

AMERICAN BUDDHIST WOMEN

Encouraging Inclusion Across American Buddhisms

The USA National Branch of Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women

Sakyadhita USA ☎ P.O. Box 1649 ☎ Ridgecrest, CA 93556 ☎ www.sakyadhitausa.org
Email: susa@sakyadhitausa.org Membership: <http://sakyadhitausa.org/pages/membership.html>

In this Issue *Beauty*: What's **Buddhism** got to do with it?

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT of Sakyadhita USA

This month's issue of American Buddhist Women explores the relationship between beauty and dharma practice. The articles approach questions of beauty and Buddhism from three lines of inquiry.

First, we pose questions from a lay practitioner's perspective: Where do personal aesthetics fit into a practitioner's discernment of appropriate choices? What about adornment, jewelry, makeup, stylish clothing? What view should we take of such enhancements designed to make us more physically or visually attractive by the standards of Western or American culture? Is there a positive function for "feminine" or embodied beauty for the practitioner or observers? Can a practitioner engage in physical adornment in "moderation" or is it always a matter of "attachment"? How might we negotiate between a culture that rewards us for certain styles of dress and sanghas where many of those styles are discouraged or even forbidden?

Second, we look to Buddhist history: What does the historical literature tell us about Buddhist attitudes and practices surrounding personal beauty? What was the relationship between beauty and virtue during the Buddha's time and subsequently in Buddhist cultures? Did the use of female beauty as a male monastic heuristic device make practitioners forever suspicious of women's beauty? Articles by Lisa Battaglia, Lulu Cook and Jane McEwan consider these vexed questions.

Third, the relationship between dharma practice and art/aesthetics is explored in interviews with four contemporary American women artists who are dharma practitioners. The artists consider how their dharma practice informs their art practice. What do they define as "beautiful?" How does their unique Buddhist-Artist lens inflect or transform their aesthetic sensibilities? Karen Gelinis and Charlotte Collins share the insights of these talented and spirited female artist-practitioners.



Charlotte Collins
SUSA President



Buddhaful: Beauty, Buddhism, and the Feminine/Feminist Predicament

by Lisa J. Battaglia

Buddhaful. I was given this shirt by a friend who found it in a small clothing boutique in Georgia. It has always struck me as, well, *problematic*. What does being beautiful have to do with Buddhism?! Beauty and Buddhism seem to be on polar opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of values, goals, and worthiness. Surely a devout female Buddhist is not concerned with beauty, and surely beauty is merely a superficial trap that is only skin deep, paling in comparison to the enduring truths of the dharma. But are beauty and Buddhism mutually exclusive? Is it possible to be "Buddha-ful" (that is, full of the Buddha Dharma) and "beautiful" (that is, pleasing to the senses and mind aesthetically)? What place does beauty have, if any, on the Buddhist path? Where does the contemporary Buddhist-feminist stand in relation to the contentious topic of beauty and beautification?

In her bestseller, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (1991, 2002), Naomi Wolf boldly asserts that societal forces compel women to be obsessed with beauty at the expense of claiming political and economic power. Wolf calls into question the ideal of beauty in contemporary America, observing that beauty standards—which are dictated by market forces and a multibillion-dollar advertising industry—drain women psychologically and financially. Not only is beauty a psychological and economic drain, it is also evaluative: "beauty" becomes the standard by which women are judged and limited due to their physical appearance. Women are taught that their worth is proportional to their attractiveness. Physical appearance, one's body shape, face, hair, clothes—these seemingly trivial



From *Tibetan Pattern Book of Proportions*,
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concerns matter, particularly to women. Indeed, as Wolf cites, "thirty-three thousand American women told researchers that they would rather lose ten to fifteen pounds than achieve any other goal." She continues, "We are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement: the beauty myth." This "beauty myth" (as Wolf coins it) is a powerful force that keeps women focused on the pursuit of beauty, at the expense of allegedly worthier pursuits. Wolf's book ultimately calls for a "new wave of feminism to free women from enslavement to beauty's dictates."

The tenuous relationship between female liberation and beauty is hardly new or particular to contemporary American society. Traveling back in time and across continents to ancient India, another "beauty myth" surfaces. Textual evidence suggests that early Indian Buddhists considered beauty a psychological and soteriological obstacle for women (and, circuitously, for men as well). Buddhist literature underscores the duplicitous nature of the female body: it is a razor blade dripping with honey, its exterior is attractive, its interior repulsive. Women's beauty holds men in thrall and leads wayward monks down the path to temptation. The Buddha of the *Anguttara Nikaya* explains, "womankind is entirely the snare of Mara." Deceived by the outer beauty of the ornamented female body, only the foolish mistake "walking corpses" and "abject bags of filth" for paragons of beauty. In Indian Buddhist literature, female bodies are systematically analyzed and dismembered to reveal the pollution and filth that lay beneath a beautiful—yet artificial and deceptive—veneer. Conjured bodies of women age rapidly before horrified onlookers, monks frequent the charnel fields to meditate on the decaying corpses of women,

and Siddhartha Gautama (the person who would become the Buddha) departs on his spiritual quest immediately after viewing the grotesque inanimate forms of sleeping women in his palace.

Men are not the only ones to contemplate the fleeting and spurious beauty of the female body. Buddhist women are oft depicted contemplating the transience and foulness of their own bodies. According to the *Dhammapada Commentary*, the nun Rupa Nanda is so enthralled with the beauty of her physical form that the Buddha intercedes. Wielding his psychic powers, the Buddha conjures a beautiful female phantasm for the "vain nun" to contemplate. The beautiful spectral woman ages before Rupa Nanda's eyes, turning from a youthful beauty to a hunchbacked old woman, and finally to a putrid corpse oozing with pus and maggots. Rupa Nanda realizes the truths of impurity and impermanence and attains enlightenment.

The *Therigatha* (the enlightenment poetry of early Buddhist nuns) is ripe with stories of women who attain awakening by contemplating the foul and deceptive nature of the (female) body. Vimala, former-courtesan-turned-nun, reflects on her body thusly:

Oh you skeletal hut of bone plastered over with
flesh and tendons—
You should be ashamed of yourself, oh foul-
smelling flesh belonging to others which you
treat as your own.
Oh bag of dung wrapped in skin; oh demoness
with swollen breasts!

Likewise, the nun Ambapali contrasts point by point her once beautiful and youthful body with her unornamented and aged body:

Flashing and brilliant as jewels, my dark eyes
were large;
Overcome with age, they are no longer
beautiful—
In youth my nose was long, beautiful, and
delicate;
with age it has become pendulous—
Adorned with gold and delicate rings my hands
were once beautiful;
with age they look just like twisted roots—
My body was once beautiful as a well-polished
tablet of gold;
now it is covered all over with very fine
wrinkles—
not other than this are the Truth-speaker's words.

