

COMPASSIONATE MIND, COMPASSIONATE WORLD
TRANSFORMING SUFFERING THROUGH COMPASSIONATE ACTION

WOMEN FAITH LEADERS RETREAT
REPORT



DHARMA DRUM MOUNTAIN GLOBAL CENTER FOR BUDDHIST EDUCATION
TAIWAN, JUNE 20-22, 2006

OVERVIEW

From June 20-22, 2006, 29 international women religious and spiritual leaders gathered at the Dharma Drum Mountain headquarters in Taiwan to participate in a global inter-faith dialogue on compassionate action. This retreat convened to initiate a global conversation between monastic and laywomen on the role women faith leaders can play in addressing human suffering worldwide. Approximately 50 Buddhist nuns and monks from Dharma Drum Mountain joined the three-day discussions to expand on the perspective of the women monastic leaders present.

The retreat participants represented the following faith traditions and countries:

Buddhism:	Australia, Cambodia, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore, USA
Christianity:	Australia, Lebanon, Switzerland, Taiwan, USA
India:	Hinduism, Sikhism
Islam:	Iraq, Sudan
Judaism:	Israel, USA
Spiritual Indigenous:	USA
Quakerism:	USA

TUESDAY, JUNE 20TH

MORNING ROUNDTABLE

The first day of discussions focused on monastic life. As this subject is varied, the participants addressed this topic in three specific themes:

- a. Women monastics
- b. Monastic training
- c. Society

Venerable Dhammananda of Thailand led the first discussion on the challenges faced by Buddhist women monastics in their training and practice. The group discussed this topic drawing not only upon the Buddhist experience, but also from the experiences of the other faith leaders present. The following summary outlines the challenges faced by the Buddhist monastic community (tradition, education and resources) and ways women monastics can deal with these issues.

Discussion themes & questions covered:

Theme: Ordination and tradition

How does the monastic community manage the challenge of maintaining the integrity of Buddhist teachings and tradition with changing times? Addressing the rules & boundaries of *women's ordination* – What types of reforms should take place? How far should women be allowed to carry ordination precepts?

Embracing and creating awareness of women's hardship, such as the exile or imprisonment some Buddhist nuns face for 'overstepping' their bounds in an effort to become fully ordained. Speaking against the misinterpretation of texts, which has become a line that divides and not one that binds. Supporting the importance and integrity of the Sanka (monastic community) in a *nun's* spiritual journey.

Recommendations:

- ∞ More emphasis needs to be placed on the way in which monks are taught in order to create greater respect for nuns
- ∞ Retain the essence of the precepts, do not emphasize classification
- ∞ Expand the nun's role within the Sanka – "At first nuns were taught, but after 2,000 years it's natural they seek to move into a leadership role."
- ∞ Inter-generational support and unity within the Sanka (younger & older nuns should try to work toward the same goals)
- ∞ Work toward demonstrating mutual respect within the Sanka between monks and nuns

Theme: Education & Resources

There has been progress during the last 30 years, but still not the same level of education for Buddhist nuns as for monks. It needs to be emphasized and recognized that not all nuns have access to a Sanka – As a result, the study and spiritual advancement are left solely to the individual nun. Education needs to take place externally as well as internally. It is important to educate the population on the reality, discipline and sacrifice of monastic spiritual life to dispel any popular notions that it is a 'fad'.

Recommendations:

- ∞ Tapping into the resources of Dharma centers in the West to advance education and support of nuns in the East.
Proposed project: Alliance of Laywomen Leaders & Western Nuns. Its mission would be to support the training, travel & retreat of Eastern nuns, and serve as an information source and reporting mechanism on the well being of nuns globally.
- ∞ Look at already existing organizations that were created to fill a need (i.e. Dharma Nuns Association)
- ∞ Consider the internet as an outlet for information or publicity

AFTERNOON ROUNDTABLE I :

The afternoon theme focused on the Relevance of Monastic Training, which inspired a discussion on the importance of maintaining old lineages and traditions from an inter-faith perspective, and the need to respond to contemporary needs and changing times.

