

Sakyadhita: Buddhist Women in a Transnational Forum

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Abstract

Sakyadhita, “Daughters of the Buddha,” is a transnational organization that attempts to link Buddhist women together. Its mission statement outlines objectives that include working toward full ordination of women in all Buddhist traditions and providing resources for women to be more active participants and teachers within Buddhist traditions. Built into Sakyadhita’s goals are numerous challenges: the difficulties of sustaining a global project, of acquiring the means and committed personnel to do so, and the strain of its activist platform. A further challenge is the organization’s capacity to bridge difference reflected in different understandings of Buddhist history and practices, different views of women’s development, differing feminisms, and contentions over the use of resources, financial and otherwise. To take a closer look at Sakyadhita’s work and its ability to meet its objectives, the researchers undertook a case study of the Sixth Sakyadhita Conference, held in Lumbini, Nepal in 2000. Through a survey of the conference participants (including some follow-up interviews) the researchers were able to establish a profile of the workings of the organization.

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One of the characteristics of religions in this first decade of the 21st century is a global presence. With the possibility of

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linkages through rapid communication and global travel, matched by the flow of resources, more than a few transnational religious organizations have arisen in recent decades. These organizations have attempted to create global communities for various purposes with political, humanitarian, evangelical or other aims in mind. Buddhism has not been insulated from such processes; in the past 20 years a group of Buddhist women have spearheaded a transnational organization they call Sakyadhita, “Daughters of the Buddha.” Its purpose is to provide an international forum for Buddhist women’s concerns and to facilitate linkages between Buddhist women from different countries and different Buddhist traditions. One of the main ways Sakyadhita creates a forum is by convening international conferences every two to three years. Organized around a unifying theme such as peace-making, each conference seeks to create a meeting place where Buddhist women can learn from each other by sharing their experiences. Implicit in this purpose is the hope that the knowledge shared will inform and thus further the work of others.

The vision of Sakyadhita is ambitious and not without the challenges—financial, logistical, cross-cultural, and so on—that beset other non-profit, voluntary-run international organizations. This paper proposes to examine Sakyadhita’s work by undertaking a case study of the Sixth Sakyadhita Conference, held in Lumbini, Nepal in 2000. We begin with an introduction to the organization and its history, and then turn to the Lumbini conference. While we include some description of the events of the conference, our main discussion derives from the information we gathered from women who participated in the conference. We administered questionnaires to those attending (conducting follow-up interviews with some) concerning their participation in both the conference and in the organization, seeking their perspectives and understanding of the goals and accomplishments of Sakyadhita, its strengths and limitations and its future prospects. Our goal was to listen to the individuals who came together under the auspices of Sakyadhita, and through their responses, reflect upon the organization’s work. Their assessments of Sakyadhita’s attempts to create a global community of Buddhist women provide insight into the viability of its work.

SAKYADHITA, “DAUGHTERS OF THE BUDDHA”

Sakyadhita grew out of the First International Conference on Buddhist Women held in Bodhi Gaya in February 1987. At the conference, a number of women, including Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Ayya Khema, Chatsumarn Kabil Singh and others, recognized that they shared similar

concerns about the access Buddhist women had to religious and material resources. One important issue was the question of full ordination for women and the restitution of the bhikkunni/bhiksuni sangha in those Buddhist countries where it no longer existed. Many of the participants of the conference also recognized that they had been undertaking similar work related to women's education, to the improvement of facilities for women to become fuller participants in Buddhist life, to fostering a sense of collective agency among Buddhist women, and to an overall empowerment of Buddhist women. An outcome of the conference was the creation of Sakyadhita, to serve as an umbrella Buddhist women's organization to help consolidate these efforts and to facilitate continued work in these areas. The organization was registered in the early 1990s in the U.S. as an international non-profit organization.

Since that gathering in 1987, considerable work has been done under the aegis of Sakyadhita. Through the efforts of several key participants, a series of international conferences have been organized, in Sri Lanka, Ladakh, Cambodia, Nepal, Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, and elsewhere (see listing Sakyadhita 2005). Several edited volumes drawing upon conference presentations and other materials (Tsomo, ed. 2006, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2000, 1999, 1994) have seen wide circulation. Newsletters and a website publicize the work of the organization, fostering links among Buddhist women (Sakyadhita 2006). Directories of religious resources and organizations often include Sakyadhita among their listings.¹ Sakyadhita has also undertaken different projects. Working with other Buddhist organizations, Sakyadhita helped sponsor an ordination ceremony in 1996 at the Saranath Temple, India, in which eleven selected Sinhalese Dasa Sil Mata nuns were ordained fully as bhikkhunis by a team of Theravada monks in concert with a quorum of Korean nuns (Weeraratne 1998). With Sakyadhita's support, the Jamyang Choling program for Himalayan women sponsors the education of women, ranging in age from eleven to mid-fifties, of Tibetan Buddhist cultural backgrounds from remote Himalayan regions (Jamyang Choling Nunnery 2002). In Sri Lanka, through the efforts of Ranjani de Silva and others, a Sakyadhita Centre for Training and Meditation has been opened, with programs for ordained and lay women of Sri Lanka and abroad.

The mission statement of Sakyadhita (2006) identifies several purposes:

- To promote world peace through the practice of the Buddha's teachings
- To create a network of communications for Buddhist women throughout the world
- To promote harmony and understanding among the various

Buddhist traditions

To encourage and help educate women as teachers of
Buddhadharma

To provide improved facilities for women to study and
practice the teachings

To help establish the bhikshuni sangha (community of
fully-ordained nuns) where it does not currently exist.

The organization defines itself as Buddhist, actively engaged in the practice and application of Buddhist teachings. Within the framework of its larger goals of international harmony, it seeks to bring together Buddhist traditions and the Buddhist women who follow the various traditions. The statement also identifies some very specific objectives: to work toward full ordination of women in all Buddhist traditions, and to help provide resources for women to be more active participants and teachers within Buddhist traditions. Sakyadhita proposes to challenge conservative tendencies that have restricted and limited the range of possibilities for women, and to do so from within Buddhist teachings.

Since its inception much has been accomplished. At the same time, built into Sakyadhita's goals are numerous challenges, related to the scope of its mission. To sustain a global project requires not only resources and committed personnel, but also some degree of shared vision among its participants. Questions can be raised about the scope and success of its activist platform, and also whether the women supporting the work of Sakyadhita endorse the same concerns.

A related question is whether an umbrella organization such as Sakyadhita can serve as an effective voice for Buddhist women. Sakyadhita's statement of self-identification implies that a global community is not only desirable, but also possible. That statement, however, does not indicate how Sakyadhita can accommodate difference, whether stemming from the disparate conditions of Buddhism in Asia, North America, Australia, and Europe, or from different understandings of Buddhist history and practices, or from different views of women's development, or from different views of personhood and womanhood, or from differing feminisms, or from contentions over the use of resources, financial and otherwise. The possibility of tensions resulting from any of these differences is real.

Cognizant of the challenges Sakyadhita might face, we sought to gauge the perspectives of individuals involved in the organization by surveying attendees of the Sixth Sakyadhita Conference, held in Lumbini, Nepal in 2000. Our reasons for undertaking a study of this conference included the significance of the site, as Lumbini marks the Buddha's birthplace, and also because by 2000 with its sixth gathering, Sakyadhita

had demonstrated some longevity. Our purpose was to gather information about the degree of participation and involvement in Sakyadhita of those attending the conference and to listen to their assessments of Sakyadhita in order to understand the strengths and weaknesses of an organization that aspires to provide a global forum for the concerns of Buddhist women—and to come to a better understanding of the expectations brought to bear on this transnational gathering of Buddhist women.

THE SIXTH CONFERENCE, LUMBINI NEPAL

The theme of the Sixth International Conference was “Women as Peacemakers: Self, Family, Community and World.” After the first day’s opening ceremonies, the daily pattern of the conference included meditation, breakfast, morning presentations and discussion groups, lunch break, afternoon presentations and discussion groups, tea, chanting and meditation, cultural presentations and the evening meal. Proceedings began at 7 a.m. and ended at 7 p.m. The final day included a Sakyadhita Council meeting to discuss visions, dialogue, and make resolutions.

