RESEARCH REPORT

# Sakyadhita Canada: Branching Out

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## Abstract

*This paper discusses the creation of Sakyadhita Canada (SC) from Sakyadhita International, the International Association of Buddhist Women (SI) founded in 1987. Further, it examines SC's progress towards attaining its Canadian goals.*

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SI was created at the conclusion of the first International Conference of Buddhist Nuns held in Bodhgaya, India in 1987. The conference had been called in order that Buddhist nuns of all traditions and countries could discuss the challenges commonly faced by them. What evolved was a much broader organization of lay and ordained women (and men). SI's goals are multiple (www://sakyadhita.org) but the primary foci are three:

1. improving the lot of Buddhist women worldwide;
2. developing an international network of Buddhist women; and
3. seeking the full ordination of Buddhist nuns (*bhikkhuni/bhikshuni*) in traditions where it has lapsed or was never established.

As the organization grew, pockets of membership emerged in Europe and North America as well as in Asia. While support for SI's mandate in Asia remained strong, there was a desire to support nuns and projects at national

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levels as well. In 2008 due to this increased membership and the need to standardize procedures, SI came to be incorporated, adopting a national branch system. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, one of the founders of SI, notes that establishing national branches allows for the building of local networks, holding conferences and addressing the needs of Buddhist women along geographic and linguistic lines.[1]

The requirements for establishing a national branch are minimal and fairly standard. They include (1) maintaining a membership, (2) support for the work of SI, and (3) branch Board members becoming members of SI, *ex officio*. In return, SI is to (a) provide official status, (b) support websites for the national branches, a national e-mail address (info@sakyadhitacanada.org) which is posted on the International website, and the inclusion of national branch items in the International newsletter and posted to the website, and (c) help in networking.

SI now provides access to the website in a variety of languages, and the SI brochures and conference brochures are also produced in several languages[2]. It should be noted that these changes have been made through the contributions of time and expertise by volunteers. Indeed, as Lekshe Tsomo notes, it is only the extensive use of volunteers that has allowed the organization to operate and grow while working with limited budgets.[3]

## The Canadian Connection

One of the first groups to apply to become an official branch of SI was the Canadian group spearheaded by Shirley Johannesen (Jayantā) of Calgary, Alberta. Jayantā's history with SI goes back to almost the beginning of Sakyadhita itself. She has volunteered her time assisting at international conferences, presenting workshops and leading meditations[4]. In Canada, she formed the Calgary Dharma Women's Forum in 1991, a support organization for Buddhist women from all traditions. She continued to publicize Buddhist women's issues and SI's work through her extensive network of Buddhist women, her yoga and meditation instruction, and participation in local events. Approved by the executive committee of SI in March of 2009, by November of that year, Jayantā had received permission to apply for incorporation under the Societies Act. The final step, achieving charitable status, occurred in 2011[5].

The Canadian Branch of Sakyadhita came into existence due to founder Jayantā's desire to connect Buddhist women, especially nuns, across Canada providing both emotional and financial support to women who are often isolated by geography. The website states, "To establish an

alliance of ordained and lay Buddhist women in Canada"[6]. This objective is particularly important in countries such as Canada where Buddhists make up only one percent of the population according to the 2001 census.[7] Of that one percent, the majority is made up of individuals who are either immigrants or Canadians who were raised in an Asian-Buddhist culture.

Asian-Buddhist nuns in Canada tend to be attached to a large community of lay Buddhists who support them through offerings of food and other necessities, and provide emotional support through requests for ritual services, teachings or guidance. They also receive support from other nuns with whom they can share experiences and expertise.

Nuns from non-Buddhist cultures are not generally attached to a specific community, although there are exceptions. JaEun Sunim, born in Canada, took full *Bhikshuni* training and ordination in the Korean Jogye tradition. She is a chaplain at the Foothills Medical Centre and Vice-Abbot of Seoraesa Korean Temple in Calgary [8] Non-community based nuns may, of course, build a community but this is difficult if they do not have a private income to sustain themselves until a community forms around them. It also takes considerable time and effort, often without the support of others. Nuns who live in isolated or rural communities are more at risk of disrobing than those in urban centres due to a general lack of information and understanding about Buddhism. This is true, too, for many laywomen who identify with Buddhism but have no practice community with which to discuss Buddhism or teachers to guide them. SC supports the objectives of the International but also wishes to build a Canadian organization that can provide the same level of support for nuns in Canada. They also support Canadian initiatives such as Sati Saraniya, the first female Theravada monastery in Canada, Po Lam Nunnery in Chilliwak, BC, and individual nuns for travel overseas for training or Sakyadhita conferences.

