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DAKINI

October 76

DAKINI - a newsletter/magazine for Upasikas and women mitras.

This newsletter has been produced in Archway for all women mitras and Upasikas everywhere. The idea has been floating around for sometime and finally became more concrete at a mitra study group early on in the Summer. Its actual appearance has been delayed due to the summer break and a certain lack of time on my part. This issue is quite small, just to start things off. I hope that in time everyone will write something or other. Anything is welcome; articles, poems, news and views, who you are and your life history and how you became a Buddhist, your views on the Dharma, bits of the scriptures you especially like, book reviews etc etc. Although most women mitras are either in London or Brighton or New Zealand, there are some living away from these places, associated with other centres. The women Order members are even more widely scattered over the globe, and mainly in ones and twos. I hope through the medium of DAKINI we can all get to know one another better and the mitras can begin to feel they know more than the one or two Upasikas they normally meet. We have two great things in common, one that we are women, and two we are all aspiring to evolve.

Dont think you have to be a literary person to write into DAKINI. Just communicate yourself, that is enough.

Why a newsletter for women? At the beginning of this year, at Shante's suggestion, I became Convenor of women mitras. I manage to see many of the women mitras in study groups but I feel that a lively exchange between women all over the world in the movement will bring us so much more in contact. I think the path of the Higher Evolution, the path to individuality is not easy for anyone. Perhaps it is more difficult for women. Perhaps we have to approach it in our own way. Anyway we are all pioneers in this field and shared experience can only be helpful.

Please send in your contributions to me at 1 Balmore Street, London N.19. Preferably typed in $1\frac{1}{2}$ or double spacing or clearly hand written. Please send in your contributions before the middle of next month. When we have got going properly we can fix a regular publication and copy date.

DHAMMADINNA.

I hope everyone gets this issue of DAKINI. To help us send them out in future and for general reference, could everyone send me (mitras that is, their full name, current address and phone number, when you became a mitra, name of Kalyana mitras, date of birth, and any other relevant information, such as your skills and talents etc.

Dhammadinna.

Some reflections after the womens seminar held at Aryatara in July Dhammadinna

Back in the heat wave of July, myself, Marichi, Malini, Anoma, Sulocana, Maggie Oakshott, Christine Roisetter and Annie Murphey (mitras) attended a seminar led by Bhante on selections from the Songs of Milarepa.

It is very difficult to describe a study seminar to those who have not yet attended one. It may conjur up scenes of intellectual ^{delight} with everyone asking intelligent questions. It may conjur up scenes of the schoolroom. However the main thing about a seminar is the experience of being on the receiving end of Bhante's energy. In this sort of intimate situation, Bhante is able to give out a particularly strong flow of energy. Stronger than he can in a larger situation or a public lecture. In this situation he is communicating, through whatever text is being studied, the Dharma in a very undiluted form. This may sound marvellous, and of course it is, but the effect on oneself can be devastating and even unpleasant. After the first seminar I attended (the Udana, summer 74), I couldn't think for a week or two, and I did wonder if I hadn't suffered permanent brain damage! This time I felt somewhat similar. It is only now some two months after the event, that I can recall any of it clearly to mind, in spite of repeated intreaties from Nagabodhi to write something for the last newsletter.

We studied various songs from the Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa, translated by Garma C.C. Chang, including the chapter entitled 'A Woman's role in the Dharma', and several other songs concerning women disciples of Milarepa who became Enlightened. I hope this seminar is transcribed shortly and that we can publish edited extracts in Dakini.

I still can't remember much of what Bhante actually said. A lot of the discussion centred around the teachings of the Mahamudra and during these periods my rational mind took a severe beating and in the end gave up.

The fact that it was a womens seminar didn't make that much difference to me as I have been on many womens events. It did seem that people asked less questions than are usually raised on mixed seminars, and Bhante did say he felt he had to work quite hard to get things going.

The main experience of the seminar for me was just being in contact with Bhante for a week and experiencing the energy he puts out. Some days it made me feel negative when I couldn't be open, sometimes it gave me a headache, and sometimes it felt fantastic. Some of the time I even felt quite frightened by it. I thought or felt that my insignificant, snivelling little ego might be crushed. In this sort of situation one's conditioning, opinions and assumptions are challenged all the time, often in quite subtle ways. But also one feels a sense of freedom and relaxation and a joy in just being oneself.