The meditation sessions were conducted by both lay and monastic women from Australia, Nepal, Canada, Burma, Sri Lanka, Japan and Korea. Meals were taken in two separate areas, one for monastics and another for laity. The presentations were divided into themes: Understanding Women in Buddhist Cultures, Women’s Health in the Buddhist Community, Women for a Peaceful Millennium: Learning Peace-building Skills, Leadership and Empowerment—Practical Skills and Paths to Enlightenment—Monastery and Family. The style of presentations varied from scholarly talks to workshops on practical skills to more specifically Buddhist presentations on the integration of Buddhist values and practice into daily family life.

According to the list compiled by the organizing committee, participants came from twenty-four countries. Table 1 lists the countries in

TABLE 1.
Participants and
Countries of Residence

USA	52
India	27
Australia	11
Canada	9
UK	9
Cambodia	7
Sri Lanka	7
Vietnam	6
Nepal	5
Thailand	5
Bangladesh	6
Germany	4
Japan	3
Bhutan	3
Myanmar	3
Netherlands	3
Taiwan	3
Norway	2
Switzerland	2
China	1
Hong Kong	1
Korea	1
New Zealand	1
Singapore	1

the order of largest to smallest number of participants,² This table indicates that 172 delegates (nearly all women) attended.³ Given the fluidity of attendance, numbers were higher on some days; not all delegates stayed the entire eleven days. Some nunneries from India, Nepal and other near-by countries were able to send larger delegations of nuns; not everyone who attended had their names registered. For the opening ceremonies numbers were much larger, due to the presence of invited dignitaries.

These were sent to the named delegates for whom complete contact information was provided; we also sent multiple copies of the questionnaire to institutions and nunneries that sent groups. We received 44 questionnaires in return, or just over 24% return. Not all the questionnaires were fully useful; four gave us sparse information. Because our questionnaires were in English (the cost for translations into all the languages of the attendees was prohibitive) the necessity of being able to read and respond in English may have precluded some responses. All of the respondents were women.

PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

A large geographical spread was represented in the returned questionnaires; places of residence comprised fifteen countries, with 9 countries were not represented. In most of these cases there were only one or two or three delegates from that country at the conference. Of the 44 responses received, 23 were from Asian women, 20 from Western women, one from an individual of ancestry indigenous to the Americas, providing a balance of east-west distribution. Table 2 tabulates the cultural regions.

Different streams of Buddhism were represented among the questionnaire respondents. Table 3 outlines the ways the respondents identified themselves religiously. Individuals following Theravadin and Vajrayana/Tibetan traditions made up the larger numbers. These numbers included Western women who were not born into these traditions, but who adopted them at some stage in their adult lives. Among the respondents were individuals who grew up in one Buddhist

TABLE 2.
Regions

Asian	
South Asia	7
East Asia	3
Chinese Asia	3
Southeast Asia	5
Central Asia	5
Western	
Australia	7
North America	8
Europe	5
South America	1
Indig. to the Americas	1

tradition but now engage in another, and individuals who started with one practice but have switched to another; they were tabulated according to the tradition they now follow. The heading, Several Streams of Buddhism, includes individuals who follow a combination of practices drawn from different Buddhist traditions. Also attending were women of other religious persuasions who came for interfaith reasons, and others who attended for professional purposes. Eighty percent, or 36 out of the 44 respondents, indicated that they maintained some practice, such as meditation, chanting, sadhana, or dharma study. Seventeen respondents had taken one or more of the bhikkuni/bhiksuni vows; some were novice nuns, others have received full ordination.

Comments added by some ordained respondents showed a frustration at the ruptures in practice that result from the absence of full bhikkuni/bhiksuni ordination in some traditions. One ordained women noted that her practices combined Tibetan and Chinese traditions, because she received ordination at the sramanerika level from a Tibetan Rinpoche, and then full ordination from a Chinese lineage.

Eighteen respondents identified themselves as lay Buddhists. Another identified herself as neither ordained nor lay. The rest of the respondents identified themselves as non-Buddhists, with one ordained in a Christian tradition.

Some representation of different age groups appeared. However, 66% of the respondents were in their 40s and older, with the largest group (15 out of 42 responses) being in their 40s.³ Women in their 30s (9 out of 42) was the next largest. Six respondents were in their 50s, 6 were retired, and 6 were in their 20s or younger. Seventy percent of the respondents live in an urban area; another 4 indicated suburban or semi-rural/semi-urban residences, bringing the figure to 80%.

The level of education of the respondents was also high. Seventy-five percent (33 out of 44) had at least one college degree, with 45% having Master's or PhD training. Several of the respondents had multiple degrees and diplomas. Several factors may have contributed to this educational level. One is the age groups of the respondents; a second may have been the format of the survey which required questionnaires to be completed in English and returned by mail. Also, many conference

TABLE 3.
Buddhisms Represented

Theravadin	13
Vajrayana/Tibetan	15
Mahayana	1
Chinese	2
Ambedkarite	2
Zen	3
Several Streams of Buddhism	2
Inter-faith connection	6

participants, particularly the Asian women, were activists, teachers and community workers. The level of education for the Western respondents also reflects Coleman's findings (2001:192-3; 205-6). His survey results found a disproportionately high level of education among Western Buddhists, with more than half his respondents (51%) holding advanced degrees, and a total of 94% having at least some college.

The occupations of the respondents ranged from academic positions to family business, to civil service positions, to unpaid work. Teaching figured prominently. Thirteen (or 29.5%) held or were retired from teaching positions, and another three taught Buddhism in non-academic settings, bringing the percentage to just over 36%. Another 11 indicated that some sort of teaching, such as meditation instruction, was part of their regular activities. Three respondents worked in health professions; another two did technical work in health fields. Five worked in social services and community development. Other occupations included the civil service, business and personnel administration, executive assistance, clerical work, journalism and writing, and studying. Several of the women listed several paid activities, including teaching and community work. Of the ordained women, eight had professions, such as academic teaching, while the rest indicated that being a nun was their occupation.

TABLE 4.
Knowledge of Conference

PRESENCE AT

THE CONFERENCE

One question in the survey related to knowledge of the conference; other questions related to reasons for attending, past participation at other Sakyadhita gatherings, and the degree of involvement with the organization. Table 4 summarizes how respondents knew of the conference. Only 25% had some sustained involvement with the organization; another 25% were able to come through financial sponsorship. Various networks of activity (such as other conference links, invitation to present, being on mailing lists, knowledge of Sakyadhita's work) and other circumstances (happened

Previous involvement with Sakyadhita	10
Financial sponsorship	10
Invited to present	4
Knew of Sakyadhita's work and conferences	4
Direct mailing	3
Learned of conference on Internet	3
Other conference links	2
Learned from friend	2
Happened to be in Nepal at the time of conference	2
Advertisement in journal	1

to be in Nepal at the time of the conference) contributed to participants' decision to attend.

TABLE 5.
Involvement with Sakyadhita

For many respondents (65% or 26 out of 40), this was the first Sakyadhita conference attended. Thirty-five percent had attended at least one other conference, with 27.3% having attended two or more, while 22.5% (9 out of 40) had attended most other conferences. These figures correspond to responses elsewhere on the questionnaire about length of ties with Sakyadhita. Only 40% (16 out of 40) had some connection with the organization for longer than five years, while for 50% (20 out of 40), the connection was less than two years. Twenty percent (8 out of 40) had been involved since the 1990s, and another 2 since Sakyadhita's inception in 1987. Table 5 lists these responses. These returns indicate a fluid or transient outer involvement by most individuals, matched by the efforts of a much smaller core of individuals committed to Sakyadhita.

Since inception, 1987	2
Since the early 1990s	8
From 4-7 yrs	6
From 2-3 yrs	4
Less than 2 yrs	20

It should be noted that our survey was directed to individuals at the Lumbini conference and that attendance at one conference is not necessarily an indicator of commitment to or involvement with the organization. Individuals quite active with the scope of work undertaken by Sakyadhita work might not have attended the Lumbini conference, or any other Sakyadhita conference. A few respondents indicated longer activity with the organization, but not having attended previous conferences. For example, one respondent wrote that she missed the last conference and resolved not to miss the Nepal conference no matter what.