SC has attempted to achieve their Canadian goals through the creation of a website, newsletter, retreat and, more recently, a mini-conference. In Sept. of 2011, SC produced its first newsletter. These have been produced once a month . The format is fairly standard. Issue 1 contains notification of events such as the celebration of Binara Poya day at Sati Saraniya Hermitage in Perth, and International Bhikkuni Day. There is follow up and pictures from the first fundraising retreat. Subsequent issues have contributions from members and links to lectures and talks, and other websites that might be of interest to subscribers. In this manner, someone unconnected with a community can find out what events or groups may be near them and have access to further information and Buddhist teachings. While the centre of activity remains in Alberta and B.C., SC has managed

to engage members from Ontario on the Board of Directors. As with the SI Board, representatives come from a variety of backgrounds: monastic, scholarly and professional, and a wide variety of lay women of all ages and backgrounds.

**Sakyadhita Canada First Conference 2012**

In 2012, SC decided it was time to reach out beyond the website and newsletter. Given Jayantā's network in the West, limited resources and volunteers, the decision was made to hold a one day conference in Calgary, Alberta in September 2012. The theme of the conference was, "Connect, Support, Share." While there was no charge for the event, participants were asked to register so that SC could provide coffee and lunch. In addition, participants were encouraged to bring food bank donations. There were about sixty-five people in attendance, including three nuns from non-Asian Buddhist backgrounds, including *Bhikshuni* Phuntsok Chodron, the spiritual director of Gawaling Meditation Centre in McLure, BC. She began as a student of Zen but took ordination in the Tibetan tradition with V.V. Khenchen Thrangu Tinpoche in Richmond BC.

Most attendees were women from the Calgary area. Some were former or present students of Jayantā's, and some had seen the advertisement and came out of interest. The primary connection was made between the non-Asian community nuns who had not met previously and were clearly delighted to meet each other.

The keynote address, given by Jayantā, was entitled, "The Blossoming of Sakyadhita Canada." Comparing the evolution of Sakyadhita Canada to that of a flower, she began with the seed planted by her teacher Dhammadinna by suggesting she invite Ayya Khema, another of the founders of Sakyadhita, to lead a meditation retreat. The retreat occurred shortly after the formation of SI and an enthusiastic Khema asked Jayantā to become the Canadian representative to the new organization. This period and her subsequent activity in SI over more than two decades she refers to as "cultivating the ground and watering this seed of Dhamma…"[9]. She described the process of turning the loose organization into the formal, legal structure that it is today, and expressed her pleasure at the organization's ability to contribute to individual nuns and charities such as Pema Choling Canada that supports laywomen and nuns in Bhutan.[10] She concluded, "The seed that was planted by the late Anāgārikā Dhammadinna-and nourished by the late Ayya Khema—is now blooming. Sakyadhita Canada is active and healthy-functioning as a national branch and participating internationally within the Sakyadhita

network."[11]

The first Sakyadhita Canada conference and its theme (Connect, Share and Support) was envisioned as a prototype for further Sakyadhita Canada activity. Jayantā envisioned a series of such one-day conferences across Canada establishing a communication network between Buddhist women at the local, national and international level.[12]

The conference followed a traditional SI format: presentations by nuns and lay women, sharing of experience, presentations regarding the use of Buddhist principles to improve general society, and academic presentations about women and Buddhism. The brief overview presented below provides a glimpse of the shape these presentations take within the Canadian context.

