

Samacitta on: **‘Women that have inspired/shaped my faith journey’**

- raising awareness of the importance of women and the contribution women have made to religions throughout history and in the city today.”

'Women of Faith' evening at Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, Thursday 10th March 2016

We are living in unprecedented times for women: at least in modern societies, women enjoy more freedom, respect and parity with men in more areas of life than ever before. But traditionally this has not been the case. And this has obviously affected the role of women in Buddhism, just as it has affected the role of women in every other religion or sphere of life. So the women in Buddhist history that I am going to talk about are women who have overcome more obstacles than those that men generally had to overcome in order to achieve what they achieved, which makes their achievements all the more impressive.

I'm going to talk about 3 women – one from the time of the Buddha, one from the 20th Century, and one contemporary woman.

Firstly, Mahaprajapati (Mahapajapati)

She was the Buddha's aunt. Her sister Queen Maya was the Buddha's mother and both sisters were married to King Suddodhana, the leader of the Sakya clan. The Buddha was born Siddhartha Gotama of the Sakyans and only later became 'The Buddha'. Sadly, Queen Maya died a few days after the birth of her son, and Mahaprajapati, her younger sister, took over the nursing of the infant and became his foster mother. But this was not her main claim to fame...

Just to fill in a little about the Buddha's story – at age 29 he went forth into homelessness as a wandering truth-seeker. So Mahaprajapati, along with all the rest of the family, sadly had to let him go... He went to different teachers, surpassed them all, still not finding the answer to the problem of life & death & the suffering of the world. Eventually, at age 35 he gained Enlightenment and, in due course, founded an Order of wandering monks and spent the rest of his life teaching and leading the new religious Order he had founded.

Mahaprajapati comes back into the story of the Buddha's life some years after his Enlightenment. She must have been about 60 years old. Her husband the king had died, and the Buddha's son Rahula, and her own son Nanda, had both renounced the worldly life and joined the Buddha's Order. Mahaprajapati decided that she too wished to follow the same path and although well into middle age, she decided to renounce her worldly life take up the homeless life.

The drama for which Mahaprajapati is famous is the encounters she had with the Buddha over this question of the ordination of women. At first he categorically refused, then he left for Vesali, about 350 miles away. Undaunted, she followed him there, along with a great retinue of women. Their long march through the dusty roads of India must have been quite a sight. Eventually, they arrived at Vesali and Mahaprajapati presented herself again before the Buddha, this time with her hair already shaved off and wearing yellow robes. Still he refused. But then there was an intercession from the Buddha's cousin Ananda – who goes down in history as a great friend and benefactor to women because of this incident. He quietly asked the Buddha, 'Suppose women were to go forth into homelessness and follow the Buddha's teachings – would they be capable of attaining Enlightenment?. The Buddha admitted that yes, women were capable of attaining the same insights, and the same Enlightenment, as men. So Ananda said it would be fitting if the Buddha were to ordain Mahaprajapati – after all she had brought him up and done him a great service. So then the Buddha was won over and he granted her request. But he laid down 8 extra conditions for women seeking ordination, to make sure they were wanting to go forth for the right reasons, and not just to escape their worldly duties and gain the status of a monk. In effect, the women's Order was subordinated to the men's Order – but Mahaprajapati accepted the extra conditions willingly, even joyfully. Far from insisting upon special treatment, she accepted the Buddha's extra conditions with true spiritual receptivity and an understanding of what is truly important.

The other thing that Mahaprajapati is famous for is asking one of the best questions of the Buddha that has ever been put to him:

Many different people purported to be teaching 'Buddhism', even in the Buddha's day! But sometimes those teachings were contradictory. So Mahaprajapati went to the Buddha and asked him straight out: 'What is your teaching? How shall we recognise it?'

The Buddha's answer was pragmatic and it has echoed down the centuries as the criterion to apply whenever one is unsure whether this is Buddhist teaching or not. He said:

'Whatever conduces to peace of mind, conduces to purity, conduces to seclusion, conduces to fewness of desires, conduces to contentment, conduces to insight and wisdom and detachment from the world, conduces to an understanding of the transcendental, whatever you find in your experience conduces to these ends, take that as my Dharma, take that as my teaching.'

So Mahaprajapati made 3 very important contributions to Buddhism:

1. She nursed the Buddha when he was an infant and brought him up
2. She secured ordination for women, setting in motion the whole tradition of female Bikkhunis and nuns, and also inspiring countless women down the centuries to follow in her footsteps, and
3. She asked the question that unambiguously established what was the Buddha's own criterion for recognising his teaching

So this, to me, is an example of a woman showing courage, humility and astute discernment in her heartfelt desire to follow the spiritual path of the Buddha.