Still, in response to another question, a significant number of the respondents (43.5%, 17 out of 39 responses) had learned about Sakyadhita only within the past two years, while two others indicated that their connection with the organization was minimal. Fortuitous circumstances led them to attend the conference. At the same time, nine respondents (out of 39, or 23%) were executive members or national representatives of the organization. Another three indicated intersections between their activism and professional work and Sakyadhita's stated endeavours.

The ways in which the different respondents came to know about Sakyadhita and its activities provide some insight into the public presence of the organization. In response to the question of how the respondents knew about the organization, two indicated that they were part of the movement launched at the 1987 conference; two others cited their

knowledge of that gathering as their initial contact. Four other venues were cited by the rest of the respondents: networking (53%), publicity about and by the organization (17%), sponsorship to attend conferences (9.7%), and being part of the local community where previous conferences had been held (14.6%). One respondent observed that it sometimes take time for the interest to ripen: she wrote that in her own case “it took six years after reading [her] first book on Sakyadhita before [she] actually got around to attending and participating at a conference.”

PERSONAL REASONS FOR ATTENDING THE CONFERENCE

Various reasons were cited by the respondents for attending the conference. These ranged from highly personal reasons, such as wishing to be with like-minded people or to renew contacts, to an interest in the focus of the conference and the workshops and lectures it offered, to curiosity about a Buddhist women’s organization. Others came for ecumenical reasons. Table 7 lists these reasons.

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These results suggest the topic of the conference was of much less interest to the respondents than other purposes. The

international make-up of the conference and the presence of both nuns and lay women from different Buddhist traditions and centres was attractive to a number of participants. Others cited reasons of solidarity, to support the efforts of Sakyadhita to draw Buddhist women

TABLE 6.
Knowledge of Sakyadhita

<i>Long-time Connection</i>	
Organizers from 1987 conference	2
Since 1987 conference	2
<i>Networking</i>	
Members of Buddhist nunneries	6
Through Ayya Khema	4
Through Karma Lekshe Tsomo	4
Other Buddhist organizations	3
Other personal contacts	4
Professional contacts	1
<i>Reading & Publicity</i>	
Books edited by members of Sakyadhita mentioning Sakyadhita	3
Sakyadhita website	2
Sakyadhita Newsletter	1
Advertisement	1
<i>Rotation of Conference Sites, Other</i>	
From community or area of previous Sakyadhita conference site	6
Knew of Sakyadhita because financial sponsorship enabled attendance	4

TABLE 7.
Personal Reasons for Attending the Conference

<i>Focus of conference, venue</i>	
Topics of papers, workshops	3
To present paper, conduct workshop	3
Location, including to visit Lumbini, the Buddha's birthplace	6
<i>Share experience, meet with other women, encounter different people, traditions</i>	
International make-up, meeting of different streams of Buddhism	5
Intersection of practitioners and researchers, presence of nuns and lay women	4
Be with like-minded people	4
Renew contacts	2
<i>Solidarity, support for work of Sakyadhita</i>	
Support work with Buddhist women	7
Support Buddhist faith, religious work	4
On-going commitment to Sakyadhita	7
Wanting to ensure regional voices were heard	1
Wanting to see the type of work Sakyadhita is doing	3

Note: Many respondents cited more than one reason, hence the total number of responses being greater than the number of returned questionnaires.

together, and to support the work of Buddhist women, as well as contribute to the well-being of Buddhism. A few of the responses also raised questions about Sakyadhita's work. One wanted to ensure that regional voices were heard; three others suggested they were coming out of curiosity or for reasons of wanting to see what Sakyadhita was hoping to accomplish. The location of the conference was also a draw; some individuals saw the conference as a pilgrimage to a gathering of like-minded women combined with a pilgrimage to the birthplace of the Buddha.

WHAT PARTICIPANTS HOPED THE CONFERENCE WOULD ACCOMPLISH

In the questionnaires, we attempted to distinguish between the personal reasons participants had in attending, and what they saw as the purpose of the gathering, or what they hoped it would accomplish. Table 8 summarizes the responses. Just as the participants came because of a range of different personal reasons, they also came with a range of expectations. The question was open-ended ("What did you hope [the conference] would accomplish?"), allowing respondents their own expression. Here again, respondents listed multiple expectations. In processing this qualitative information, we tabulated similar responses, using the respondents' phrasings to create headings, and then organized these responses in the larger categories of consciousness-raising, advocacy and solidarity, dialogue across cultures and traditions, personal and professional work, and other reasons. Clusters of responses showed up in four particular areas: the international nature of the conference and the possibility of dialogue and exchange such a gathering might enable; the possibility of a forum where women could learn from each other; the possibility of a forum where local, or less-known challenges facing Buddhist women could be addressed; and general advocacy, the bringing to public attention issues and challenges faced by Buddhist women.

The most common aspiration was that the conference would provide a meeting ground for Buddhist women. Some 45% of the respondents indicated that they hoped for exchanges and dialogue among Buddhist women of different traditions and different areas. One Western nun working in Ladakh stated that her interest in the Lumbini conference was initially "to take the group of nuns" she leads, "to help them get a broader view of the Buddhist world by meeting nuns from other cultures," though she felt this goal was only partially accomplished. Another wrote that she was hoping to meet some nuns from the Buddhist tradition she follows.

Support for local Buddhist women (cited by 7 respondents, or 17.5%) was mentioned second most frequently. One long-time organizer of Sakyadhita from South Asia was very specific about the purpose of the sixth conference: she hoped that having the conference in Nepal would have some beneficial impact on nuns and Buddhist women there, at least by raising awareness of nuns' issues. To some extent she felt there were some positive indicators, such as during the opening day when "senior monks expressed their willingness to help the bhiksunis." Consciousness-raising also saw some mention.

Other aspirations were mentioned less frequently. The hope of gaining information or understanding applicable to one's own work and

TABLE 8.
What the respondents hoped the conference would accomplish

<i>Consciousness-raising, advocacy and solidarity</i>	
Support for local Buddhist women	7
Consciousness-raising, bringing to public attention issues and challenges faced by Buddhist women	6
Support for Buddhist women	2
Give attention to regional needs	1
<i>Dialogue across cultures, traditions</i>	
Provide forum for dialogue among women of different traditions, cultures	18
To meet Buddhist women, nuns	4
<i>Have voices heard, hope to be beneficial for own work</i>	
Provide forum where experiences could be shared, and where one could learn from other women	7
Provide tools for personal/professional work	4
Provide insights into place of women, feminism in Buddhism	4
Provide more understanding of Buddhism	2
Provide more understanding of practice	1
Further knowledge, education	1
<i>Other</i>	
Would benefit people	2
No expectations, simply wanted to attend	5

Note: Many respondents cited more than one reason, hence the total number of responses being greater than the number of returned questionnaires.

more understanding in certain defined areas, such as the intersection of feminism and Buddhism, and other reasons show up in Table 8. Some respondents cited no expectations.

Were the respondents' expectations fulfilled? Mixed responses came back on that question. A number of respondents chose not to answer that question. Of the 24 who did, 11 (or 45.8%) indicated they felt the conference accomplished what it needed to. Of these responses, one suggested that though she was satisfied, she felt more could have been done to facilitate understanding between nuns and lay women. Four respondents (or 16.6%) responded negatively, that the aims had not been

fulfilled. The other 9 responses were qualified. Three felt most of the aims were accomplished; four said some yes, some no, and two said not quite. Significantly, among the negative responses (those decidedly negative, and those partly negative) were four respondents who specifically cited a failure to address regional needs.

BENEFITS OF THE CONFERENCE

In addition to querying the participants on their expectations, the survey also asked the participants what they got out of the conference. Table 9 outlines these responses. Reasons were sometimes very personal, as for one Western nun living in southeast Asia who spoke about her mother coming from Europe to attend the conference. For her it was a “very important time to be with my mother, to share my life with my mother.” An organizer of the conference spoke of the different roles she played, highlighting the combination of actual practice with discussion:

(A)s an organizer it meant a lot of time and energy—a challenge to staying centred and in the present moment. As a presenter—a wonderful opportunity to lead meditation ...among such wonderful and distinguished guests as well as to present a “paper take” on meditation and its values in daily lay-life. As a participant—the opportunity to meet and talk and share with other women on a similar spiritual path.