The morning presentations were by two nuns.[13] The first presenter was Bhikkhuni Thich Nu Tinh Quang who is trained in the Vietnamese tradition. Ordained in Vietnam by Thich Nhat Lien, himself trained in Theravada and Pureland Buddhism, she was sent to Thich nu Hanh Dam to study Zen, a pre-existing interest. In Canada, she has studied with Trich Tri Thanh at the Phap Van temple in Mississauga. Bhikkhuni Tinh Quang has a small Dharma centre in Hamilton, Ontario. [14]

Because of her ability to speak Vietnamese, she has been of assistance to the Vietnamese community as well running her Dharma centre. The constituencies of the temple and Dharma centre have differing needs. The Little Heron Zen Hermitage has a Western Buddhist constituency, and the Vietnamese temple ethnic Vietnamese Buddhists. In addition to chanting and meditation, Bhikkhuni Tinh Quang provides a variety of workshops, adapts Vietnamese rituals for a Western group and creates others such as a special Mother's Day service. The Vietnamese temple has a focus on devotional chanting and rituals.

Recently, she has been asked to give Dharma talks to the temple youth. Raised in the west, Vietnamese youth seek a Buddhism closer to western intellectualism in addition to the traditional practices of their parents. As recent research by D. Mitra Barua shows, this appears to be a common pattern[15]. Thus, she not only connects the Asian and non-Asian Buddhist community but has begun to connect first and second generation Buddhists. Through the years, she has managed to function well in both communities and they occasionally come together for fundraisers.

Her presentation at the SC conference dealt with the learning curve required to bridge these worlds of differing expectations. Although *Bhikkhuni* Tinh Quang has a stable community and a small private income, it is difficult for her to finance her bi-yearly trips to Vietnam for personal study at her home temple and to teach English at an orphanage in a rural area.

*Bhikkhuni* Sārani Karunā, who maintained the Heartwood Meditation Centre in Kelowna BC, was the other speaker. The Heartwood website notes that she has dual ordination in both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, and has studied in Asia and the West for almost twenty years.[16] Sārani Karunā's talk provided an example of the problems faced by nuns in Canada who are not attached to a community of support. She referred to the difficulties of practicing in an area where Buddhism is not known. She noted that she knew of only two other Buddhist women in the area. She also recounted her meeting with a student who spoke of the pain she experienced when her teacher had to return to lay life due to financial circumstances. And, while shortly after the conference Bhikhhuni Sarani spoke of the personal encouragement and support the conference afforded her, strengthening her dedication to monastic life, she found it necessary to close the Heartwood Meditation Centre and return to lay life due to financial circumstances.[17]

The presentations by these Canadian nuns echo those heard in Asia. There are insufficient funds to provide nuns with financial security and access to Buddhist education. In Canada, this is particularly the case for independent nuns.

While the morning's proceedings focused on the lives and challenges of nuns, afternoon presentations by Patricia Galaczy and Mavis Fenn represented a different type of sharing. Galaczy's presentation was focused on integrating Buddhist insights into the daily lives of practitioners. She is a leadership educator as well as a mindfulness yoga[18] and meditation instructor. She discussed the ways in which Buddhist practice can be used to develop a new style of leadership, one that would replace current model of "command and control" with a more flexible and open style based upon self-awareness and clarity of insight. Fenn, a Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Waterloo, discussed the important role played by bilingual women (an Asian language and French or English) in both the Canadian multicultural project and in shaping Buddhism in Canada. She noted that bilingual women provide an important link between Asian communities and the broader Canadian community. Through their participation in multicultural and interfaith forums, they contribute Buddhist values to the ongoing process of developing a Canadian identity.

## Conference Assessment and Aftermath

Certainly the conference was successful in that it did provide some support to the nuns through bringing them together and, for the day at

least, lessening their isolation and the ability to discuss matters of common interest. Unfortunately, while e-mail addresses were exchanged, there was no follow up structural support to assist them in network building and one did not develop. It was clear from the question and answer periods following the talks that those who attended found the presentations thoughtful and engaging, and enjoyed the ability to talk to the nuns in an informal atmosphere. SC membership increased by about ten members as a consequence of the conference. [19] The conference raised awareness of SC through the listing of the conference by Sumeru, a website that carries information on a wide variety of Buddhist subjects, and has the largest listing of Buddhist groups in Canada.[20] Certainly awareness was raised in the community through the participation of local vendors and through the donations made to the food bank. Posting of the presentations on the website also provided those who had not attended with a glimpse of what had occurred, encouraging future participation. One major limitation of the conference lay in the lack of Asian-community participation. Due to the short timeline within which the conference was organized, nuns such as Bhikshuni Yin Kit Sik of the Po Lam Buddhist Association of Chilliwak were unable to attend. So, too, JaEun Sunim . Given Bhikshuni Yin Sik's work in prisons and JaEun Sunim's work both in the community and within a cross-cultural Buddhist community, their participation would have been a valuable contribution to the conference.

