

# Living in a precarious and precious world (Translated from German)

FROM GABRIELA FREY | PHOTOS: OLIVIER ADAM



The world is facing immense challenges. Escapism and discouragement do not help, emphasises Gabriela Frey. She is involved in international Buddhist women's networks and explains looking back on the main Sakyadhita conference in South Korea in 2023, she explains why a life of solidarity, commitment and awareness is rewarding.

From left to right: Eun-Su Cho, Congress Organisation; Sharon A. Suh, President of Sakyadhita International; Bongak Sunim, President of the Korean Nuns-Association of the Jogye Order and Copresident of Sakyadhita Korea; Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, former president of Sakyadhita International; Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Founding member of Sakyadhita International.

**D**aily news makes it obvious: we live in a precarious, endangered world: Environmental damage, wars, extremism, terrorism, pandemics, poverty and domestic violence are spreading.

Quite a few people try to escape from the oppressive reality by throwing themselves into too much work or losing themselves in overconsumption, discriminating against other people, becoming aggressive or depressed, drinking too much or numbing themselves with drugs.

The many contributions to the conference by courageous and committed women showed impressively how the transformation from precarious to precious can be achieved under the most diverse life circumstances.

But how can the current challenges be met with a clearer head, an open heart and more equanimity? This question was posed by around three thousand ordained and non-ordained Buddhist women at the latest congress of the Buddhist women's organisation Sakyadhita International. It organises an international meeting every two years. In 2023, it took place in Seoul, South Korea; several men were also among the participants.

The title of the conference, "Living in a precarious world", was followed by the encouraging subheading "Transience, resilience, awakening": so that people could broaden their own horizons for constructive solutions that help to break out of habits and forge new paths in solidarity. The subtle play on words in the conference motto cannot be translated into German: "Living in a prec(ar)ious World" - only two letters separate precarious (precarious, endangered) from precious (precious, valuable).



Gelongma Pema Deki

### Precarious turns to precious

The many conference contributions by courageous and committed women showed impressively how the transformation from precarious to precious can be achieved under the most diverse life circumstances. Vanessa R. Sasson goes back to the early days of Buddhism in her book "The Gathering - A Story of the First Buddhist Women", which was presented at the congress. After years of research, the scholar of religious studies has summarised the experiences of the first Buddhist women in an impressive narrative format. Inspired by the Therigatha, the chants of awakened women, she describes how challenging it was for women in the early days of Buddhism to follow a self-determined and spiritual path. Trapped in patriarchal social structures, they needed an incredibly strong determination to break out and find a way to escape the suffering of enforced immaturity. It was only with great courage - sometimes that of despair - and above all thanks to female solidarity across all class boundaries that these women managed to be accepted into the Buddha's Sangha against massive resistance. But even as ordained nuns, their situation remained difficult.

Another important topic concerning the equality of women in the Buddhist world was brought to the conference by Tashi Zangmo, President of the Bhutan Nuns Foundation. Her personal life alone testifies to the great determination that Buddhist women in many countries around the world still need to go their own way: Tashi Zangmo was born in a Bhutanese village in 1963 and was the first girl in her family to attend a school. She later travelled to India and the USA via a series of winding paths, including a period as a secretary, and went on to study Buddhology and Development Studies, a subject area that deals with the causes and effects of international development and globalisation processes, and completed her doctorate

At the conference, she reported on how, through perseverance, solidarity and with the support of the Queen and King of Bhutan, the full ordination of women in the Tibetan Mulasarvastivada tradition was finally restored in the country despite massive opposition. For those who wish to learn more, the book "Liberated" by Gelongma Pema Deki, formerly Emma Slade (*this is the name under which the book can be found, editor's note*), is a good read. For those who wish to learn more, the book "Liberated" by Gelongma Pema Deki, formerly Emma Slade (*this is the name under which the book can be found, editor's note*), is a good read. She was one of the 143 women who were ordained in Bhutan in June 2022 and describes her journey from her life as a banker to becoming a nun and founder of the award-winning aid organisation "Opening your Heart to Bhutan", whose work can also be found on the website [openingyourhearttobhutan.com](http://openingyourhearttobhutan.com)

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### Stemming domestic violence

Because violence against women has reached alarming proportions worldwide, Australians Diana Cousens and Anna Halafoff have helped launch a campaign to prevent violence in the family and against women in Buddhist communities and presented it at the conference. The former is deputy chair of the Buddhist Council of the Australian state of Victoria and an honorary member of the



Thea Mohr, Researcher in religious studies, treasurer of Sakyadhita Germany, Gabriela Frey Founder Sakyadhita France, Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo



Australian Catholic University, while the latter is a professor of sociology at the renowned Deakin University in Melbourne and also a Buddhist. The anti-violence campaign was initially funded by the Australian government and involved all religious communities. The Buddhist Council of Victoria also addressed and deepened the topic for Buddhists.

The two speakers emphasised that domestic violence is a major problem worldwide. This includes not only physical and sexualised violence, but also financial and emotional abuse. Although many countries have modernised their legislation and authorities have introduced packages of measures, the number of victims is increasing year on year. In addition to the direct victims of violence, their immediate environment is often also affected, especially children.

Unfortunately, domestic violence also occurs among members of religious communities. In a broad-based survey conducted a few years ago, a large majority of the population was even certain that religious beliefs are a possible additional cause of violence against women: 60 per cent of respondents in Europe, and as many as 70 per cent in Germany, affirmed this. (\*)

Political and legal frameworks alone are clearly not enough. People in difficult life situations need more easy-access help. The pilot project launched in Victoria to prevent violence in families includes a handbook for those responsible in religious communities on how to deal with domestic violence. Another deals with the topic of how to encourage positive family relationships. A whole range of resources have been developed especially for children: for example, the 100-positive-words postcard "Dealing with strong emotions", a poster "How to be a good friend" and infographics on how to treat other people with respect and how to deal with one's own anger.

Some of the materials have been translated into several Asian languages.

It is mainly unconscious fears and a lack of communication skills that lead to uncontrolled emotional outbursts and aggressive misbehaviour, the lecturers explained. From a Buddhist perspective, they emphasised, that many people are afraid of the uncertain ground of change and impermanence. This is the case, for example, when men cannot accept that their partner is developing new career aspirations, making new friends or even wishing to separate, and resort to violence to stop this. It is therefore important for all people to recognise and accept the reality of impermanence and ultimately learn to no longer see it as a threat.

Our human existence and our environment are precious and it is in our mutual interest to dedicate ourselves consciously and with a loving heart to caring for others every day.

### Solidary, resilient and conscious

In conclusion, a few personal words: I would like to recommend to all those who despair in this world with its vast problems and great suffering to take part in a Sakyadhita congress. In Seoul, I once again realised how closely impermanence, resilience and awakening are interconnected. The Buddhist perspective teaches us about impermanence and interdependence. Our human existence and our environment are precious and it is in our mutual interest to consciously and lovingly care for others every day. If we endeavour to live this way of life together, step by step, it will increase our solidarity with all people, regardless of gender, because we need to free ourselves from our mental gender prisons. This enables us to be more resilient in the face of adversity, leads to a comprehensive awareness and ultimately to awakening.

#### More Information:

sakyadhitafrance.org | sakyadhita-germany.org  
europeanbuddhistunion.org/network-buddhist-women-in-europe

(\*) <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/166496/umfrage/meinung-ueber-religion-als-ursache-fuer-haeusliche-gewalt-gegen-frauen/>