An Asian nun observed that her attendance at the conference meant that she “could understand the stream of Buddhism over the world.” One respondent, who attended because of interfaith reasons, took note of the shared religiosity, “it made me aware of the universal truths common with all religious beliefs systems.” At the same time, she notes elsewhere in her questionnaire that the differences were apparent: “It was interesting to see how much our socio-economic differences affected the way we think, we live and how it impacts on us culturally. The conflicts which occurred in a very small way of the conference are a microcosm of what actually occurs in war.” She spoke of the conference making her “aware of [her] limitations.” An Asian woman observed that “we still need some mutual understanding and cooperation between us.” She had responded that she had hoped the conference would provide a forum of different women gathering to get to know each other for mutual understanding and cooperation—an aim she felt was only half accomplished. A veteran member of Sakyadhita found that the Lumbini conference showed progress, with its greater numbers, with new ideas, more qualified speakers, and more innovative work.

TABLE 9.
Impact of the Conference on Respondents

<i>Networking</i>	
Networking, taking part in a large gathering of Buddhist women	22
Sharing experiences, having voice heard	13
Furthering work on community development projects	2
<i>Insight and understanding related to Buddhism, Buddhist women and personal religiosity</i>	
Exposure to many aspects of Buddhism	11
Cross-cultural exposure	8
Deeper appreciation of spiritual issues	8
Further understanding of the limitations/opportunities facing Buddhist women, especially nuns	5
Participation in the propagation of dharma, Buddhist life	5
Change of direction of life	2
<i>Insight into organizational processes</i>	
Recognition of the limitations of an organization such as Sakyadhita, including recognition of the differences between Asian and Western approaches	7
Further awareness of what causes interpersonal and intercultural conflict	2

The positive responses included feeling invigorated by the gathering, gaining fuller understanding of issues facing Buddhist women and nuns, a deeper appreciation for spiritual issues. Over 50% of the respondents cited networking, taking part in a large gathering of Buddhist women as particularly meaningful; 32% cited the sharing of experiences and having their voices heard. Two women called it a life-changing experience.^V One Western woman wrote, “there is no way I would have known about the options [women have for study, learning, practice] without meeting the members of Sakyadhita.” She was “overwhelmed by the stories...heard from the nuns of Tibet and Cambodia,” and she was “inspired to finally meet Western nuns who are doing great things.” A Tibetan nun observed the conference was a “tremendous opportunity” to let others know about the issues nuns in isolated communities face—a presentation that had resonance, as evinced by the “increased respect for nuns facing limited opportunities” that another participant felt she gained

from the conference.

For some of the respondents (12%), participation in the conference was felt to be participation in the propagation of dharma; 26% felt they gained an appreciation for the richness of Buddhist traditions through their interaction with different Buddhist women. One Asian woman wrote that the conference gave her "a great opportunity...to learn Buddhist Dhamma from the various countries' venerable enlightened women."

Some of the respondents drew particular attention to the intersection between lay and ordained women that the conference allowed. A North American woman, working for an NGO in Asia observed that the conference had a profound effect for her in helping "to usher in a deeper understanding and appreciation for those women who choose to take ordination or dedicate themselves by whatever means possible to the dharma." She noted that she "never had the opportunity in the west to speak with a nun about spiritual issues or about how people choose the paths that they take." She noted that among the draws of the conference were the sessions on the lay and monastic paths to enlightenment. However, she felt "that a lot more could have been done to facilitate a deeper understanding between nuns and lay-women at the conference," a point of importance for other respondents, "and also between women from the west and the east." Not having attended earlier conferences, she was uncertain whether such foundational work had already been done at them, but she felt that "the foundations of mutual respect and understanding are always worth repeating as an good active reminder." Another respondent echoed this view when she cited, "coalition, mutual understanding and support between monastics and laity."

At the same time, certain respondents (17%) observed that the differences between Asian and Western approaches were evident (for one respondent, "as in previous conferences"), that they were able to recognize the limitations of an organization such as Sakyadhita, and the conference enabled them to become more aware of what causes interpersonal and intercultural conflict. One observed, "The needs of Eastern and Western Buddhist women are quite different and I feel these need to be addressed."

Taken together, the responses to the questions regarding what attending the conference meant to the participants, what expectations the participants had, and what were their reasons for attending suggest that questions of collective identity, or identify as Buddhist women, were catalytic for the conference. This fostering of identity shows up in expressions that suggest an enhancement of a sense of self-being informed by relational processes of being with and relating to others, on

a cultural, personal, or sectarian level. Identity was also expressed through the cultivation of a sense of solidarity with other Buddhist women, a desire of mutual participation of all Buddhist traditions, and an interest in learning of the challenges of other women. One respondent specifically cited how the conference not only deepened her Buddhist practice, but also provided her with “a large network of women to which I feel a great kinship with” in an integrated way regarding mutual support, life work and Buddhist practice. The impact the gathering had on many of the respondents was an appreciation of a feeling of co-participation in a shared project, even if that project was simply the fostering of a sense of shared identity. A Western woman ordained in the Soto Zen tradition observed how attending the conference “broadened [her] view of Buddhism and Buddhist practice.” For her, the conference refreshed her practice and her confidence about taking ordination and her purpose in life. A Tibetan nun whose attendance was sponsored spoke about seeing herself in a larger context. She wrote she was aware of the importance of her education in light of the work there is to do.

The expression of shared identity was tempered by attempts not to mistake similarities with sameness. The responses express attempts at recognizing the particularities, the conditions and circumstances that different Buddhist women found themselves in. In some ways, the conference appeared to generate what is akin to “goodwill,” the learning about and appreciation of another’s conditions, with the effect of that awareness providing a kind of vicarious support for the other, or a mitigation of feelings of isolation.

This goodwill sometimes had a hegemonic quality to it. For some of the Western respondents this goodwill was expressed in a benevolent voice that displaced Asian women’s agencies, as expressed in an interest in the “plight” of Asian nuns. Implicit criticism of the conference’s English medium of communication showed up in a few responses. As one woman put it, “I did not feel the translation needs were met for the participants.” One attendee remarked that she “did not feel there was enough opportunity for nuns to share the strength of their practice as most of the presentations were from lay-people.” She further observed:

I also felt a little bit of imposition of Western ideals on Eastern culture in terms of the types of presentations which were a bit “new age” and sometimes seemed pale in comparison to the remarkable audience. Not to criticise the presenters who were great in their own right—but a little bit strange in the context of having an audience of so many renunciates.

Her response suggests she wanted to hear more of the experiences of the nuns in attendance. She added that she found the American influence in

the presentations and organization over-powering, as did an Asian nun who observed that "Buddhism is not capitalism." This nun was disquieted by the pervasion of Western women's voices, feeling that they were so predominant because they had made so many financial offerings.

JUST HOW BUDDHIST IS SAKYADHITA?

A theme that ran through several of the questionnaires (15%) raised questions about how Buddhist the organization is. One woman raised questions about the level of religious awareness of those who had assumed leadership roles. She wondered if they had sufficient grasp of Buddhist values. Another woman noted the lack of prayers each day. Three nuns, one Asian, two Western, raised concerns about the organizational details. One nun found the rules of the Vinaya not implemented. She stated, in reference to where nuns were seated, that "correct sitting order should be implemented as it is in accordance with the Vinaya" to follow protocol of placing the nuns before the lay women. In a follow-up interview she observed: "It would be good if [there was] some kind of consideration for this sort of detail as it shows an educated respect for the teachings of the Buddha. It would seem appropriate for the daughters of the Buddha to follow the teachings of the Vinaya." This then would demonstrate "the right attitude to the vows." Another pointed out that timing of meals ignored nuns' vows, and she "felt discriminated against as a western nun."