Discussion themes covered:

Meaning of being engaged/enriched by a life path:

By showing the evolution of monastic dress via a slide show, Venerable Dharmananda demonstrated that part of the external (dressing, hair cutting) is tradition, which helps to define aspects of monastic life. The group noted it is important to restate the values between lineage & tradition. One suggestion was to remember the relationship between disciple and teacher represents lineage. The participants questioned the type of role models that exist within monasticism. Additionally, the importance of sharing faith traditions, particularly when you live with "sisters of other faiths" came up as an important way of maintaining communication between faiths. In order to address contemporary challenges in a changing world, the group emphasized that one must learn and understand one's own lineage and then adjust to new ideas and ways of others.

Recommendations:

- ∞ Review old traditions and make sacred new traditions
- ∞ Keeping lineage does not mean changing the structure
- ∞ Embracing something symbolic of suffering or sacrifice helps to create a new voice in tradition
- ∞ Teach about lineage in new and innovative ways
- ∞ Let go of some staid aspects of tradition as part of gaining something new and evolving

AFTERNOON ROUNDTABLE II:

In the afternoon session on the Role of Monastics in Society Today, Sr. Joan Chittister, author and advocate for social justice, challenged the group to consider whether monasticism has really changed, or if it's one's view and practice that has changed. She urges the group to "Beware of your monasticism when the meetings become the end, and the consciousness is lost".

By using the example of an evolving institution, from its origin and period of optimism to decline, she encourages the group to question the direction in which monastics take their practice. She prompts the question of whether or not monastic life follows a similar pattern (optimism followed by decline). She asks the group to consider whether institutionalization and rigidity has replaced fulfilling one's calling and the true mission of service, and if so, what to do not to befall these traps. She warns: "Beware when the practice becomes the thing for which have given your life [and not the mission]".

Discussion theme & recommendations:

How has the role of monastics changed: The life of a monastic is to devote to study and one's faith in order to extract the heart of teachings. Monastics can better serve the lay community by assisting their spiritual path and teaching a lay person the way in which to be his/her own best teacher. It was concluded that the monastic is to be a full-time presence, in his/her faith, for the preservation of tradition. It is also the responsibility of the monastic to address the social ills that affect society.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 21ST

The remaining days of the retreat expanded on the challenges in monastic life by exploring more deeply one of spirituality's main principles: **compassion**. Agreeing that compassion is a dynamic presence in daily life, the group focused on two main themes: the role of women monastics & spiritual laywomen in defining and influencing compassion and implementing compassion through action.

These themes emerged in four roundtable discussions:

A. Becoming a Compassionate Presence – What is the meaning of compassion and how do we become a compassionate presence in the world today, from the monastic and lay perspectives?

B. The Heart of the Mother – Do women have a special role to play in generating compassion? Does the mother image have a special spiritual significance and is there a greater role for this in the world today?

C. **The Universal Heart** – How do we address the challenge of balancing contemplation and action? Does compassion play a vital force and role in bridging the two? How do we manifest compassion in our society today?

D. **The Practice of Compassion in Daily Life** – How do we bring compassion into daily life? What is the meaning of compassion in our day-to-day activities?

MORNING ROUNDTABLE SUMMARY:

As women spiritual leaders, the issue of motherhood played a vital role in the discussion on compassion. The dialogue drew upon many social views of motherhood and womanhood, as well as the importance of the family unit in creating vital compassionate communities. The group not only made a connection between women being an essential component for fostering compassion, but also looked at the root causes for the lack of compassion that exists today. They identified this as the breakdown in the family structure due to new economic responsibilities and expectations. The discussion also included the struggle women have today for positive self-images, in terms of their place in society and the home. The group concluded that men also play an important role in fostering compassion. One participant stated: “the issue is about parenting, not just the mother.” Raising awareness of fathers and men to share in the responsibility of family life will build a foundation for a more compassionate home, and in the larger context, society.

By questioning what it means to be and have universal heart, the participants addressed the criticism that monastics are often ‘narcissistic’ and aren’t functioning in reality. Ven. Chi Kwang and Sr. Joan Chittister cautioned that a religious person must remain focused in moving the individual (lay person) forward in finding universal heart, and not merely focused on personal spiritual evolution. Further, monastics that are misguided in their practice and teachings are to be addressed and corrected – showing that there is forgiveness and compassion within the monastic community.