I did become aware that Bhante seems to exist in another dimension from most if not all of us, that he speaks from experience and that he is the only person I have ever met who I feel can lead me to the Truth. That is, if I allow myself to be led. Or rather I became re-aware of these things. The path seems to involve opening up more and more, giving up petty doubts, hostilities, resentments and reactions, and surrendering to guidance, and yet becoming more and more independent, self-reliant and able to take responsibility.

The seminar experience gave me a burst of energy and an increase of faith and confidence. Shortly after the seminar I did a month's solitary in the country in Wales which was also a very positive and strengthening experience. But now here I am back in London, in Archway at the onset of winter. Back with a full timetable of activities, with responsibilities, with doubts and conflicts and negativity as well as energy and inspiration. Back in the thick of it. But my memories of the seminar, of my experiences and my contact with Bhante keep feeding me with energy and faith.

Some subject! Well, there's a lot of talk about it and a lot of feeling running high, so I thought I'd add my two-pence worth.

Difficulties between men and women are not, to state the obvious, restricted to the Friends. Since the Suffragettes stated their case earlier this century, the whole question has exploded into a multitude of arguments, books, articles, talks, Acts of Parliament etc., and Western Society (not to mention its followers) has re-examined its attitudes and actions towards women, and is still in the process of finding a new balance.

So what happened?

In the beginning, men and women lived together in tribes. Women had babies automatically, and because the human baby is so dependent, the woman's function in tribal society was limited to what she could do at the same time as feeding and caring for her children. Which meant that the men were left with the job of going out to hunt etc. This was perfectly natural, practical answer to a physical problem.

And so it went on. For years and years, centuries and centuries. Times changed, people became more conscious, societies came and went, but the basic arrangement didn't change that much. Women became used to their role and never expected anything but to have children and stay at home to look after them, and men got used to their role; going out and working with other men. As hunting became obsolete, the work changed, and in fact the roles available to men became many and varied and often, less aggressive.

As this evolution took place, Christianity also played its part, propagating the tale of Adam and Eve. Adam was always characterised as the result of the culmination of the creator's inspiration, and Eve, as an afterthought, and a mistake, at that. This, perhaps, counts for many of the attitudes prevalent today.

But suddenly things changed.

Efficient contraception has become available, and women are no longer tied down to their usual role. Physically, they can actually choose whether they want to accept the usual female role, or not.

And if not, what?

They can go out to work with the men, they can go and do most of the things that up until this point, only men could do. Notice that I say 'physically'. Some women take their opportunity in both hands and move very naturally and confidently into the new roles that are available to them. Others, restricted by what is expected of them, what they have come to expect for themselves, in short their conditioning, find the transition very difficult and painful, and sometimes, impossible. If we look around today, we can see women at all stages of 'liberation'. Some have happily made the choice to move into successful 'careers', while others have happily chosen to be wives and mothers, at least for part of their lives. Some feel unable to do what they would like to do on account of their conditioning, and some have actually tried to find themselves a new role, and have found the pressures of society too much for them.

But what of the men?

This physical change in woman means that those areas of life which until now, have always belonged exclusively to men, are now 'invaded' by women. Some men have taken very happily to the new situation, and in a lot of areas, one now finds men and women working together on equal terms in harmony. But some men feel that their 'male' identity is threatened by this new intrusion. Until ^{now} the man's role has been easily definable as 'that role which the woman does not fulfill'; but here we have women fulfilling exactly the same role as men have always done, and apparently, just as effectively. The whole question of what it is to be a man arises, and a lot of men are shaken by it, just as some women find it difficult to cope with the choices now available to them.

One of the tendencies of such men is to retire into all male groups which confirm their members in their threatened 'male' identity. 'We're doing such-and-such, and women aren't allowed to (or perhaps don't want to) do this, so we must be the real men'.

Unfortunately, where there is a group, there are outsiders. A group automatically excludes non-members. That is one of the functions of a group. And one of the most natural reactions of the outsiders of a group is to form another group. The child sees another child getting a lollipop and even though the thought had not entered the first child's head until that moment, he immediately feels that he too, wants a lollipop. He may not even like lollipops very much. I would suggest that some of the women's movements that one hears so much about these days are somewhat akin to that child. 'Well, if the lads are going to join forces against us, we'll jolly join forces against them!'

And what do we have? The battle of the sexes. Feminism, anti-feminism, male-chauvinist-piggery, the whole lot.

I now intend to relate all this to the Friends. I will attempt to tread very carefully!