An Asian nun also drew attention to the lack of proper protocol: "Lay women didn't respect the ordained nuns except their tradition." She observed that in her country of residence, lay and ordained women do not meet together. Elsewhere in her responses she remarked that she felt Western women want to establish their independent sangha, but her next comment suggested she was unsure as to whether it would conform to what she felt were Buddhist ways. She stated, "Buddhism must be treated by pure Buddhist way (thinking)" [her parenthesis]. In another place she observed, "Right tradition must be respected and western women must learn right traditional Buddhism with modesty." Her final comments were hopeful, however: "Let's become one mind as a real Buddhist!" Taken together, these comments indicate contention regarding what constitutes authenticity in the face of different cultural expressions of Buddhist practice. Some remarks express suspicion as to the depth of understanding of Buddhist teachings of others, especially non-Asians, when measured against practices understood as normative.

And there were at least some direct, tangible outcomes to the conference. One respondent advised that interest in her presentation led to an invitation by nuns from Ladakh to run a training program.

MISSION OF SAKYADHITA

With regard to what they saw as the mission of Sakyadhita, respondents again often listed several related purposes. Table 10 tabulates these responses.

<i>Nuns' issues</i>	
Work towards establishment of bhikkuni/bhiksuni sangha)	6
Material support for less-well-off nuns	4
Support, to help nuns achieve their goals	3
<i>Asian women's needs</i>	
Support for Asian women to gain access to education	5
Help Asian women develop self-sufficiency in their endeavours	2
The psychological development of Asian women	1
<i>Advocacy, networking, education</i>	
Unite and empower Buddhist women around the world, to provide a voice for Buddhist women	19
To work as a pressure group for Buddhist women, and publicize Buddhist women's needs	3
Disseminate information about Buddhist women; undertake research	2
Promote research on women's issues and Buddhism, including history of women and Buddhism	2
Broker between donors and communities in need	1
<i>Dialogue</i>	
Increase dialogue between Buddhist women of different traditions	4
Promote understanding and tolerance, respect for different traditions, cultures	3
<i>Buddhist purposes</i>	
To aid in the globalization of and propagation of Buddhist principles	6
<i>Women's issues</i>	
To explore women's role in creating a better world, other ways of doing things	3
Empower women via spiritual means	3
Enhance the overall development of Buddhist women	3
Support for women's projects	1
To encourage an increasing number of women to enhance their skills by providing a forum for dialogue	1
<i>Other</i>	
Need to rethink its purposes, as most of the initial goals have been fulfilled	1

TABLE 10.
Sakyadhita's
Mission

NUNS' ISSUES

Given Sakyadhita's early identification of a campaign for the "recognition of full bhikkuni-ordination in all the traditions where there are presently no fully recognized bhikkhunis," it was not surprising that mention of advocacy for the right of Buddhist women to become fully ordained was mentioned by six of the respondents, among them women who had only short association with the organization. One respondent cited the efforts of Sakyadhita to establish the "bhikkuni sangha where the lineage is broken or never existed, like Sri Lanka where we have now about 200 bhiksunis." She observed that this accomplishment would not have been possible without the work of local Sri Lankan women whose commitment to women's gaining a place with the monastic community aligned them with Sakyadhita. Her observation suggested that Sakyadhita's role was to foster a coalition of women working on similar goals. Association with an international organization such as Sakyadhita would give these individuals support, financial or otherwise, but it was their efforts, and not the organization's, that saw results. Her observations suggested that the role of Sakyadhita was not to sponsor projects or impose an agenda, but rather work with individuals who had identified local needs and begun work to address those needs. This view was reiterated by another respondent who wrote of a need for Sakyadhita "to support local women's groups."

Another respondent, a westerner who has resided in Asia, linked the question of ordination of women to a Buddhist goal of reducing suffering. She suggested that a fuller contribution by women to Buddhist teaching was not a self-serving goal on the part of some women, but that it could have a larger benefit for everyone:

Sakyadhita's focus on building bridges for the establishment of the Bhiksuni Sangha in Asia is of great importance. The Bhiksuni Sangha in Asia could provide such a positive role model and option for women in this region, not to mention the positive influence it could have in the west also. The importance lies in the fact that Buddhist men and women alike are missing out on the potential insight and teaching that could be available through women if they were granted the appropriate training and educational opportunities that full ordination in the sangha provide. Furthermore, it would bear witness to the fact that women's spiritual potential is as equally valuable and potent as men's and this equality could then be reflected, in time, in both the spiritual and mundane worlds, reducing suffering. And the fact is that Sakyadhita has helped to facilitate this becoming a reality in many places, which is just fantastic.

The comments from a woman from Nepal echoed some of these observations, though she did not tie them solely to women's access to

ordination. In her view, a purpose of Sakyadhita was to “enhance the overall development of Buddhist women.” She spoke in terms of empowerment, an “awareness of women’s potential,” and an enablement of Buddhist women to develop their skills and talents. Another South Asian woman noted social roles nuns could fulfill when she spoke of “social development work in the village and health education through the nuns,” suggesting that nuns could serve as community workers for women in an application of socially engaged Buddhism.

Other respondents’ comments took in consideration the larger social processes that were tied to the question of redefinition of women’s roles in traditional settings. This included material support to enable women’s access to education and health care, and to help “keeping nunneries going” in places where women had access to few resources and where the well-being of female renunciates was neither a religious nor social priority. Sakyadhita’s early concern with nuns’ issues was reiterated in another respondent’s comments that the organization has (1) allowed “a forum for monastics to be heard,” and (2) has provided “a place where the need to support monastics (and lay as well) emotionally, financially and spiritually can be visible.”

Two western women raised questions about provision of financial assistance and whether it benefitted recipients or whether it promoted dependency. One wrote that a goal for Sakyadhita should be “*real* [emphasis in original] empowerment for Asian nuns—I see them being too dependent on western funds without much hope for changing this in the near future.” Another criticized one of Sakyadhita’s projects: “I think nunneries should be managing themselves. Right now [in reference to a particular nunnery] the administration—the finances, all is handled by the monks. Women will never learn what their values and skills are this way! Emancipation of nuns is one of *my* priorities and should be the one of Sakyadhita as well.”

Some of the responses about sponsorship here, as seen elsewhere in the questionnaires, had more than just a hint of paternalist benevolence, that Asian women were lacking in certain areas of development. In some cases, a respondent’s choice of wording revealed unexamined attitudes of privilege and difference between “haves” and “have-nots.” An Australian woman wrote about the hope “to help women and children from mostly developing countries attain an acceptable level of education and spiritual guidance so they can help themselves and others.” Another suggested that non-western women had more obstacles to overcome. In comparison, a Buddhist woman from Asia spoke in more mutual terms, “to encourage an increasing number of women to enhance their skills by providing a forum for dialogue” and for sharing skills. She

also raised a concern of relevancy to local capacities and needs, to “[f]ormulate and implement projects based on identified needs of different Sakyadhita women groups” and to “[d]o feasibility studies for Sakyadhita development programs for women.”

PROVIDING A VOICE FOR BUDDHIST WOMEN

International voice and advocacy. Notwithstanding the recognition given to Sakyadhita’s involvement in the issue of women’s ordination, many more respondents found the mission of Sakyadhita to be more generalized. Nearly half the respondents (47.5%) described Sakyadhita’s mission as the bringing together of Buddhist women in order to provide them with an international voice. One Asian woman was straight-forward in her endorsement of an advocacy role: “to assist, support and promote the welfare and causes of Buddhist women”; and “to unite Buddhist women.” Another, a Buddhist woman from Nepal, spoke of the development of a “sisterhood for mutual benefits.” Another, to “establish a global network of Buddhist women.” And another, to provide linkage “with the international women’s Buddhist community and a venue to share visions and aspirations and support.”

Networking. Another respondent in a leadership role in the organization included a list which suggested that she sees networking as integral to its aims. Her list read: “Buddhist women’s empowerment, networking, education and training, advocacy, research, create a coalition of Buddhist women internationally.” To that end she cited the conferences and resulting publications as among its important projects, as did others who observed that “Sakyadhita made it possible that women from all over the world come in contact, get to know each other, had discussions, talks, etc.” Others viewed such networking as providing “support and encouragement of Buddhist women as spiritual leaders.”