By contemplating their own beautiful-turned-ugly flesh, Vimala and Ambapali achieve enlightenment. Verse by verse, female aspirants de-beautify themselves on the path to liberation.

Yet, as one of my students in my Women and Buddhism course commented, “It seems as if Buddhist women are encouraged to ruin themselves for the sake of spiritual awakening.” As the stories of Vimala, Ambapali and Rupa Nanda reveal, the very markers and signifiers of a *female* body—that is, ornaments and adornments, hair and cosmetics, hips and breasts, lips and eyes, skin and flesh—are stripped away as the onlooker/inhabitant moves from a state of bondage and suffering to a state of liberation and release. What one is left with is an androgynous, asexual form at best and a sack of bones at worst, not an explicitly female body, and surely not a beauty. The grotesquely represented woman, or the transcendent androgyne (who sheds her beauty, femininity and sexuality on the path to enlightenment), becomes an exemplary model of enlightened “female” embodiment. Yet, can we even consider the resulting embodiment to be “female”? Is “she” still a “woman” at all? Can the beautiful female body ever tell a story of awakening? Are beauty and Buddhism destined to be at odds? Can beauty be so easily relegated to the sphere of vanity, shallowness, and ignorance?

As masterfully demonstrated in John Powers’ *A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex, and the Body in Indian Buddhism*, the Buddha of Indian Buddhist literature is upheld as the paragon of masculinity, repeatedly and fervently extolled for his extraordinarily beautiful body. The Buddha is portrayed as handsome, possessing supreme beauty of complexion, and remarkable to behold. He is beautiful. Indeed, as expounded in the *Lalitavistara*, the Buddha is so beautiful that he outshines gold:

Next to the radiance of the [Buddha] ... gold cannot shine; it becomes like ink.
 So it is with the jewels adorning the one who is unblemished,
 the one filled with a hundred virtues; placed on him the jewels cannot shine.
 [...]
 Bearing the signs which are the fruits of former virtue, what need does he have of common ornaments, the work of others?
 Let the ornaments be removed!
 [...]
 Give away these jewels! Seek the radiance which is truly pure and spotless.

In accordance with the doctrine of karma, the Buddha's

exceptional beauty is a manifestation of his spiritual attainments over many lifetimes. He is so resplendent from the light of his accumulated merit that no superficial ornaments or adornments are necessary. Far from being merely skin deep, true beauty is manifest internally and radiates outward. Yet, is the Buddhist linkage between bodily beauty, on the one hand, and moral perfection, on the other, pertinent to the Buddha only? What of Buddhist women? Are there instances where female piety and female beauty are validated and deemed worthy simultaneously? I offer up three possibilities from the Indian Buddhist narrative and artistic repertoire: Queen Maya, the laywoman Visakha, and the lesser known Kumaradevi.

Queen Maya, mother of the Buddha-to-be, is represented in both art and literature as beautiful (in accordance with traditional Indian aesthetics) and virtuous. In various Pali canonical sources and in Buddha biographies, Maya possesses specific qualities of physical and moral perfection that render her fit and worthy to be the bodhisattva's mother—including being “supremely beautiful” and “abundant in merit.” In a mural on the walls of the Buddhist monastery of Ajanta (ca. 5th century CE), Maya appears slender but curvaceous, adorned with exquisite jewels, leaning languorously against a column. In an adjacent scene, she is seated next to King Suddhodana, baring her breasts, swathed in necklaces, armbands, and other ornaments, all the while listening to the soothsayer interpret her dream of the night before, in which she saw a white elephant entering her womb. What is striking about these murals is the apparent congruity between Maya's



Hand-stamped textile using hand-carved woodblocks and designs drawn from Hindu-Buddhist iconography, by Los Angeles artist Gina Tyler. Photo: Gina Tyler.

beauty and sensuality and her "sacred" role as the mother of the Buddha-to-be. It is also striking to consider that Buddhist renunciates prayed and meditated within the Ajanta caves, amidst all of this beauty and sensuality. In the figure of Queen Maya, spiritual beauty and bodily beauty are intertwined and inextricably linked.

Visakha, a Buddhist laywoman, also embodies piety and beauty. Visakha is lauded for being a generous benefactress, converting many to Buddhism, and lavishly bestowing her wealth and services upon the monastic Order. She is also celebrated for being endowed with the five beauties (beauty of hair, of flesh, of bone, of skin, and of youth). Though she gave birth to ten sons and ten daughters, the *Dhammapada Commentary* applauds her for maintaining her youth and beauty throughout: "she always seemed to be about sixteen years old" and never had a single gray hair on her head! While the feminist scholar in me is eager to critique the apparent ageism and sexism here, the Indian Buddhist record repeatedly links bodily beauty and moral perfection (for both women and men). Within this karmic framework, signs of virtue are manifest as signs of beauty.

Like Visakha, Kumaradevi was a generous donor who gifted a Buddhist *vihara* at Sarnath. A stone slab at the site is inscribed with Sanskrit verses (dating from the 12th century) lauding the physical beauty, Buddhist devotion, and generosity of Kumaradevi, wife of King Govindachandra. The verses elaborate on her "marvelous beauty" which, according to the poet, surpass that of the goddess Parvati. At the same time, her devotion to the Buddha is highlighted:

"Her mind was set on religion [*dharma*] alone; her desire was bent on virtues; she had undertaken to lay in a store of merit; she found a noble satisfaction bestowing gifts [*dana*]; . . . her appearance (was) charming to the eye."

This public poem, composed as official poetry to applaud the Buddhist patroness, makes clear that physical beauty is an expected adjunct to piety. Queen Maya, Visakha, and Kumaradevi are all laywomen who are publicly applauded for their piety and beauty. Where does this leave Buddhist

nuns? In the charnel field contemplating the unworthiness of the body? And where does this leave Buddhist feminists? What are the implications of all this for us today?

Let us return to Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*. Wolf's bestseller was met with intensely polarized responses from the public and mainstream media; even so, it was largely embraced by feminists. Feminists lauded Wolf's book as "a clarion call to freedom" (Gloria Steinem), "essential reading for the New Woman" (novelist Fay Weldon), and "a hopeful sign of a new surge of feminist consciousness" (Betty Friedan). But, are beauty and feminism always and inevitably destined to be at odds? Is "ugliness"—the antithesis of beauty—the signifier of a liberated woman? Can a woman wear lipstick and shave her legs and still claim feminist consciousness? Is the woman who dons "hippie swag," Birkenstocks, and wears no makeup *more Buddhist* than the woman in eyeliner, high-heels, and a designer suit? Where does beautification, or de-beautification, fit in all of this? Does Buddhist-feminism need a makeover? I think, in some ways, yes.