I will first say that I do see the point of single-sex set-ups, be they communities, retreats, study-groups, or whatever. It will be a long time before we (both men and women) are all free from regarding one another as sex-objects. After all, that biologically speaking is a very healthy thing. Nature and Society have worked out a rule book through which the procreation of the species and the perpetuation of society can take place, and we have all, to some extent, been conditioned into playing by these rules. To become free of these rules, we must first become aware of the extent to which we are bound by them; and anyone who has partaken of a single-sex set-up, can probably vouch for how much one learns in this respect. When one is not with members of the opposite sex, the whole question of sex counts for a much smaller part of one's thoughts, and one often finds oneself communicating in a much more free and open manner. Out of sight is often out of mind, and that in itself is a help rather than the opposite in terms of meditation and the setting of one's mind on higher things!

Also, when one does come into contact with members of the opposite sex, one is much more aware of how all the old patterns start up again. The contrast serves to highlight the problem.

However, this is where, to my mind, the usefulness of a single-sex set-up comes to an end. The isolation of a problem is not its solution. I think that the prevalent attitude that men and women are 'different' and that it is of great importance for the two sexes to segregate in order to discover their separate 'identities', is a misconception. We should all be trying to gain confidence in ourselves as individuals, developing both our 'male' and our 'female' sides in order to find the perfect balance within us. So this feeling that we must find ourselves 'as men' or 'as women' seems to me irrelevant. We should, if anything, be trying more than anyone else to transcend these 'differences', if 'differences' there are. My own feeling is that the differences exist only on the physical plane, and in the societal conditioning resulting from that. If one examines the different societies of the world, I am sure that there is no characteristic that is solely related to one sex or the other apart from those relating directly to the physical differences about which no one is arguing.

There are some, however, who feel that there is an inherent quality, a 'je ne sais quoi', an indefinable 'something' that separates man from woman; that one is just that better if one is a man, and that if one is lucky enough to be a man, one is best kept well away from the unhealthy taint of the 'lesser' woman. I have heard women ascribe to this point of view (well not to the last bit!) and I would suggest that they are the very victims of conditioning that I have referred to earlier.

Regarding the unease that exists between men and women in the Friends, many of us, if not all, must be aware that there is at least some element of all this. There seems to exist a tension which makes it very difficult to openly communicate with members of the opposite sex; to talk to them on a one to one basis, let alone ANYTHING ELSE!

I would like to make two suggestions on this count.

1. That we try at least to be aware of our motives in setting up any single sex groups. While recognising their inherent value, we should be sure that we are not doing it in a reactive state of mind, or at the encouragement of all male groups who may feel more secure and justified in their existence if there are female counterparts.

2. That each of us, in our dealings with the opposite sex, either on an individual or a group basis, tries to talk openly and frankly about these difficulties, and how we feel about one another, without laying blame at each others feet, and perhaps concentrating on the similarities rather than the differences.

After all, we're all in this together, and as our new puja says, (and I quote)

The Buddha was a man
as we are men.

- and we all know how that is supposed to be interpreted!

ON RETREAT - Christine Seymour

The summer retreat this year was a three week 'open' retreat held at Four Winds, a Sufi Centre in Surrey.

The setting was ideal for a retreat; the centre lay on a hill looking over the rolling Surrey countryside with an extensive pine forest to the west and deciduous woods to the south. Four Winds, itself was large and wild with the main house and barns and wooden huts scattered amongst the woods which housed many of us attending the retreat. The almost non-stop sunshine and clear starry nights only enriched the atmosphere more.

The retreat was well attended with up to thirty-six people at times. Mitras and Friends came from all over England and Scotland as well as from Finland, and several complete newcomers came also. All in all I found it a very valuable and enjoyable experience to meditate and live for three weeks with new and old friends.

Many of the women mitras from London and Brighton attended the retreat for varying lengths of time and several of them gave a special contribution to the retreat; Anne Farnham and Dawn Mastin who live with me in Arcway organised the cooking whilst Annie Leigh and Jenny Deadman gave yoga instruction.

Partly because there were several newcomers to meditation, Nagabodhi who was leading the retreat gave instruction in the shrine room during the first week in the three meditation practices we did; the mindfulness, the metta and just sitting, as well as talking about the value of chanting and puja, and although I have been meditating for almost two years I came to a fresh understanding of my practice, and often during the ensuing weeks when Nagabodhi would say a few words in the shrine room it was like I had heard them for the first time and a new light dawned on me. The retreat made me aware as the saying goes 'you are never too old to learn' - or perhaps 'you have never been a Friend so long that you are not also a beginner'.

