison Platt is a post-graduate student at Lancaster University in U.K.)

VIDEOS AVAILABLE!

“Women in Buddhism: Unity and Diversity” (31 min.) is a kaleidoscope of images and issues concerning Buddhist women. Filmed at the 5th Sakyadhita Conference in Cambodia in 1998, it presents the history of Sakyadhita and portraits of Buddhist women around the world. Noted Buddhist scholars and practitioners discuss women's potential in Buddhism as well as their practical limitations.

"Living and Dying in Buddhist Cultures" (49 min.) looks at a variety of traditional beliefs and practices concerning the universal experience of dying.

VHS copies are $20, including postage. PAL copies are $30.

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