On the subject of women, femininity and beauty, I am skeptical of the transcendent androgyne as the ultimate Buddhist-feminist goal because it seems to erase female specificity and leave us with the seemingly unmarked default male. As French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray intimates, the "disappearance" of women into the "masculine-neutral" is a radical genocide (the end of "women") that ultimately triumphs the masculinist economy. Like Irigaray, I would like to locate an explicitly feminine and female liberation. And I know this is precarious ground.

There is no denying that men and women can both be beautiful, and both are depicted as such in various Buddhist texts and images. There is also no denying that strict and unattainable beauty standards cause many women (and men) suffering. Yet, I am hesitant to see women as passive slaves to beauty (which was one of the critiques of Wolf's book). Likewise, I find it imperative to celebrate the female body and beauty without being muddled in the repressive demands of patriarchy.

One might conclude that the fundamental problem with beauty is not the manifestation of beauty, per se, but



Annual "Self-Portrait" by California artist Pat Rogers, mounted sculpture in clay. Photo: Charlotte Collins

attachment to beauty. In other words, the desire to be beautiful or to *obtain* that which is deemed beautiful keeps one mired in a repetitive cycle of suffering. Disinterest in beauty itself, dispassion toward beauty, and nonattachment to beauty—coupled of course with virtue—constitute the truly beautiful person.

An alternate conclusion might be a critique of the construction of masculine heterosexual identity—along the lines of Irigaray’s criticism of the “masculinist economy.” The female form does not innately create desire in males (or females). Male culture constructs the female body as a sexually desirable commodity that puts women at risk of violence and blame. The question surfaces: Is women’s beauty dangerous or seductive in a world where there is not male desire? Regardless of whether the problematic issue of women’s beauty is placed at the feet of men or women, from a Buddhist perspective the three poisons—ignorance, attachment, and aversion—can be seen as being at work in men’s sexual desire and women’s pursuit of beauty. The antidote to the three poisons—namely, wisdom, non-attachment, and compassion—offer a path for recognizing the existence of beauty and virtue united in women.

So I end not with a definitive conclusion, *per se*, but with a vision, a possibility, of a fully embodied and beautiful female enlightenment. A colleague of mine mentioned a verse she recalls, but cannot locate, about “gazing on the beautiful female monastics.” I am still searching for it.

Lisa Battaglia is Assistant Professor of Religion at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama.



Lipstick and Enlightenment

By Lulu Cook

‘Fessing up to how deeply I care about being “pretty enough” feels dicey and embarrassing to me. Internalized and conflicting messages about the importance of looking a certain way and the value of being the kind of person who does not care about such shallow things duke it out in my mind. This a testament to how complicated the issue of beauty is to me. How we look has meaning in the relative world we move through every day and yet, as Buddhists, we may also understand that the form carrying this limited self is not ultimately defining. I’ve had to come to terms with the truth of what appearance can mean in different social contexts and how contingent these meanings are. I have sought to teach my daughter a curious and critical approach to that dynamic. More recently, as I bring practice to bear on my own tender and fraught relationship with personal appearance, I have begun to shake off the self-violence that pursuit of beauty

can bring, and find the freedom to define my own kind of beautiful.

I first had to accept that there is value in directly contemplating our relationship with personal appearance. In the past, I have chastised myself for being “too vain,” equating self-care with a lack of discernment about what’s really important. This dismissive view does not accord with the fact that how we appear as women matters in regards to privilege and disenfranchisement and that these effects may vary by community. The way I look as I move through contemporary society grants me a generally pleasant reception, based on physical details such as the color of my skin, the shape of my body, my make-up and adornments. My wife has not always experienced the same easy welcome I am accustomed



Ammam Thanasanti Bhikkhuni and student Lulu Cook in Ammam's training program for women in the dharma, in Oakland, CA. Photo: Courtesy of Lulu Cook.

to, as her appearance does not follow the standard template of how “feminine” and “beautiful” are commonly defined. And yet, we are part of other communities where her more androgynous look grants her access that is not as quickly extended to me. “Beautiful” is coded differently in some queer communities, and my wife’s shaved hair, bare face, and fuller body shape signify belonging in a group that has largely opted away from heterosexually-based gender roles. Bringing awareness to how we make our own judgments of others based on appearance, or to how it feels internally when we ourselves seem to “fit in” or “look different” from certain communities, gives us a fuller understanding of the ever-shifting nature of appearance, perception, and experience. Just because something is impermanent doesn’t mean it’s not important, and beauty illustrates the power of the ephemeral perfectly.

We have sought to give our teenage daughter a direct understanding of the role of personal appearance in different contexts. Within our extended community live women who have adopted a broad range of ways of relating to appearance, from bhikkhunis to transgender people to radical gender-queer dykes to women who express their most beautiful selves through service rather than looks. We hope these women serve as role models to expand our daughter's sense of what she may aspire toward, rather than allowing media and advertising to limit her understanding of how women



Sanskrit print textile by Los Angeles artist Gina Tyler.
Photo: Gina Tyler.

“should be.” We talk with her about the meaning of choices women make in regard to appearance, and also about how our choices may be received by others. Early on, her only comment may have been to inquire about why some nuns shave their eyebrows, and whether she would ever have to do so. Recently, she has given a lively defense of her right to wear short-shorts, arguing that because they are comfortable for her, it's not her problem what anybody may think about her exposing so much leg. She has a nascent understanding of the judgments that may follow from this wardrobe choice and she has an innate grasp of the old feminist motto, “my body, my choice.” Meanwhile, I have an appreciative respect for her liveliness and well-thought arguments, and also a deep unease and more seasoned perspective on just how dangerous it can be for a young woman to appear in certain ways. There is no single answer to these questions, so we have an ongoing discussion about them. Sometimes the short-shorts win, and other times, she decides to find something else to wear.