AFTERNOON ROUNDTABLES SUMMARY:

After identifying the essential component to creating a compassionate society, which is the monastic & spiritual lay communities; the role of women and family structure; what it means to be compassionate; and the definition of compassion itself, the participants looked at ways in which to *put compassion into action*. It was agreed that in order to make a compassion a living and breathing force, it is essential to bring the idea from one’s intellect, to the heart, and finally into the world.

The following is the result of a group exploration, through small working sessions, on *compassion in action*. Each recommendation reflects an individual practice or idea that could influence a global movement toward greater compassion through deeds.

Recommendations:

- ∞ True compassion is to put things into action, to do something
- ∞ Working with the poor; looking at them as your master you serve, not merely as someone in need
- ∞ Practice of generosity (Zakat) in Islam becomes a natural way of giving. Demonstrates that sharing can be taught and introduced into culture.
- ∞ Speaking out against injustice
- ∞ Using land resources, even if limited, to feed children
- ∞ Meditation and prayer keeps us in check to move toward compassion
- ∞ Developing mindfulness through daily practice

- ∞ Ability to say “I’m Sorry” and developing forgiving heart
- ∞ Praying for others
- ∞ Be open to being used as an instrument of peace
- ∞ Implementing Buddha nature
- ∞ Being compassion to oneself (body)

THURSDAY, JUNE 22ND

The final day of the compassion symposium opened with a quiet meditation followed by a plenary reflecting on the previous days of dialogue. Following the plenary, the participants divided into three groups to brainstorm on ways to bring compassion into the world. The exercise was aimed at moving the dialogue from identifying compassion in the direction of implementing action.

The first group comprised religious/monastic leaders. They explored what needs to be done either by or for monastics to enable them to respond to the call for compassion and universal heart. *What should monastic leaders do to respond to the call of project action?*

Recommendations:

- ∞ Make protecting the water & environment a priority
- ∞ Equal rights between male & female monastics
- ∞ Education for monastic & lay people
- ∞ Training nuns to be aware of various social problems
- ∞ Building a greater community of support, so nuns do not have to work alone
- ∞ Promoting nuns on all levels
- ∞ Educating nuns to teach
- ∞ Training small numbers of nuns in different countries (each one, reach one method)
- ∞ Using the resource of the internet
- ∞ Individual action (i.e. nun from Korea inspired to address the situation of Cambodian nuns)
- ∞ Create inter-faith monastic groups, which will help to broaden potential for universal heart
- ∞ Use the resource of Dharma Drum Mountain as a tool for education & a place to contribute through teaching

The second and third groups comprised lay practitioners who follow a spiritual path or belong to religious community, and the youth community. They were challenged with discovering what lay people need to do to bring faith groups and society beyond a consciousness of suffering towards compassionate action. These groups were asked to consider that although many people know about global or local challenges (Iraq or homelessness), what would be the next step toward responding to these crises?

Recommendations:

- ∞ First find out one’s personal relationship/interest – is it local or global action?
- ∞ Create a global Sanka (community) that focuses on unity
- ∞ Encourage communities to adopt voluntary simplicity through mindful consumption
- ∞ Create more valuable time to share values and wisdom (connecting practice to action)
- ∞ Generate a think tank to evaluate what’s been done already and to address the root causes to social ills & issues
- ∞ Incorporate a page on *voluntary simplicity* on the GPIW website
- ∞ Encourage community members to travel for exposure to the reality of other communities

From the youth:

- ∞ Start with yourself; consider what basic things can be done on the individual level
- ∞ Start small; acts of kindness and love that can be implemented today

- ∞ Begin internet forum to encourage inter-faith communication & posting ideas for acts of kindness/compassion that can be shared by a global group

AFTERNOON ROUNDTABLE:

The afternoon session on ‘compassionate action’ focused on elements needed to build a compassionate society and the role of women in leading this effort. The discussion was led by Teny Pirri Simonian representing the World Council of Churches & Dr. Rashad of Iraq. Both women suggested ways to generate compassion drawing upon personal experiences in conflict resolution or living with conflict itself.