We listened to lectures on Aspects of the Bodhisattva Ideal and on the White Lotus Sutra, had communication exercises and silent periods, yoga, played frisbee and sang songs, made offerings for the shrine, built fences, tended the vegetable patch and I even milked the Sufis cow Moon for 22 weeks which turned out to be quite a practice in itself.

An important event on the retreat which seemed to give some of us a fresh impetus and consolidated our energies was the ordination of Karin, a Finnish Friend, by Bhante. She was given the name Gunavati which means - full of good qualities - with particular reference to the six perfections of the Bodhisattva.

Many people had never seen Bhante and so a question and answer period with him was arranged. Bhante suggested we kept to practical questions, perhaps arising from the meditation practices we had been doing during the retreat. I believe

the first question was on metta. 'Just what was this metta we are trying to generate?' This opening question paved the way for the whole session. Bhante seemed to talk non-stop for over half an hour on just how important it was for us to feel positive towards ourselves. How could we possibly hope to evolve, to develop, to become Enlightened if we felt we were so insignificant and wretched, if we carried some sort of unfounded guilt about with us? It was a very inspiring communication and when Bhante laughed now and then, many of us also had a good laugh. It seemed that his own positive feelings were bringing out the best in me, perhaps in all of us. Since the talk I have certainly been doing the metta bhavana practice every day and feeling the value in it for me.

The retreat culminated in a rather more elaborate puja on our last evening that we had had before with personal offerings and the five sense offerings during which 108 ritual cakes were offered. There was a chance before the Confession of Evil to give up before the Shrine on pieces of paper - of varying shapes and sizes! - anything we felt guilty about and later in the puja there was a chance to make vows if any of us felt particularly strongly about some aspect of ourselves or our life and wanted to work on it. At the end of the puja to the chanting of the Padmasambhava mantra, led by Nagabodhi bearing our bowlful of confessions we walked out of the shrine room and down the hill to a campfire where we stood in a circle chanting and watched our guilt go up in smoke.

WOMENS COMMUNITY/CENTRE

Many of you will be aware that the Centre at Archway, Pundrika and the surrounding houses where many of us live, are due to be repossessed by the Council to be reconverted within the next few months. At the moment there are eleven women housed in Balmore street, closely associated with the Friends, (three Order members, 6 mitras and 2 who have asked to be mitras). What we hope to do is to find a large enough house to accommodate some, if not all of us together. At the moment we are split up into small units as the houses around here are small terraced houses. Apart from providing accommodation for ourselves, and a solid base where we can have much more day to day contact and **group practice**, we want to have a number of guest rooms so that we can put up visiting mitras and Upasikas, for long or short periods. At the moment there is nowhere where we can do this. I see it as a place which will provide a strong situation for those who wish to live there, a place where visitors can stay, and a focus for women coming along to the Friends in London, perhaps for women in the movement generally. Probably some people living there will be involved in the running of the community, some will be involved in small business like say Kusa cushions, which could expand into upholstery and clothes, or other similar projects, and some will go out to work for money or go to work in the centres in London. I am also sure that once a larger number of us get together in a place of our own, all sorts of exciting things will happen and evolve which we can't begin to imagine in the present situation. I hope that we can find a place with space for a large enough shrine room so that weekend or day retreats or seminars or study would be possible. As convenor of mitras (women) I don't see myself as just concerned with providing situations like study groups or retreats just for their own sake. I'm interested in providing the best possible situations for people to evolve in, for devotion to the movement to ripen into real commitment. I would be only too happy to see some more Upasikas! So as far as I can see, this finding and setting up of such a community is the next step for those of us around Archway. Then from this solid base I hope we can benefit all women in the movement, and everyone in the movement. Finding and fixing up such a place will be a practice in itself, but we will need financial support at least in the beginning. Dakini will keep everyone posted as to our progress in finding somewhere, and I hope when the time comes, everyone will help in whatever way they can. We all have much experience in fundraising events from fundraising work for Sukhavati and some of us are thinking in terms of full time jobs to provide the necessary cash. If, however, we find a place which needs renovating we will probably need a lump sum. We may be asking you for donations!