Like the conversations with my daughter, my own views have also been contextual and have evolved over time. On monastic retreats in the past, I've agonized over the precept against adornments, spending more time than I'd prefer to admit on wondering if tinted Chapstick and my wedding ring count as adornments, and then beating myself up for caring so much. It was a slow awakening to see the violence I was directing toward myself in this debate, and I only began to find some freedom with an inquiry into non-harm in relation to the issue. Was there harm done by using tinted Chapstick? Was there harm done by the vicious voices in my mind castigating me for being so vain? How could I uphold the intention of renunciation in this precept in a way that felt kind to myself, rather than white knuckling the “no make-up” thing with an attitude of abrasive self-judgment? What is the felt sense in my body as I select my clothing for the day or as I notice myself judging another woman for something about her appearance? This practice of inquiry has loosened the struggle I sometimes feel around the issue of beauty and has offered more freedom in regard to my choices.

All this has only been a whisper, though, compared to the roar of expansiveness I touch occasionally in contemplation of the dharma teachings around *anatta*, or the lack of a distinct and lasting “self.” These teachings point to an ultimate reality, in which the struggle and work around defending how I am perceived by others drops away to spaciousness and interconnection. I drop into awareness more often now of how illusory that sense of “self” is, so fragile and yet seemingly solid and inescapable. From this centering point, there is no struggle against being “too vain.” Rather the preoccupation with propping up, decorating, and arranging the form in flattering positions simply falls away. The obsession with achieving a particular “look” in order to be accepted and desired is experienced as empty and meaningless, just a husk blown in the breeze. These glimpses of freedom are supported by my intention to follow the call of the Eightfold Path to ethics and meditation. Practicing this way, beauty then becomes compassion for my own struggles to be accepted, and kind awareness of how desperately we all want to be embraced by our communities. I do not yet walk around in that place all the time. I still want to “look good,” but I am less driven by it. I have more choices in how I respond, and more awareness around what I believe beauty truly is – and it's less to do with appearance these days.

The meanings and power of beauty are manifold and complicated. We experience beauty on the levels of both relative and absolute reality and, as a Buddhist, I've found worth in practicing directly with this question of beauty. I've come to see the value of our physical forms not in how we look, but as the simple and precious flicker of an incarnation in which we may all move toward liberation. I

hope that I have equipped my daughter to embark on her journey of young womanhood with awareness about the power and potential of appearance, as well as the limitations of believing in it too deeply. I now see beauty as enhanced by living a life that is in alignment with my ethics, including the contemplation practices that occasionally grant me insight into ultimate reality. Sometimes I even experience moments of being utterly freed from concern over how I look and how others perceive me... even so, I also understand that wearing a terrific shade of lipstick is not going to bar me from awakening!

Lulu Cook is trained to facilitate dharma groups by Noah Levine (Against the Stream/Dharma Punx, www.againstthestream.org) and she is a student of Amma Thanasanti Bhikkhuni's training program for women in the dharma. She co-facilitates the Oakland Against the Stream weekly meditation group. She is employed as a registered dietitian nutritionist specializing in sustainable wellness for our personal health as well as that of the environment. She finds that lay life, relationships, and parenting are fertile grounds for dharma practice and awakening. See her website at www.lulucook.com and follow Lulu on Twitter @DhammaDish.



Mollie Favour, Los Angeles painter and ceramicist.
Photo courtesy of Mollie Favour.

Three Contemporary American Women Artists: How Buddhism Influences Their Work

By Karen Gelinas

I set out to interview three women artists who work in three different artistic media, and who have been influenced by Buddhist teachings, ideas, and iconography in different ways. I had several questions to ask: What do these artists define as BEAUTIFUL? What do they see differently through a Buddhist-Artist lens? How does Buddhism influence their artwork? Two of the women, Mollie Favour and Milla Cochran, credit their Buddhist practice with the way they see the world and how they make art. Gina Tyler literally uses Buddhist-Hindu images in her work, an influence of her Indonesian heritage. After meeting with each of them to discuss art, Buddhism, and beauty, I came away feeling like an honored guest who had been invited into their mind's eye to see what they see. They each approach their artistic process in different and unique ways, yet they all see the world from what I would define as "Inside Out".

Mollie Favour

Mollie Favour is an accomplished painter and ceramicist living in Venice Beach, CA, an area famous for its long lineage of artists and galleries. She was born in Arizona and spent many years teaching and painting in Oregon and Colorado. Mollie's paintings are reflections of organic forms found in nature, such as seed pods, botanicals, landscapes, oceans, and kelp. She works in a variety of media; a mix of water color,



"Seedpod" by Los Angeles artist, Mollie Favour. Photo courtesy of Mollie Favour.

acrylic, oil, digital printing, collage, linen and embroidery. She said her path to Buddhism began in Colorado twenty-nine years ago when her best friend introduced her to the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh. This led her to study with Charlotte Joko Beck for eleven years. “Joko was really tough. I would go to her seshins and work with her one on one. She was so amazing.” Mollie currently studies with Noah Levine, Matthew Brensilver and George Haas at Against The Stream Meditation Society in Santa Monica. She is a dharma teacher and offers workshops combining meditation and art. Mollie said initially she was very reluctant to teach an Art and Buddhism class because she didn’t want to teach Buddhist art, like painting mandalas. “After Noah convinced me to teach a workshop, I said okay. I am comfortable teaching art, and teaching Buddhism, so we will do both, but with no promise that they will connect.” She says, “These workshops are pretty intense. You have to make a lot of choices, very quickly.” Mollie’s workshop begins with a walking meditation in her beautiful garden, moving students rhythmically from slow to fast, which was something she learned from Joko Beck. She says this helps build a sangha because you need to be totally aware of others. Then the students go into the studio and begin to paint with Sumi ink on white paper. The experience is very transformative. Mollie says, “It is exciting for me to help bring out the individual, a voice, an interest.” Mollie attributes her approach to art to her Buddhist practice. She feels that practice is tied to how we operate and how the brain works. “It’s all a package...my conditioning, my instincts. I think the Buddha taught us about suffering because he really wanted us to be happy. You need to take care of the dark places and acknowledge how to just be with the way it is.” She describes her art in a similar way, that it has a “dark edginess” to it and that it is more than just making a pretty picture...it’s both, like suffering and happiness. Learn more about Mollie Favour by visiting these websites:

<http://www.molliefavour.com>

<http://www.againstthestream.org/about-us/teachers/>

Milla Cochran

Like Mollie, Milla Cochran is a longtime Buddhist practitioner. She is a professional celebrity photographer living in Topanga Canyon, a well-known Los Angeles community of artists, musicians, healers and bohemians. She was born in Paris, France, and moved to New York in her early twenties. She began taking pictures in her teens, teaching herself and taking classes in Paris. Milla assisted the American photographer Jules Backus and later met Henri-Cartier Bresson, whom she credits as tremendous influences. In New York she met *Life Magazine* photographer Gordon Parks. She says, “He was a huge inspiration and a beautiful man. I would show him my work when I was starting out.