Ms. Simonian explained that some of the necessary tools used to rebuild communities in reconciliation efforts are those that can help to generate hearts and minds to open to compassion oriented action. Ms. Simonian offered techniques used to build a culture of peace. She shared that the methodology and tools used in reconciliation building and dialogue come in three familiar values of daily life:

- a. Come to the process open; be willing to be a learner
- b. Be an observer and suspend judgment
- c. Speak from the heart.

Speaking from her experience with the vulnerable women and children in Iraq – a country impacted by conflict, uncertainty and daily violence, Dr. Rashad offered the following guidelines as a means to build compassion:

- a. Respect all religions
- b. Retain one’s values
- c. Reap benefits of the moral constitution of each nation
- d. Teach compassion from early childhood.

Cultivating Compassion in Youth

The youth participants to the retreat led an inter-generational discussion with the spiritual and lay monastic leaders present. This allowed for a frank discussion on what youth feel their roles are in to generating community or global compassion. The religious and spiritual women responded by suggesting ways they feel they can and/or have been collaborating with youth to guide positive youth action for overcoming various kinds of suffering.

Two youth presented a current project to be launched in Fall 2006 on peacebuilding and youth leadership, which will take place in the Sudan (Sudan Youth Peace Dialogue). They offered the participants an opportunity to participate in a compassionate action-oriented response to a crisis of tremendous suffering for thousands of displaced youth living in Sudan today.

CLOSING

His Venerable Master Sheng Yen, Buddhist scholar and Founder of the Dharma Drum Mountain, offered the closing remarks for the Compassion Retreat. He spoke of compassion by using an analogy of people in love. Through his wisdom and lifelong study and practice of Buddhist philosophy, he communicates to the participants the nature of true love, which is love without strings. Part of our journey in relationships with others is to love without the expectation of getting loved in return, or in equal amount. We should not limit or give our love to others on the condition that they will reciprocate that love.

He later expanded on the nature of love by explaining the three levels of compassion. The first of which is the compassion we feel for our family and friends and those we love, which often is the easiest to practice. The second is a compassion that extends equally to each person on the earth regardless of country, race, gender, whether they are poor or rich. He stated that this compassion is more difficult to practice than

the first, and is the level of compassion attained by high spiritual beings or teachers. Finally, the highest level of compassion is that which is expressed without the thought that one is practicing compassion; it is spontaneous and non-discriminating. It leaves no trace, just like a bird that has flown through space or the wake behind a boat on water. It is the very maximum form of compassion and is practiced by enlightened beings or those who have achieved great inner realization.

Master Sheng Yen shared that The Dharma Drum Global Education Center is only possible because of the compassion of those living and practicing and serving –and it is because of this great compassion that so much has been manifested. Without their pure attitude of wishing to help others the University would not have been possible. *“It is the attitude that has brought it all to pass.”*

Thanking Dena and the women religious leaders, he spoke of **Kuan Yin** - the Bodhisattva of Compassion and reminded the participants that she is female.

Official Participants:

Venerable Dhammananda,	Thailand	Buddhism
Venerable Chi Kwang,	Korea	Buddhism
Sister Joan Chittister, OSB,	USA	Catholicism / Christianity
Sadhvi Vrnda Chaitanya,	India	Hinduism
Jesbeer Kaur Singh	Australia	Sikhism
Jill Jameson,	Australia	Buddhism
Dr. Ang Beng Choo,	Singapore	Buddhism
Venerable Chang Ji,	Taiwan	Buddhism
Mary Trotochaud,	USA	Quakerism
Rabbi Shira Israel,	Israel	Judaism
Dena Merriam,	USA	Hinduism/Judaism
Dr. Rashad,	Iraq	Islam
Eily Ho,	Taiwan	Buddhism
Teny Pirri-Simonian	Lebanon/Switzerland	Christianity
Lisa Ha Vin	Switzerland	Buddhism/Christianity
Ilhana Rosen	USA	Spiritual Indigenous
Amel Al-Dehaib	Sudan	Islam
Mary Faeth	Australia	Christianity
Ven. Kang Seoun	Cambodia	Buddhism
Sr. Rosa Wang	Taiwan	Catholicism
Sr.Emma Lee	Taiwan	Catholicism