International meeting place. One respondent spoke of the dedication that the members of Sakyadhita have shown to ensure an international meeting place for Buddhist women, and of the inclusion of women from many countries in its gatherings. A Sri Lankan woman wrote that Sakyadhita enabled the “meeting of Buddhist women of all traditions and a strong sisterhood among all women from the East & West.” Other comments echoed these, emphasizing the value of solidarity through a “wonderful international network” that helped “increase in mutual understanding a united voice to challenge male dominance in Buddhist hierarchy, to state women’s needs and [their] historical place in sangha.” The purpose of Sakyadhita is: “to give Women Buddhist Practitioners the opportunity to come together to discuss, inform, and encourage one another”; “[t]he facilitation of an International Buddhist women’s

community”; to provide “an association of Buddhist women of all traditions, ordained and lay...to be a voice for Buddhist women.”; a “network of Buddhist women throughout the world that celebrates and shares our commonalities and difference in a manner that is supportive in nature.” Other respondents emphasized the value of exchanging information and skills, “to educate and inform women of the projects of Buddhist women” and “sharing ideas and experiences for mutual understanding of Buddha’s daughters for better thinking among us.” Dialogue between different Buddhist traditions was also cited, with several respondents affirming Sakyadhita’s mission in “increasing discussion between Buddhist women from a variety of countries.”

Self-awareness. Others found the value of an international meeting place in the self-recognition it provided, the awareness of the shared nature of challenge of being Buddhist women. Some respondents equated the positive self-awareness that comes from the acknowledgment of others with initial stages of empowerment. In a couple of cases, respondents seemed to position themselves as coaches or guides in this process. One western respondent wrote of the positive effects ensuing when “Asian Buddhist women realize that their lives, their traditions, their experiences are worth(y) to be talked about, to be discussed.” Others felt that equitable relations among the different Buddhist traditions and among Buddhist women needed to “begin right with Sakyadhita.”

Cautionary notes. There were also voices that cautioned against being swept up by the rhetoric of a shared community. One comes from a woman who has been involved with Sakyadhita for a long period of time and who has attended all the earlier conferences, except the one in Cambodia. She remarked that she has found it difficult to interest Buddhist women in Australia in attending conferences, not simply because of financial constraints, but because “women often seem to have difficulty thinking globally although they are active members of their own Buddhist organization.” Another woman from North America cautioned against mistaking hegemony for universality. While taking positive note of Sakyadhita’s international aspirations, she recognized the possibility of predominantly western concerns blanketing over other voices, “I believe that it is important that it *not* [emphasis added] become a “western” organization...[because] there are already many western groups and also because non-westerners can become overpowered by us privileged and arrogant women who have different agendas.” An Asian nun responded in a similar vein, that as an international clearing house ... “Sakyadhita is not really that helpful.” Rather, it “should be localized. Different traditions have their own problems and their concerns.” She ended her questionnaire with a query that challenged any idea of

universal concerns, that she would like to know how Sakyadhita [can] unite different people from different backgrounds, renunciators, practitioners, academic researchers, feminism and non-believers. From which point of view were these goals set?"

Education, dissemination of information and research. Related to the advocacy work done by the different women involved with Sakyadhita was the dissemination of information. One respondent saw a function of Sakyadhita "to publicize Buddhist women's needs (through conferences, publications, etc.)." Another cautioned that "books and written materials published by its members" needed to be "beneficial for all cases." A small percentage (just over 11%) saw research on the history of women in Buddhism and on the feminine in Buddhism" as relevant to Sakyadhita's purposes. This information could "serve as a resource for Buddhist women lay and ordained." The application of such research was noted; one respondent observed that the publication and dissemination of information "on women and the feminine in Buddhism" has "helped my personal dharma study and challenged me in new ways." Another related research to the "education of Buddhist women to be teachers of the dharma," while another Asian woman mentioned difficulties women sometimes have in gaining access to information. She recommended translation of Buddhist works such as the Bhikkuni Patimokka into vernaculars. She also saw a more active role for Sakyadhita in helping establish training centres for activists and other workers and providing help for the newly ordained.

BUDDHIST MISSION

Six respondents, all of them Asian, framed their answers to the question of Sakyadhita's mission in specifically Buddhist terms, seeing a purpose of the organization in the propagation of Buddhism—"[t]o communicate the principles of [the] Buddhist religion all over the world." Another saw the mission as "to make effectiveness of Buddha's teachings for day to day life for peace" and "to create awareness of Buddha's teachings of non-violence." Two others suggested that a wider dissemination of Buddhist teachings worldwide could serve as a venue for intercultural understanding and help promote world peace. One specifically said that she felt Sakyadhita had not done enough in this regard.

One respondent cited the promotion of Buddhist education with the aim of improving relations between Buddhist groups and Buddhist traditions. Another hoped the organization would help "encourage women Buddhists to educate themselves in Buddhist teachings," while noting that Sakyadhita still had much to do in the area of Buddhist education. One of the respondents also linked the goal of gender equality

to the “rectification of Buddhist teachings,” which she cited as not harming others, but instead collectively helping others. For this nun, gender equality represented an overcoming of the harmful treatment of women, and their subordination.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Table 11 summarizes what the respondents to the survey identified as Sakyadhita’s accomplishments.

<i>Provided a forum</i>	
Conferences, enabling Buddhist women of all traditions to gather together six times	15
Networking, sisterhood	9
Provided a bridge linking different Buddhists together; facilitated better relations	8
Facilitated an international community of Buddhist women	5
Fostered personal and professional links	1
Provided a forum for monastics to be heard	1
Mutual understanding between monastics and lay	1
<i>Dissemination of information, education</i>	
Publications	5
Education of Buddhist women	10
Circulation of information about Buddhist women and their activities	2
Promotion of research	1
<i>Nuns’ issues, women’s issues</i>	
Made nuns’ issues more visible	15
Advocacy for re-establishment of bhikshuni lineage; women’s place in the sangha	9
Strengthened and encouraged women, made them more aware of their potential	7
Financial and other assistance to nuns	6
Created more space for women in the Buddhist world	2
<i>Localized work</i>	
Encouraged a local voice for Buddhist women	6
Established regional centres	2

TABLE 11:
What
Sakyadhita
has
accomplished

Note: Many respondents cited more than one reason, hence the total number of responses being greater than the number of returned questionnaires.

Conferences and the provision of an international forum: The set of international conferences Sakyadhita has sponsored and organized were identified by 15 respondents (41.6% of those who responded) as among Sakyadhita's significant work. One effect of the conferences was the fostering of a sense of community. As one respondent expressed it, the conference was a "wonderful way to deepen our understanding and [it] facilitate[d] mutual support between and for Buddhist women and the challenges that lie before us." Notwithstanding all the logistical difficulties and time commitment involved, the "value of getting women together seems to be worth it." Included as well were mention of "networking, publications, retreats, friendships and professional links among Buddhist women and friends." Through these international gatherings, "communication between Buddhist women all over the world has been established." One cannot minimize the impact of the gatherings and the importance of creating the sense of membership in a larger community. An Asian woman summarized it when she responded to the question, "What has Sakyadhita done?" with the answer, "Reached out to Buddhist women."

More than just facilitating linkages among Buddhist women, community workers, activists, educators, practitioners, between lay and ordained women, the conferences were also seen as having a residual impact by the raising of awareness in regions where the conferences were held. One respondent believed that in the countries where Sakyadhita conferences have taken place, there was an impact on the local Buddhist women, that the conferences "activated them to work for the improvement of the situation of women in their countries, especially in the field of access to education in the field of Buddhism." Another woman observed that after the previous conference in Ladakh, people there became more conscious of women's concerns and nuns' problems and started to make little changes; a direct result of the conference was the establishment of a nunnery in Ladakh. The woman spoke of how the conference "opened the eyes of our nuns in Ladakh to see the other nuns," suggesting that recognition of a larger community helped overcome a sense of isolation. "Here the nuns have no proper teaching in the majority of the Nunneries."