Milla Cochran, Los Angeles professional celebrity photographer. Photo: taken at Sarnath, courtesy of Milla Chochran.

In New York I took pictures of Madonna, Amy Winehouse, P Diddy. Now in Los Angeles I am taking a lot of photos of Buddhist teachers from India, Nepal and the U.S.” Milla wants to put all of these into a book and share what she truly loves. I asked her how she was introduced to Buddhism. She said one day when she was still living in Paris, she would walk a lot to find things to photograph. One day she went into a Tibetan store and that is where she met her first teacher, the man she calls her spiritual father, Lama Tashi. “He saved my life. I was a broken young woman and he gave me his heart. He could see inside me. I still speak to him once a week, and he has a center in Normandy.” From then on Milla began to study Buddhism with two Tibetan teachers in New York, brothers Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche and Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal Rinpoche. Now living in Los Angeles, she studies with Venerable Bhakha Tulku Rinpoche and Tulku Ogyen in Santa Barbara, CA. Milla says that being a Buddhist, she is able to see how everything is connected and that things constantly change. “Impermanence and change. It is the same in photography. The light is always changing. Everything is connected, and it helps with dealing with huge egos. We are little drops in the universe, and we should be nice to everyone. The most important thing in the world is to have a good heart.” I asked Milla what she sees as beautiful, and if it is influenced by her practice? “Yes, it is. Definitely! Anything can be beautiful. Simple is beautiful. For me, I am so happy to be alive, so happy to be free, so happy to be spiritual and so happy to do what I love as a photographer. It’s all connected. Buddhism helps me to be in touch, to meditate. It’s about being the director of your own life.” Milla recently lost her father to brain cancer and shared with me how much her Buddhist practice has helped her deal



Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, Pasadena, CA, photo by Milla Chochran.

with death. She said, "It helps me understand energy. It helps the soul and the spirit." When my grandmother was dying, I photographed her, documenting her last days, it was so difficult, yet so beautiful." Learn more about Milla Cochran at: <http://www.theroseweddings.com>

Gina Tyler

Gina Tyler is another Los Angeles-based artist who lives at the bottom of Topanga Canyon. She is a painter, a clothing designer and a classical homeopathic doctor. Gina's approach to art is deeply influenced by her Javanese heritage. Her family fled Java from oppression when she was a young girl, but she says, "I have totally transferred my Indonesian roots here." Gina started painting and sewing when she was four years old. "My parents were very artistic and they let me paint on the walls of the house when I was little." She credits her ability to sew from watching her father make costumes for her mother, who was a Javanese temple dancer. She began designing clothing and costumes in the 1980's and 90's for rock and roll singers such as Pat Benetar and Toni Basil. Today Gina makes beautiful, one-of-a-kind clothing from velvet that she hand stamps with carved, wood block designs. In addition to making her own carvings, she has collected wood blocks from India with Sanskrit lettering, and Om



Gina Tyler, Los Angeles painter, clothing designer and classical homeopathic doctor. Photo: courtesy of Gina Tyler.

images, drawn from Buddhist-Hindu iconography. "My clothing, just like my paintings, are all original. I can't make anything twice because my ideas are all in my head. I let the fabric tell me what it wants to be and I start cutting. It's really time consuming, and I can't make any mistakes." Gina's paintings are primarily of humans who she says fascinate her. This same interest in the human body led her to practice the art of homeopathy. "Just like my paintings, I see something deeper than the surface of a person. I see people without their skin." Gina uses her innate intuitive senses to guide her into what others may not see as beautiful or perfect. "What I see as beautiful is the opposite of what others may think it is. I think the odd, the unforgiving, the ugly, the sad, sick, strong and powerful are beautiful. The imperfections are beauty to me!" Like Mollie and Milla, Gina is able to go deeper into the soul of her subjects, whether it is making art or healing others. She understands the interconnectedness of all things, which in turn influences how she sees the world. One of Gina's teachers is Lama Jigme Jinpa, a San Francisco based Dharma medicine healer, and recently she was invited to Thailand to mentor Dr. Suvimol, a pediatric doctor, on classical homeopathic methods to help detox autistic children who have had chemical exposure. Learn more about Gina Tyler at:

<https://www.facebook.com/gogoginaclothing>
<http://ginatyler.com>

Mollie, Milla and Gina each see the world through an artist's lens. Each embodies the essence of what it means to be an artist, finding beauty beneath life's imperfections. They have the ability to extract objects from nature and the human form from culture in a way that sees beneath the superficial and reaches to the core of their subjects. The Buddha taught us to accept suffering, to face it head on in order to find true happiness, and from this darkness, there is light. This light is the raw, natural beauty seen in Mollie's paintings of plants and organic materials, it is the pure emotional light captured in the faces and images of Milla's photographs, and the deep internal light Gina sees in her human subjects.

Karen Gelinas, holds a B.A. in Art History from Loyola Marymount University, an M.A. in Buddhist Studies from University of The West in Rosemead, CA, and is a doctoral student at UWest in Theology: Applied Buddhist Studies. She is interested in feminist issues within Buddhism, immigrant Buddhist women in the U.S., and goddess worship within the faith. Her current focus is related to contemporary American Buddhist women and the worship of Kuan Yin, which she hopes to develop for her dissertation. She lives in Monrovia, California, with her husband and two teenage children. Last fall she joined the staff of SUSA's *American Buddhist Women* as a staff writer.





Pat Rogers, sculptor and ceramicist, lives and works in Ridgecrest, California. Photo by Charlotte Collins.

Pat Rogers: Capturing The Boldness of the Feminine

By Charlotte B. Collins

Ridgecrest, California, sculptor and ceramicist Pat Rogers has practiced the dharma and meditation for fifty years. Born into a family of artists, Pat began to draw and paint at an early age. She found inspiration for her art in the ranching environment of her home, and much of her work in those years reflected her love for nature and especially for horses. In 1966 she began studying ceramics. By the late 1960's, during the Vietnam War era, her work evolved from their rural influences to commentary on world events. Her work now aims to tell stories. By the 1980's, Pat was working almost exclusively in clay and she produced a piece of artwork depicting a life in "shoes" that included baby shoes, a soldier's boots and a pair of Birkenstock sandals, all in fired clay. "Shoes," which she still creates, were initially inspired by scenes at the entrance of meditation halls where all the shoes were lined up. Pat thinks of shoes as a personal expression of the wearer, which reflects the journey of their owner in the world.