It became evident shortly after the conference that it would not be, as envisioned by Jayantā, the beginning of a series of one-day conferences held yearly in a different locale. A tentatively proposed conference to be held in Ontario in August of 2013 had to be placed on hold due to insufficient volunteer resources to plan and execute the gathering. It also became an open question as to whether or not conferences were the appropriate means to develop and grow the type of network envisioned, one that would connect Buddhist nuns and link to a wider network of Buddhist women. Consequently, the decision was made to conduct a survey in order to determine the SC constituency and their needs.

The survey was sent to current recipients of the Net Letter. There were 158 net letters sent (107 opened). Of the 69 surveys opened, 44 responded. Most of the respondents were already SC members (33) and almost half of those also were members of SI (16). The ages of the respondents fell mostly between 45 and 65. Respondents were primarily from Alberta and BC, not surprising given Jayantā's longstanding involvement in these provinces as a teacher, a few from Ontario and one from Quebec.

The primary interest expressed by the respondents was retreats and to a lesser degree conferences. While some support was expressed

for having a SC chapter in their local area, there was little interest in being personally involved in building one. The newsletter received positive reviews but respondents requested the listing of local events outside of the core area of the West Coast.[21]

While the survey is small, it is informative. The results indicate a need to broaden the demographic, bringing in some younger members . Doing so may help to address the need for energetic and dedicated volunteers to organize events. SC has recently launched a Facebook group in hopes of raising awareness of the organization among younger people.[22] The desire for retreats is understandable as many of the respondents are students of Jayantā but retreats are not a primary focus for either SC or SI. It will be hard to establish chapters in various locales and to mount local conferences without a high level of engagement. But such an engagement is not evident in the survey results.

The results on the Net Letter are more positive and suggest that it may be a way of broadening awareness of SC. Jayantā is well-known in Canada and is likely able to get contacts in other provinces to provide reports on local events and publicize the Net Letter. It may also serve as the basis for the creation of a network along with research aimed at creating a database of all the known nuns in Canada. The SC Board will be engaged over the next few months in discussions about the future direction to be taken by the organization.

## Conclusion

The restructuring of SI that occurred with the incorporation of the organization allowed for the transformation of a loose network of mostly Buddhist women into a small but structured organization. The status of SC as an official branch of SI facilitated the ability to obtain charitable status, to solicit memberships, and to develop and maintain a website and regular Net Letter. The Canadian website is linked to that of SI so that Canadians who visit SI website discover the presence of SC. The Net Letter raises awareness of SC and its goal of supporting Buddhist women across Canada through the posting of current events, links to talks, printing of member reflections and teachings by guest teachers. As a non-profit, SC can now make donations to Buddhist women's programs, International Buddhist groups such as Pema Choling Canada, and monasteries such as Po Lam Monastery and Sati Saraniya Hermitage . It also facilitated the organization of the mini-conference in September, 2012. These developments have been quite positive. While the conference did not set the stage for a series of conferences throughout Canada nor did it stimulate

the creation of a network to connect Buddhist women, especially nuns, it too may be considered to be of benefit to SC. It was the conference that stimulated the survey of SC members and supporters. The results of the survey provide the SC Board with a snapshot of where they are now and what is needed if they are to move ahead in accomplishing their goals of establishing a network of support for Canadian Buddhist nuns , laywomen and supporters. Having suspended any active moves for the present allows for a period of reflection on the survey results and an opportunity to establish some concrete and manageable objectives for the future.

There are major challenges facing SC. The primary challenge is that of leadership, a theme that runs just below the surface in the SC narrative. The second and related challenge is the need to develop a core of dedicated volunteers. As the founder and prime mover of SC Jayantā is the central figure. SC was established largely through her efforts with assistance from volunteers. She has been the driving force behind all the initiatives to date, including the conference. Given that she reports spending up to 40 hours a week on preparation for the conference, it is an open question as to whether or not volunteers with the same level of dedication can be found to develop SC in other provinces. It also raises the question as to how long Jayantā will be prepared to put forward this level of effort. Recently, she has signaled a desire to scale back her involvement and her belief that, if the organization is to thrive long term, others must take the initiative.[23] Building a core of volunteers outside of Alberta and BC without a strong and dedicated leader such as Jayantā will be difficult.