Further, another respondent suggested that it is not only the local communities that are affected by the events of the conferences, but also that participants from outside can be impacted by the efforts of the hosting communities. Commenting on the Lumbini conference, she expressed her appreciation of the work of the Nepali women, especially Dharmawati Guru Ma, of the Vihara in Kathmandu, in staging the gathering: "the conference venue was built due to [the] generosity [of the

Nepali women, who had given five paisa or fifty paisa donations to the Vihara in Kathmandu] and devoted support for Dharmawati whose determination and grace was incredibly heart warming.”

Also cited in relationship to the consciousness raising that took place at conferences were possible impacts within the male monastic community. “Monks of the Sangha in these countries maybe heard for the first time that women aspire to be a fully ordained nun and their need to get access to education.” Another made a related observation that, given the attitudes of quite a percentage of Buddhist men towards the issue of women’s ordination, it is refreshing to know there is a group of women out there willing to “stand up” and “speak up.” Other, related outcomes include the facilitation of better relations among different Buddhist groups, and, between monastic and lay Buddhists, the fostering of personal and professional contacts.

Dissemination of information, education. A second area of accomplishment, mentioned less frequently, was Sakyadhita’s work in making the place of women within Buddhist communities and within Buddhist history better known and recognized. Cited were the publications that resulted from the conferences, Sakyadhita’s encouragement of research, its help in publicizing the activities of Buddhist women, and its interest in the education of Buddhist women. These responses took notice of efforts to provide a voice for Buddhist women through publications and the dissemination of information; however, more respondents appeared interested in work that gave Buddhist women the tools of exercising their voices. Work related to broadening women’s agency received much more mention than what might be considered scholarly interest in Buddhist women.

Provision for nuns, advocacy for full ordination of women, and support for Buddhist women. A third area of activity cited by a large number of respondents was Sakyadhita’s efforts on behalf of nuns. Respondents acknowledged the organization’s advocacy for the reinstitution of bhikkuni/bhiksuni lineages where they once existed and for full ordination of women within all Buddhist traditions, its efforts to improve the conditions in which nuns live. A woman who has been active with the organization over the past decade credited Sakyadhita, and particularly the Sri Lankan branch, with the push on the part of nuns to seek higher ordination: “Sakyadhita motivated the nuns to seek higher ordination and co-ordinated the ceremony.” She also cites a Sakyadhita Centre for Training and Meditation that has opened, with programs for nuns and women. The centre has residential facilities, also for Buddhist women of other countries, for retreats and Dhamma education. “Higher ordained nuns are being trained in basic skills in working with

communities at the grassroots level.” She spoke of them assuming teaching and leadership roles. Her comments acknowledge the work of Ranjani da Silva in these initiatives. Also mentioned was the material and social assistance given to Buddhist women in remote areas. A nun from Ladakh described the efforts of the Ven. Lekshe Tsomo to secure facilities for nuns, to help with organizing teachers, finding two to serve in a remote nunnery, and also in supporting the nuns with food.

Localized work, regional projects. While consciousness raising, educational endeavours, and similar endeavours were recognized as valuable by many respondents, at least one voiced the view that Sakyadhita also needed to target more specific projects. However, comments cited above indicate that some localized and specific projects are being undertaken. Another respondent referred to several specific initiatives when she wrote about the support given by Sakyadhita and by individuals associated with Sakyadhita to a meditation centre with a library, nunnery and home for the aged in Aurangabad, India. She noted that she had received some financial support for a Sakyadhita magazine in Marathi. Her comments and the ones cited above refer to the work of individuals within the organization, drawing attention to the fact that Sakyadhita as an organization can fulfill its regional mission only insofar as there are committed and dedicated women willing to direct their time and energy to this work. Sakyadhita has facilitated local projects, based on local needs, but not without the work of individuals willing to remain involved with these projects. These observations suggest a function for Sakyadhita in regional work through partnership with local groups. Such local projects are autonomous, and developed according to the needs and capacities of the local communities. Sakyadhita, as an umbrella organization, lends support by linking the local efforts with the work of an international organization, and by reducing the isolation of local efforts. Further, through fund-raising from donations and membership subscriptions, Sakyadhita has some, albeit limited, financial support to allocate to local initiatives. Choice of which local initiatives to support and how the support is provided rests with the leadership of the organization.

LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES THE ORGANIZATION FACES

Table 12 lists what the respondents to the survey cite as the challenges facing Sakyadhita. The one most often cited was financial. It was mentioned by 12 out of the 35 women who responded to this question, or 34%. Comments included the recognition that the “[e]conomic base is very limited”; the “lack of funds to promote

TABLE 12.
Limitations and challenges faced by Sakyadhita

<i>Organizational</i>	
Financial limitations	12
Support base of engaged women is small	6
Volunteer burn-out	3
Need for stable infrastructure and organizational politics	4
Too western in organizational make-up and approach	2
Lacking stable administration	1
<i>Its global reach</i>	
Language barriers, reliance on English	2
Communication problems among disparate groups & geographically separate communities	2
Difficulties in brokering cultural, regional, sectarian differences	2
Need for more local presence	4
Uneven allocation of resources	1
Difficulties in fighting entrenched power structures	3
<i>Its approach</i>	
Not following Buddhist protocol	3
Need for more Buddhist orientation/practice in organizational procedures	2
Not enough inclusion of traditional women	1
Exclusively women-oriented	1

education”; and the problem of “finances—many of the women members are from developing nations, thus finances are a serious consideration for conference locations.” At the same time, a few Western women mentioned a perception of inequitable distribution of funds. One nun who lives “the life of a monastic” responded that she felt there was a “discrepancy between those sponsored and those not,” that one area in which Sakyadhita had fallen short was in offering financial support for Western nuns. She recommended “formal sponsorship for Western sangha in the same way that ethnic nuns find sponsorship—more Western sangha would attend if this was the case.” A follow-up interview with another respondent yielded the comment that she felt the issue of

sponsorship needed to be more thought-through. She cited some inequities, and observed that the differential treatment “has the potential of creating disharmony,” though she acknowledged that she has no practical suggestions to rectify the situation.

Related to the problem of financial resources was another limitation, the lack of sufficient “human resources for various volunteer staffing,” or as another respondent put it, “not enough engaged women to really DO something.” Six women cited the problem of a limited support base; another three cited volunteer burn-out. One felt that Sakyadhita had not attracted enough “Buddhist women in the West to become members and supporters, be it materially or otherwise,” notwithstanding the fact that American, Australian and European women made up the largest numbers at the conference. The next most-frequently mentioned concern was the infrastructure of the organization. In different ways, seven respondents raised concerns with the way the organization was run. Some of the comments were general: An Asian woman identified the lack of working structure and management as a problem within the organization. A western respondent remarked that politics among organizers was one of the main obstacles it faces. For others, the concerns related to what they saw as an over-centralization of leadership, appearing in problems of delegation of work, lack of open decision-making, and the absence of team building. An Asian meditation teacher found that the infrastructure of Sakyadhita needed development. She alluded to a “structure of indifference,” meaning perhaps that there was some lack of meaningful commitment, that many were only casually involved with the organization. A few other respondents, both from Asia and the West, found the American influence in the presentations and organization overpowering and that a main obstacle of Sakyadhita is that it “is Western (North American) led.” One stated that it is time for “western women to step back and leave the stage or the first row [reference to seating at conferences where leaders sit in the first row] to Asian women.” There are issues in the west for western Buddhist women to attend to.

Several respondents also related organizational issues to different cultural styles. An Asian woman felt that Sakyadhita has to “overcome cultural barriers” and “Western-centricism.” Language barriers and the lack of multilingual communication were seen also as part of the problem, with English serving as the medium of communication. One respondent remarked on the “[s]trictly limited readership” of Sakyadhita publications even in technologically advanced Asian nations. Another expressed the hope that “western women would be more cautious about “turning the wheel” purely for the sake of themselves in the future. One found that the global reach of Sakyadhita was itself problematic, due to

“[c]ultural differences, the different needs and the different approach (to Buddha’s teachings) of all members. For another, Sakyadhita needs “inclusion of *traditional* Buddhist women into the movement.” The exclusive concern for women’s issues was also identified as a limitation.