During the 1970's, Pat studied with local pottery artist Paul Meyers, whom she regarded as a great source of inspiration and guidance. In 1994, she founded Green Tree Pottery Studio where she worked in stoneware, terra cotta and porcelain. She studied tile work in Abiquiu and Ruidoso, New Mexico, and in Mendicino, California. Her current work comprises representational organic forms in porcelain, and also social-commentary conceptual art work in mixtures of clay and porcelain. Even with such an abundance of art practice, producing representational and conceptual art

is not Pat's "day job." For more than 38 years she has made her living as a building designer, contractor and building consultant.

Pat's studio displays many signs and symbols of her complex identity. A door is decorated with bumper stickers announcing claims and directives such as, "The Arts Are Not A Luxury," "Well-behaved women rarely make history," "Feminism is the Radical Notion that Women are People," "I'll be the Post-Feminist in the Post-Patriarchy," "Practice Compassion," and "Tolerance: Believe In It." Throughout her many-roomed studio, in almost every available nook and cranny, are figures of the Buddha and Kuan-Yin, in ceramics, wood and metals, standing, seated or reclining. When asked how and when she had become a feminist. Her answer was curt, "I've always been a feminist!"

A spinal injury in 1995 resulted in a long period of immobilization with severe pain. Pain medications made her sick. What happened next dramatically changed her life in both her dharma and art practices. She had been practicing meditation for two decades and found that meditation gave her some relief from the pain. Day and night for four months she listened to tapes that incorporated bio-feedback therapy with meditation. And she meditated. She describes the process as one that called for focusing on the pain and delving into the pain, rather than trying to flee from it. It called for accepting the conditions as she experienced them rather than trying to change them. At the end of four months, the pain was gone, and she became able to produce art again. As a result of this experience, she says that her



Metta Bundle, by Pat Rogers, ceramic, with leather thong and beads, inscribed with the name of friend "Mary", right side, yin-yang symbol on the flap, and Chinese characters for health, longlife and joy on left side.



Another annual "Self-Portrait" in ceramic tile, by Ridgecrest, CA artist, Pat Rogers. Photo by Charlotte Collins.

work has become more reflective. She also says that through an intensive practice of mindful meditation, she was able to release the storehouse of anger she previously carried; and instead, to focus on compassion. Out of this experience, she found inspiration in the mountains and rock formations of the Indian Wells Valley where Ridgecrest is situated in the California Mojave Desert. She began to produce murals of all sizes in ceramic tile mosaics, drawing on mountain and rock landscape images.

In 1998, Pat and seven other women artists in the town of Ridgecrest joined into a friendship and collaboration, as reported in the local newspaper *The Daily Independent* (6/23/02), "to nurture each other's artistic souls and expertise in a wide range of media including pastels, oils, watercolors, ceramics, art glass, photography and poetry." More than half the members were dharma practitioners or meditators and all were trained and experienced artists. However, the group's project was not only focused on their artistic souls, but also on the economics of art, specifically women's art. In the space of a few years, they founded the Studio Eight Art Gallery and organized six art shows of their work. As feminists, and understanding that women's art is typically undervalued, they set their prices at what they calculated to be "men's prices." They were rewarded with high numbers of sales!

The group still meets weekly to support each other in their artwork and to study women's art and women artists. In the early days, they studied Julia Cameron's *Vein of Gold—A Journey to Your Creative Heart* (1997), "...and did all the exercises!" reports Pat. This study gave focus to their weekly meetings and gave clear guidance for pursuing their commitments to their individual and collective work. Another exercise they assigned themselves was to create a yearly self-portrait in their medium of choice. Photos of



Pat Rogers, sculptor and ceramist, with desert landscape in ceramic mosaic tile. Photo by Jane McEwan.

two of Pat's self-portraits in ceramic mosaic tile appear in this issue.

When I asked for her definition of beauty from a Buddhist perspective, Pat replied, "Beauty relates to harmony. Whatever is beautiful, points to harmony. Even if the representation is discordance, its purpose is to underline what's missing, the harmonious element." When I asked what qualities she aims to represent when she creates images of women, she strongly asserted, "I aim to capture the boldness of the feminine!"

To that, I say, *Sadhu! Sadhu! Sadhu!**

**Sadhu* is a Pali word meaning good, excellent, auspicious. Today it is common for people in Buddhist countries to say sadhu three times to express their happiness or approval of something related to the Dhamma. From: <http://sdhammika.blogspot.com/2011/10/sadhu-sadhu-sabhu.html>

Charlotte Blackmon Collins is president of Sakyadhita USA (SUSA). She is a founder and editor of *American Buddhist Women*, SUSA's quarterly electronic magazine (eZine). She is a writer, graphic artist and documentary filmmaker. She lives in Ridgecrest, CA, with her husband Clyde and elderly mother, Miss Betty.



The Navatala Standard: A Model of Serenity

By M. Jane McEwan

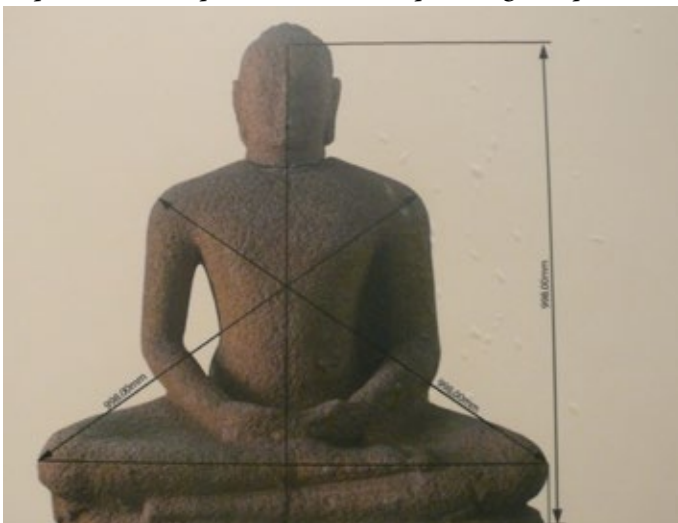
Since my father was a sculptor and I watched him make many carvings, I have had an added interest in how sculptors in antiquity carved magnificent statues of the Buddha with simple hand tools. Imagining how craftsmen chipped away stone to create beautiful carvings increases my admiration of ancient sculpture.

When I visited the National Museum in Colombo, Sri Lanka, I was intrigued by a display of the ancient measurement system used to carve perfectly proportioned statues of the Buddha--serene images which have inspired people and provided a model of equanimity for over two thousand years. According to ancient technical texts, the Buddha statues of the Anuradhapura (c. 377 BC-1017) and Polonnaruwa (c. 8th century-1310) periods in Sri Lanka were based on the Navatala measurement system.