A further challenge is the country itself. With the entire Buddhist population numbering only one percent of the general population, it is only within cities of fair size that there may be sufficient Buddhist women and men to organize a community or SC chapter. Independent Buddhist nuns are rare and spread out across the country. These circumstances make organization difficult and travel to conferences expensive. SC will need a fairly secure financial base to provide travel assistance to nuns across the country. This will require ongoing, fairly high level, fundraising. While it is not impossible to raise funds through a series of retreats, it is unlikely at this point given the scarcity of volunteers. The development of chapters throughout the country would facilitate major fundraising and is allowed for within the SI charter but developing chapters also requires a critical mass of dedicated and energetic volunteers who are not yet in place. There are two possible avenues here. Jayantā has contacts throughout Canada. These could be the touchstone for a series of talks promoting the creation of local chapters. As well, these contacts could be used to expand the content of the Net Letter through the inclusion of local events and guest

columns.

SC is a new organization, less than five years old. It has accomplished a great deal but there is a great deal left to do. To return to the metaphor of the flower, it is first blush rather than full bloom.

## NOTES

[1] Tsomo, Karma Lekshe, April 22, 2013, e-mail communication.

[2] A full listing of the requirements and benefits may be found in the *Sakyadhita Branch and Chapter Guide* Summary.

[3] Tsomo, Karma Lekshe, April 22, 2013, e-mail communication.

[4] <http://www.sakyadhitacanada.org/about.html>.

[5] More on Jayantā can be found in Fenn, "Dhammadinna and Jayanta: Daughters of the Buddha in Canada" in Harding, John S., Victor Sogen Hori, and Alec Soucy, forthcoming 2014. *Flowers on the Rock: Global and Local Buddhism in Canada* , MQUP.

[6] www.sakyadhitacanada.org/about.html.

[7] Matthews, Bruce, 2006, "Preface", in Matthews, Bruce (Ed.), 2006, *Buddhism in Canada,* London and New York: Routledge, xvii.

[8] http://www.visitkorea.or.kr/enu/CU/CU_EN_8_3_2_2.jsp; http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs193/1106769988264/archive/1113171039579.html

[9] Jayantā, Sept.15, 2012"The Blossoming of Sakyadhita Canada," text copy of the talk, p.3

[10] Ibid, p.5

[11] ibid, p..6

[12] Ibid, p.5

[13] Chodron, Phuntsok, June 20th, 2013, e -mail communication.

[14] I have written about Sister Quang previously. Fenn, Mavis L., 2008, "Buddhist Women in Canada: Researching Identity and Difference" in *Buddhist Women in an Multicultural Community* edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo. Malaysia: Suki Hotu Dhamma Publications, p.174; Koppedrayer and Fenn 2006, "Buddhist Diversity in Ontario," in *Buddhism in Canada* edited by Bruce Matthews. London and New York: Routledge, p.69; 2012,"Canadian Buddhist Women: Multicultural Connections." paper presented at the Sakyadhita conference (Canadian Women in Buddhism: Connect Support Share). Available online http://www.sakyadhitacanada.org/conference-review.html.

[15] Bhikkhu, Deba Mitra (Barua), 2010.*Dhamma Education: The Transmission and Reconfiguration of the Sri Lankan Buddhist*

*Tradition in Toronto,* unpublished dissertation, Wilfrid Laurier University.

16 http://heartwoodmeditation.com/

17 Jayantā, May 19, 2013,e-mail communication.

18 Mindfulness yoga combines hatha yoga and mindfulness meditation.

19 Jayanta, Sept.21st, 2013, e-mail communication.

20 http://www.sumeru-books.com/

21 Survey details provided to the SC Board of Directors. Used with permission, Jayantā, Sept.22, 2013, e-mail communication .

22 Sakyadhita Canada, association of Buddhist women

23 Jayanta, 2013, personal conversation Aug. 10th, e-mail communication Sept.21st.