The question about the limitations of the organization and the question of what Sakyadhita should be doing which appeared in another part of the questionnaire prompted some comments and criticisms that the organization was not doing enough on-the-ground work and was too diffuse in its purposes. A European participant identified “decentralization...focusing on regional situations” as a priority. She felt the need for more attention to local conditions. Her remarks were echoed by another respondent, who appealed for “concrete projects in specific regions.” An Asian respondent expressed a similar opinion, that it was “time for reorganization of the organization to make it more efficient, to meet the demands and needs of the members in the various countries and for the workload to be shared by many.” She elaborated further that Sakyadhita “should have a working body to tour many countries to study the individual country and its characteristics, which is essential for the working body of the organization to be in close contact.” She suggested that the organization have means to be in touch with the grassroots level of different Buddhist arenas, and that attention be given to the particular needs and circumstances of those different arenas. Another emphasized more need for Sakyadhita to “support local women’s groups.”

Several respondents found that the global reach of the organization would inevitably expose tensions due to the “[c]ultural differences, the different needs and the different approach (to Buddha’s teachings) of all members.” Related to this observation were the remarks of another respondent who identified the difficulty the organization faced in sustaining communication among disparate groups and among geographically separate communities. Three others also identified the very nature of the work Sakyadhita proposed as one of its main challenges, those being the almost insurmountable difficulties in fighting entrenched power structures in areas that have marginalized women. Also pertinent is the reality of economics: our data show that a disproportionate number of women from North America (52 from the U.S., 9 from Canada) attended, indicating that ability to participate in the conference was related to access to financial means.

With regard to effective communication about its activities, one respondent offered gentle criticism in the form of support of the organization. She felt the organization had well-defined purposes, which included providing a forum where Buddhist women’s (both lay and monastic) could be heard, but that the organization needed better means

of communication so that “those who might be interested would know it exists.” This comment implied more attention could be given to disseminating the work of the organization. The same respondent noted realistically that the organization is a volunteer organization, which meant that “many laudable projects, ideas, and plans cannot be implemented due to lack of qualified staffing and concomitant time restraints.” Communication was raised by another woman: “women who can’t go to these international conferences are excluded from information and don’t know what is going on.” She suggested that women from wealthier nations were used for the financial donations they could make.

Finally, a concern that appeared elsewhere in the survey was reiterated in this section, that Sakyadhita was not faithful to Buddhist protocol in its group practices. Three women identified this; two others felt that the organization needed more Buddhist thought and practice in its operation.

OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The survey results discussed in this paper provide us with a window on the workings of the Buddhist women’s organization, Sakyadhita. As we have seen, its purpose includes tacit respect for the differences expressed in global Buddhist traditions. The organization seeks to create a meeting place for Buddhist women, which indeed was effected by the conference in Lumbini, and in the other conferences organized prior to and since the Lumbini conference. It has attempted to foster a shared sense of identity among Buddhist women, while not mitigating the particularities of any of the Buddhist histories, communities, and lives represented by the women involved.

As our survey results indicate, Sakyadhita has been successful in consciousness-raising, in providing forums for Buddhist women to come together, and in disseminating information relative to Buddhist women and their different concerns. The survey results also suggest that advocacy for greater participation by Buddhist women in the workings of their religious traditions and for very real outcomes such as access to education and resources remains a concern for those involved, especially for those women coming from Asia. The concern for access to full ordination for all Buddhist women that was identified in previous years as central to Sakyadhita’s purpose has not been entirely displaced, but now it is but one interest among many held by this collectivity of Buddhist women. A larger and perhaps more diffuse frame of reference for the activities of Sakyadhita—namely promoting the well-being of Buddhist women—is suggested in the responses from the conference participants. These responses also indicated that different priorities are

given as to how that well-being can be accomplished depending upon the understandings of needs. For some women, community development was of paramount concern; for others reaffirmations of their practice was sufficient; others had questions and concerns as to how women's leadership was expressed. These, and other concerns, were informed by the participants' backgrounds and experiences. While in some instances constituting sources of real tension, the different priorities also indicated that work reflecting the needs and capacities of those involved at local levels cannot be replaced by a universal mandate. Rather than spearheading a global Buddhist women's movement, an organization like Sakyadhita is suited to providing a meeting ground where shared and different concerns can be expressed. The exchanges that occur might well result in further activism, with Sakyadhita's role as that of catalyst.

Though decidedly a transnational organization, given the geographical and ethnic backgrounds of the women who have been involved in Sakyadhita's activities, it is small relative to the potential population base of Buddhist women worldwide. When the disproportional number of American women in attendance at the conference is also considered, Sakyadhita's global profile is further reduced.

Our survey results suggest that the Sakyadhita's activities on international and local fronts are the results of the efforts of a core group of dedicated volunteers. Some of the volunteers, especially those in leadership roles within the organization have had sustained, long-term involvement with Sakyadhita, some contributing to its very inception. Ten of the respondents to the survey had worked with the organization since the early 1990s or longer. For several individuals, this work is tantamount to a vocational calling, drawing together their Buddhist practice, their endorsement of women's potential, their particular type of feminism, their understandings of Buddhist teachings, and their willingness to see these actualized in social and religious practice.

For others, involvement with Sakyadhita is more recent. Our survey results found that 50% of our respondents had some connection with the organization for only two years or less, while for 65%, the Lumbini conference was the first Sakyadhita conference attended. These results suggest a more fluid outer circle of participants interested in Sakyadhita's activities for a range of different reasons. The results may also suggest a growing interest in global connections among Buddhist women, as well as more effective networking and advertising on the part of the organization. Follow-up surveys on the conferences that Sakyadhita has convened since 2001 will shed more light on the question of sustained involvement.

As we have seen, an organization like Sakyadhita faces many challenges. Survey results identified tensions between feminisms, disagreements over the assertion of rights and emphasis on self-development, different priorities given to personal practice versus community-based work; concerns of hegemony of western women and their views of self-articulation, with Western women positioned as guides, Asian women as learners. Notwithstanding these tensions, the work of those involved in Sakyadhita at the organizational level should be acknowledged. As one respondent put it, the activities of Sakyadhita need to be understood in context:

[C]onsidering the enormous problems [of such an organization], including the very limited financial base, the difficulties in communication and organizing internationally, the reliance on dedicated volunteers who are willing and able to devote sufficient time to organizational activities...the amount of work and accomplishments of Sakyadhita are enormous: initiating the Buddhist women's movement, guiding and supporting it, encouraging projects to benefit Buddhist women around the world, establishing dialogue between lay and Buddhist women from different countries, traditions, social and economic strata, language and educational backgrounds.

In summarizing the aspirations of the organization, these comments also emphasize how Sakyadhita has served to provide a venue for Buddhist women to network and communicate with each other. That in itself is an accomplishment.

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NOTES

¹ A Google search using the key words, "Buddhist," "women," and "Sakyadhita" on 15 October 2001 turned up 678 listings; on 1 October 2006, the number was 12,500. These included various directories and resource sites, such as religiousresources.org, umbrella organizations, such as Interfaith Voices for Peace and Justice, and bibliographic listings of publications associated with Sakyadhita.

² Other estimates of attendance are similar (Chew 2000). The numbers listed in Table 1 do not include individuals whose names appear on the list but whom the researchers know did not attend the conference. The places of residence shown in this table reflect today's mobility; in a number of instances (from 8 countries), the current place of residence is not the

delegate's place of origin. Survey results showed Asians residing in Western Europe, the USA and Australia, Westerners residing in various countries of Asia; Asians residing in Asian countries other than their country of origin; and Westerners residing in countries other than their country of origin.

- ³ The list identified 165 delegates by name. In three cases the delegate was identified as the contact person for a nunnery or an institution, with an indication that she would be accompanied by others from her area. As well, three institutions are listed, but without a contact name. Also not on the list were the delegates who came from the nunneries located in the proximity of Lumbini.
- ⁴ The age group of two respondents was not possible to determine.
- ⁵ The completed questionnaires were sent back several months after the conference was held, allowing respondents some distance from the events of the moment.