A "tala" was either the length of the patron's hand or another set length for larger or smaller statues. An entire statue would be "nava" talas (that is, nine talas) in height and width. Each tala was divided into 12 units so the stone block that was to be carved would be marked in a grid of 108 by 108 units. Statues were made according to these proportions: The height between the hairline and the feet, the diagonal between the left shoulder and the right knee, the diagonal between the right shoulder and the left knee, and the horizontal line between both knees were all the same length.

An interesting system using properly spaced plumb-bobs (that is, weights suspended on strings or lines) hanging from a lattice and fixed above a sculpture was used to ensure the dimensions were correct.

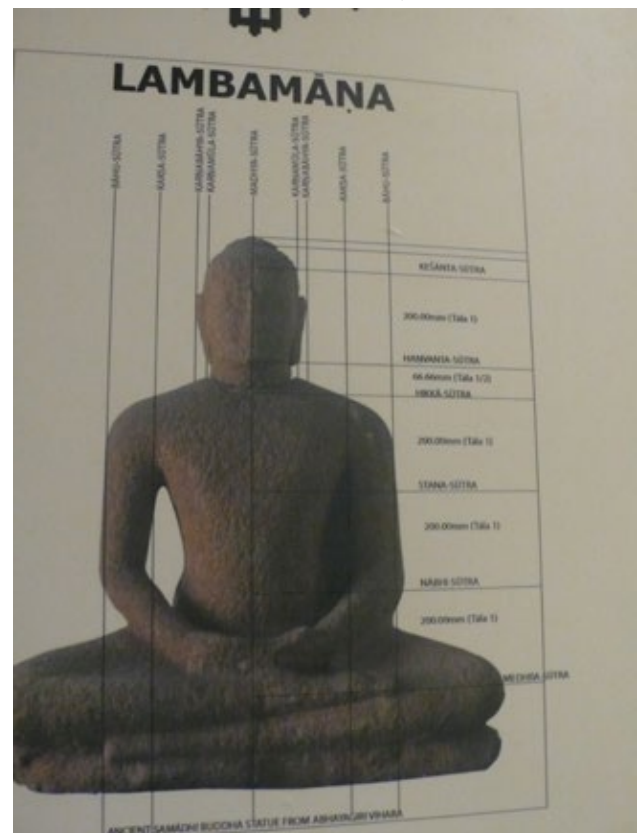
Jane McEwan lives in Ridgcrest, California, where she has a law practice. She specializes in estate planning and probate.



The height between the hairline and the feet, the diagonal between the left shoulder and the right knee, the diagonal between the right shoulder and the left knee, and the horizontal line between both knees were all the same length. Photo by Jane McEwan.



A system of properly spaced plumb-bobs, weights suspended on strings or lines, hanging from a lattice and fixed above a sculpture was used to ensure the dimensions were correct. Photo by Jane McEwan.



Navatala Measurement System and Plumb Scale. Photo by Jane McEwan.



Remembering Mary Miears Cutsinger

(January 23, 1931 – July 18, 2008)

by Charlotte B. Collins

In this issue of *American Buddhist Women*, dedicated to beauty, women artists and dharma practice, we want to remember Mary Miears Cutsinger. Between 1998 and 2008 in Ridgecrest, CA, Mary was one of the founders of Studio Eight Art Gallery and one of eight women artists who worked together to support and encourage each other's art practice.

Mary worked in oil, pastels and watercolor. Her subject matter was often visionary images such as the well known image of Kuan Yin, inspired by her discovery as a young mother, of Kuan Yin, Bodhisattva of Compassion, a statue at the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, MO. Mary's painting of *Kwan Yin* is striking for the tears streaming from the figure's eyes. On her website, Mary told the story of the inspiration for Kwan Yin's tears. While learning to use the air brush on a free-hand drawing of a Buddhist head resembling Kuan Yin, she used too much air causing the eyelashes to thicken and drip. After the image dried, she saw the drips as tears and asked God for their meaning. The message came to her that Kuan Yin was crying for her because she had not allowed herself to grieve the recent loss of her husband. His untimely death left her a near penniless widow and her five young daughters fatherless. She then allowed herself to grieve, and she soon finished the air brush image of Kuan Yin, intentionally adding the tears. Through the rest of her life, she kept the painting of Kuan Yin in her studio as a reminder to nurture herself.

Mary wrote: "The many hours of meditation that I've spent with Kuan Yin over the past years have been blessed and richly rewarded with insight into the sacred mission of compassion and her unconditional love for all beings regardless of race, creed, gender or religion." We are grateful to Mary for the reminder that compassion and beauty are synonymous.

Appreciation to Pat Rogers for the image of Kuan Yin and information for this story.

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When planning your next retreat, or looking for teachings or teachers, consider these communities led by fully-ordained female monastics, bhikkhunis/bhikshunis.

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and their women's monastic hermitage,

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www.dhammadharini.net

In Pali, the language of the Suttas, *Dhammadharini* means "to uphold the Dhamma in the feminine form"

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The Buddhist Council of the Midwest 10th Annual Buddhist Women's Conference

Saturday, March 7, 2015

East-West University, 816 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill 60605

"Spirituality and Violence: A Buddhist Response"

The Buddhist Council of the Midwest has held a Women's Conference for the past 9 years. We have covered issues from a Buddhist Feminist framework on topics including education, healthcare, environmental sustainability, and creativity. In 2015, the Buddhist Council will again offer a one day conference on March 7, 2015.

Spirituality and Violence: A Buddhist Response will focus on how Buddhist practices and beliefs inform our response to violence in local communities and globally. The conference will feature an interfaith panel to enhance our focus. Our aim is to discuss the difficult topic of violence in our lives and develop a spiritual framework to respond. We hope participants will come away with a better understanding of how their own faith tradition informs and enhances their response to violence.

It's an intimate and diverse gathering of practitioners who are dedicated to learning more about how to develop wisdom and compassion and to network across traditions.

The Buddhist Council of the Midwest promotes the spread of the Dharma by fostering the learning and practice of Buddhism in America, inclusive of all three Buddhist traditions. Its mission is to be a vehicle of mutual aid and fellowship for Buddhist organizations throughout the Midwest, to celebrate the diversity of Buddhist philosophy and culture, and to represent and advocate for the Buddhist community in the public realm, confronting misunderstandings or misrepresentations of the Dharma and engaging in inter-religious dialogue.