ON BEING A DAKINI

(The following is a discussion which took place on the Songs of Milarepa Seminar after we had studied the chapter entitled 'Challenge from a Clever Maiden'. At the end of the chapter it says: 'and in this life she (Rechungma) went to the Pure Land of the Dakinis'.
Present: Dhammadinna, Malini, Sulochana, Marichi, Anoma, Christine Roisetter Annie Murphey, Maggie Oakshott).

- Sangharakshita: I notice that quite a few women rather like the idea of being dakinis. It seems to be an idea, an ideal, which rather appeals to some women. Why do you think this is? Men don't respond to being dakkas in the same way - or at least not very much.
- Dhammadinna: It's something about the freedom and spontaneity aspect.
- Annie: It seems to be a positive development of previous conditioning. It doesn't seem to be the same for men.
- S.: It does suggest that a woman can have a positive spiritual value, as a woman even, because the term is usually dakini, in the feminine gender. It is a sort of link, as it were, between woman in the ordinary sense and woman in the purely spiritual - in the sexless - sense.
- Malini: It makes a difference. The Buddha is a man. So for men, it's the next stage. Women haven't got that.
- S.: In the Tantra you certainly do get the whole idea of the dakini prominent in various ways. For instance, many of the great Dakinis are Buddhas in female form, that is, the Dakini at the higher level, like Sarva Buddha Dakini, whereas in other forms of Buddhism you do not get the Buddha, or Buddha Nature, represented in female form in that sort of way. In the Tantra, however, it is quite common. There the Dakini is on the same level as the Buddha - the Buddha being the expression of that state in the masculine form, the Dakini being the expression of the same state in feminine form. So if you are a man, as it were, and gain Enlightenment, you become a Dakini in the highest sense. So in the Tantra they speak more in terms of women becoming Dakinis, rather than women becoming Buddhas, which suggests a change of sex - you know, women becoming men, which to many women isn't quite acceptable. Well, if they are to gain Enlightenment in this life, they have to do it as women, and they end up being Enlightened with a female body. You don't change your sex mid-career. You might change from birth to birth, but not in the course of this life. Change of sex does sometimes happen of course but not usually in this sort of way. So maybe for a woman it's more positive to think of becoming a Dakini (with a capital D) than of becoming a Buddha, which has got this taint of masculinity about it (laughter). Perhaps it's a very positive ideal for a woman to think in terms of being a dakini (with a small d) and then of being a Dakini (with a capital D).
- Marichi: What is the difference between a dakini (small d) and a Dakini (big D)?
- S.: A dakini (with a small d) is a woman who has got some special spiritual quality, who can possibly spark off other people, but who isn't fully Enlightened. But a Dakini (with a big D) is the fully Enlightened Tantric female, who is co-equal with a Buddha, or who is a Buddha but in female form. So there are quite a number of these Dakinis, or Dakini forms, because it is, after all, the one and the same Enlightened being or person essentially. There is

Sarva-Buddha Dakini and Vajra Bhairavi, the adamant and fearful one. There are the five great Dakinis, corresponding to the five Buddhas. There is Padma Dakini, Vajra Dakini, Ratna Dakini, Karma Dakini and Buddha Dakini, of the five different colours, just as you have the five masculine Buddhas with their different colours.

Marichi: Are they different to her consorts of the five Dhyani Buddhas?

S.: They can be regarded as consorts, but where they are regarded as consorts and given names like Pandaravasani and Tara, there is the suggestion that the Buddhas, as it were, are more important, and still in a sense occupy the centre of the stage. But with the five Dakinis it isn't quite like that. It is more as though they were just the feminine counterpart. And you get them in five Dakini Mandalas on their own, without the Buddhas, that is to say without the masculine forms. You simply get the five Dakinis, just as you get the five Buddhas, and that is regarded as spiritually complete. They have got everything on their own. There is this sort of women's community at the highest possible level (laughter)- the five Dakinis, red, white, blue, green, yellow.

Dhammadinna: Another appeal of the dakini is that there is something a bit wild about them.

S.: That's it. Their hair is dishevelled, they're dancing, and they have drums and cymbals and things.

Dhammadinna: I like that!

S.: Yes, it suggests a free, not exactly wild energy. They may look wild, but they're not really wild, they're just being themselves. Wearing garlands of skulls, drinking blood, yes it rather appeals to some women doesn't it?

Chorus: Yes!

Transcribed by Dhammadinna

Edited by Ven. Sangharakshita.