Dipa Ma –

Dipa Ma (born Nani Bala Barua) was born in 1911 in what is now Bangladesh. Buddhist practice within her culture consisted mainly in rituals and ceremonies but hardly any meditation so Dipa Ma had little opportunity to undertake serious spiritual training. She was an ordinary village girl, was given in marriage to an engineer twice her age and later lived with him in Burma. By her mid forties, she had lost her husband and was suffering from some kind of heart disease and hypertension, trying to care for her child, Dipa, and her younger brother, Bijoy. After having a prophetic dream, she decided to go to a

monastery in Rangoon and undertake meditation training. But she was obliged to return to family life and to find a way of practising alongside her family responsibilities. Once into her fifties, she was more determined than ever to take up serious meditation training and she found a renowned teacher Mahasi Sayadaw. Under his guidance, she almost immediately attained deep levels of concentration, her heart trouble disappeared (blood pressure returned to normal) and her grief vanished. She would henceforth go back and forth between her city apartment in Calcutta and the retreat centre for bouts of intensive training, and she began to gain a great following amongst householders who would come to see her at her home all day long.

“Human beings will never solve all their problems,” she taught. “The only way is to bring mindfulness to whatever you are suffering. And if you can manage only five minutes of meditation a day, you should do that.”

Dipa Ma became the “patron saint of householders,” and the embodiment of *being* the practice rather than *doing* the practice. She urged her students to make every moment count and emphasized bringing mindfulness to cooking, ironing, talking, or any other daily activity. “Meditation, mothering, and practice all flowed into each other in an effortless way,” says meditation teacher Jacqueline Mandell. Dipa Ma’s path wasn’t attached to a particular place, teacher, lifestyle, or the monastic model. The world was her monastery; mothering and teaching were her practice. Joseph Goldstein said that with Dipa Ma there was no sense of someone trying to be mindful; there was just mindfulness doing itself. Dipa Ma said, “You cannot separate meditation from life.”

Dipa Ma was a strong spiritual influence on many eminent teachers, especially the 3 founders of the Insight Meditation Society in America, Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, and Sharon Salzberg. Though she lived as a mother and grandmother in a simple city apartment in Calcutta, she never compromised on her own practice of mindfulness and meditation and she became one of the most renowned meditation masters of the 20th century.

Maitrisara – a quietly strong spiritual influence and an inspiration to hundreds of women and men who go along to the Birmingham Buddhist Centre looking for ways of bringing a spiritual dimension into their lives. Although she carries a lot of responsibility as a Trustee of the Charity, she wears it lightly, even playfully, without pretentiousness.

Maitrisara is a long-standing member of the Triratna (Three Jewels) Buddhist Order. The ordination process typically takes around 6 years of preparation and training. From the moment of ordination onwards, all the activities of one's life are in service to those Three Jewels of Buddhism –

1. The Buddha - developing one's potential and growing towards Enlightenment
2. The Dharma - studying/practising the teachings and making them available to others
3. The Sangha – or community of followers – in many ways the most complex and demanding practice of all. Cue: Maitrisara's life.

Maitrisara has taken up a lifestyle that is a direct expression of her highest values which are her guiding principles. She is neither monastic nor lay; her commitment to the path consists in taking responsibility for her own ethical practice as well as for the needs of people coming along to the Buddhist Centre where she is part of a team running things. Like Dipa Ma, Maitrisara's practice is exemplified in her whole life e.g. not having any specific hours to her work, she blends being a spiritual teacher with being a friend to many women – both with her peers in the Order and with those less experienced. Also, as part of her practice of generosity and renunciation, she lives on a very basic 'support package' rather than taking a salary, even though she is highly qualified in her field of community development.

Like Dipa Ma, Maitrisara practises her faith in the context of a busy urban environment, yet there is no sense of compromise in her practice. Though she is not in robes, she has renounced the worldly values of money and status and is as committed to her practice as any monastic. Her particular responsibility is around befriending women, organising training for them and helping them to prepare for ordination. Soon she will be ordaining some of those women herself and, as their Preceptor, she will be taking on a particularly weighty spiritual responsibility towards them. So she is passing on the flame of the

Buddha's tradition in accordance with his teaching but in a new and pioneering way for women: like Mahaprajapati, she has become part of the lineage of ordained women. Like Dipa Ma, she is sharing the benefits of her spiritual practice with others, giving inspiration and guidance simply by how she is and how she leads her life. But unlike Mahaprajapati or Dipa Ma, Maitrisara was ordained by a woman, she has joined a united Order where men and women practise alongside one another on an equal footing, and Maitrisara herself will be passing on the benefits of her ordination to other women. She is a great inspiration to them – and to me!