The Buddhist Council of the Midwest (BCM) is an organization for all Buddhist groups in Chicago and the Midwest area. The BCM became a reality when it was officially incorporated as a nonprofit religious organization by the State of Illinois on October 21, 1987. The founding purposes as stated in the Articles of Incorporation are: to foster the learning and practice of Buddhism; to represent the Midwest Buddhist community in matters affecting its membership; to pool resources and coordinate efforts by its membership to create an atmosphere of fellowship and cooperation.

For further information, visit our at
www.buddhistcouncilmidwest.org



The Program

Keynote Speaker

Venerable Pannavati

Co-founder and co-Abbot of the
Embracing-Simplicity Hermitage in

Hendersonville, North Carolina. Venerable Pannavati has been recognized internationally as an advocate for disempowered women and children, the homeless, youth in crisis, and other marginalized people.

Panel Discussion on Buddhism and Violence

Kerry Ito, Tricia Teater, and Sunil Yadav

Interfaith Panel with representatives from different faith traditions including:

Islam, Catholicism, Hinduism, Jainism,
Native American and Buddhism

Continental Breakfast and Vegetarian Lunch included

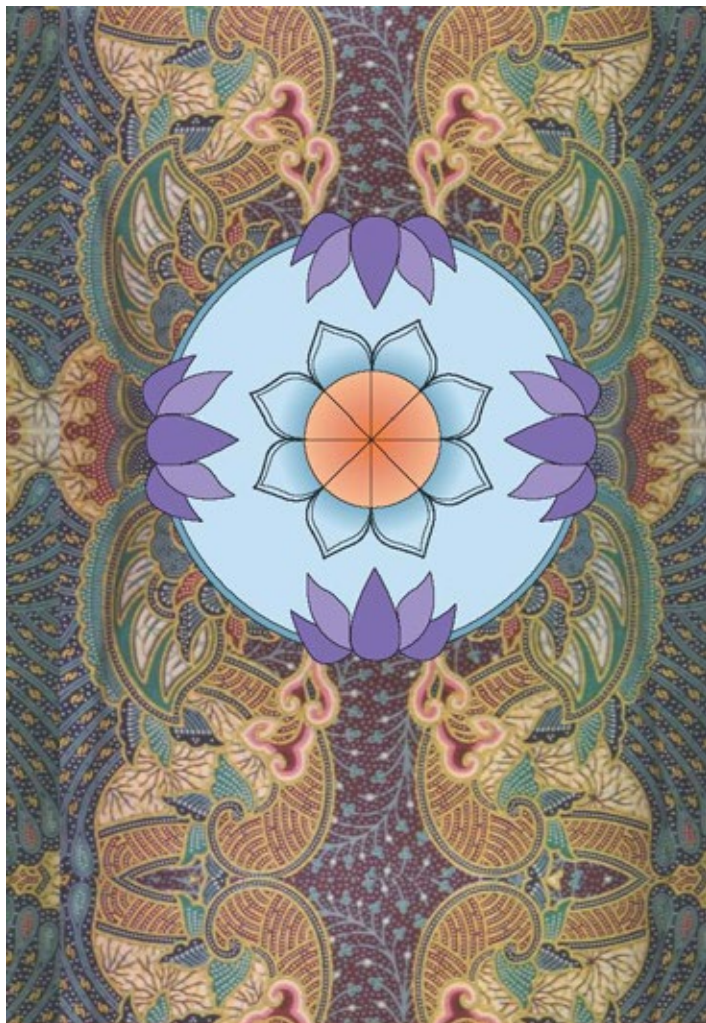
All Genders Welcome

Conference will be held at:

East-West University
816 S. Michigan Avenue,
Chicago, Illinois 60605

To register, and for further information visit us at:
www.dharmawomensconference.org

LET'S GO!
14th Sakyadhita International Conference
on Buddhist Women
Yogyakarta, Indonesia
June 23-30, 2015
<http://www.sakyadhita.org>



Sakyadhita

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on Buddhist Women

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Yogyakarta
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Register NOW!
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(All costs in USD)

Early bird registration by March 1 - \$60

Regular registration by April 15 - \$80

Late registration by May 15 - \$100

All meals for 8 days - \$80

2-Day Temple Tour after conference - \$30

Program Highlights

Confirmed speakers include

Ajahn Brahm

Ven. Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo

Ven. Thubten Chodron

Evening cultural performers will include dancers from many provinces of Indonesia and sutra readings accompanied by gamelan

Selected Workshops

Batik, Now and Then

Coffee and Zen

Compassion at Work

Dancing in the Mandala of the 21 Praises of Tara

Depictions of Women in Silk Road Buddhist Art

Dhamma and Animals

INFORMATION AND REGISTRATION

The 14th Sakyadhita Conference will be held in Indonesia at the Sambi Resort, located in the highlands on the outskirts of Yogyakarta. The tropical ambiance and spacious grounds at Sambi are an ideal setting for meditation, educational presentations, workshops, interactive discussions, and cultural exchanges. All voices are welcome at the Sakyadhita conferences: women and men, lay and ordained of all ages, nationalities, and perspectives.



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EDITORIAL STAFF

Charlotte B. Collins, M.A.

Elise A. DeVido, Ph.D.

Carol L. Winkelmann, Ph.D.

Lisa Battaglia, Ph.D.

Karen Gelinas, M.A., Staff Writer

Submissions are gratefully received for "Sakyadhita Sisters-USA: Our Lives, Our Stories, Our Practice" and for "Join the Conversation." "Announcements" to promote your programs or dharma center are welcome. Send submissions to: susa@sakyadhitausa.org



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of American Buddhist Women

"BUDDHISM & WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP"



Sakyadhita is a Sanskrit word, which translates as "daughters of the Buddha." Sakya was the clan name of Gautama Siddhartha, the Buddha. The word *dhita* means "daughters." Sakyadhita USA, a branch of Sakyadhita International, was formed to serve Buddhist women in the U.S. SUSA was established in 2010 and is governed by a board of eleven lay and monastic women who live in the U.S. We have more than 100 members across the country. Please consider becoming a member. You can read more about our goals and mission on the website and join the membership at: <http://www.sakyadhitausa.org>



Sakyadhita USA

A National Branch of Sakyadhita International Association
of Buddhist Women

P.O. Box 1649, Ridgecrest, CA 93556

Email: susa@sakyadhitausa.org

<http://www.sakyadhitausa.org>



SUSA's Mission

☞ To establish an inclusive alliance of Buddhist women in the U.S.

☞ To promote dialogue among Buddhist traditions.

☞ To encourage wise, compassionate action for the benefit of humanity.

☞ To work for gender equity in Buddhist education, training, institutional structures, and ordination.

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