



*Global Peace Initiative  
of Women*

## The Inner Dimensions of Climate Change

### A Retreat for Young Contemplatives



Entering the summer season, The Global Peace Initiative of Women brought together 40 young contemplatives from throughout America to the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in Pine Bush, NY. The purpose of this gathering was to provide to young adults engaged in a deep contemplative practice a sacred space to explore the inner dimensions of the Global transformations unfolding in the 21st Century. Also present were religious and spiritual leaders from the GPIW network who participated as mentors. Through active discussions, meditation and yoga the group explored meaningful ways to address climate change and methods for bringing their conversation to the public domain. Here we recount for you the highlights of the time the group shared together and the collective wisdom that emerged around the following questions:

- How does our spiritual practice impact the world around us?
- What are the changes needed to shift our collective perceptions and relationships?
- What are the values needed to cultivate a more sustainable and peaceful society?
- What practical steps can be taken to address the inner and outer dimensions of climate change?

For the Opening Session - ***The Sacredness of the Natural Environment in Different Spiritual Traditions*** - Venerable Guo Dong, the Abbot President of Dharma Drum Mountain, joined GPIW in welcoming the group and spoke on the sacredness of the Earth's natural resources. He emphasized the value of having young contemplatives using kindness and

compassion to overcome difference. Regarding the times in which we live, Venerable Guo Dong offered words of guidance on compassionate action:



"The human race of the twenty first century has come a long way. Our world is evolving from regionalism into globalism; we have transformed our closed ethnic societies into societies characterized by multi-cultural diversity. We are moving away from nationalist concerns toward concerns for the shared security and well being of the entire human race. The impact of events in any corner of the world can be felt globally. This is aptly described by the Chinese proverb that says the whole body will move when even a single strand of hair is pulled. Indeed, we share the burden of all calamities and we certainly share the benefits of all blessings too. It is no longer possible for anyone to be indifferent to the happenings of the world. Since violence and war have not in fact brought us peace, don't you think that we need a new paradigm, a new approach toward making peace? If you do, that would mean looking for methods of non-violence because if we continue to resort to force, all that will happen is that we will be stuck in violent conflicts around the world."



#### Day 1 - Morning

The discussion on the **Root Causes of Environmental Degradation and the Subsequent Changes in Climate** was facilitated by Rev. Diane Berke, Founder of One Spirit Learning Alliance. This session addressed the deeper issue of environmental degradation as it relates to the human relationship with the natural world and its resources. As a moderator and mentor to the gathering, Rev. Berke offered key insights on the ways in which spirituality can be used as an expression of respect for the Earth's resources. The group addressed what it means to find balance between treading lightly on the earth (least footprint and living wholesome) and not blocking the world (global issues, community involvement and advocacy).

The discussion on some of the external challenges shifted to include how inner wants impact actions with the outer. One participant expressed her understanding of the inner-outer duality: "I want to be conscious and not wasteful, but I want more not to be thirsty and I want more to get there fast." The group agreed that whenever one feels desire it is a manifestation of not feeling whole, so as a conscious contemplative (in an effort to tread lightly on the earth) one has to aim to answer "need" with constructive, Earth-sustaining measures like internal dialogue, enlightened reading or spiritual practice.

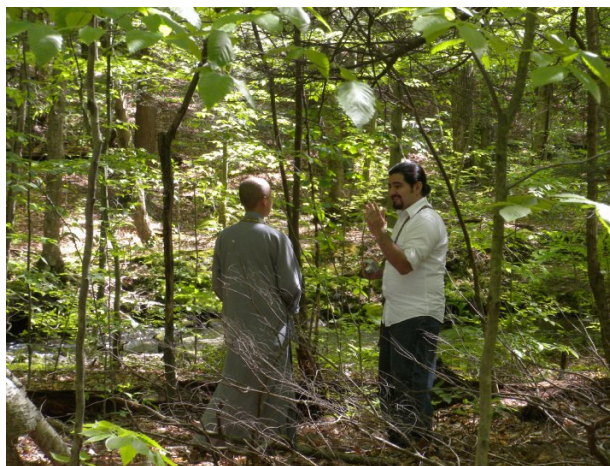
Final reflections on this topic, interspersed with silences, helped bring about an inter-spiritual articulation of the many inner and outer human conflicts with the environment. Some of the key points that emerged:

- How do we recapture the unity between human energy and Earth energy?
- Ancient cultures held a profound connection with the Earth. This was possible because the complexity of life was not so great.
- Current popular culture reveals a deep desire for something. What is it that we yearn for?
- World problems we see around us are a reflection of what is in us.
- We get wisdom and teaching from nature, not just services and goods.



### Day 1 - Afternoon

To support and balance the awareness that was emerging, Ven. Chang-Ji and Ven. Guo Chan of the Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association led the group on a walking meditation into the Pine Bush woods. They asked the group to marry the dialogue process with the natural surroundings of the retreat center by listening to and observing the Earth's natural wonder in silence. Some participants described this exercise as enabling them to experience the Earth's animals, trees and water as a palpable, unified energetic presence. Ven. Chang Ji asked that each person select a stone from a brook as a symbolic reminder of his/her connection to the Earth, as well as to signify the piece of the Earth each human being is responsible for.



### Day 2 - Morning

Venerable Guo Xing, Abbot of Dharma Drum Mountain Retreat Center, led the discussion on **Re-aligning Ourselves with the Natural World: Spiritual Perspectives on the Interior Work Needed to Address Climate Change**. Drawing on his experience in the Chan Buddhist tradition, he approached this theme by looking at the outer world as a reflection of an individual's emotional response and integrated action. He said, "How do you make people believe that the outer problem comes from inside? You don't need to change the external, but you can change your viewpoint." In other words, by changing your outlook, you can impact the exterior. He shared that many people aim to change external factors with "pleasing sensations" to satisfy the internal. With this in mind, he reminded the group that the environment is always neutral, and yet, humans equate a bad environment with unpleasant feelings.

He explained that in Chan Buddhism one is not captive to these fleeting emotions because relational experiences are expressed through the constancy of mind; the outer therefore

does not have to impact or fluctuate the inner state. Ultimately, his message was that one's feeling is not dependent on the external environment.

Supporting the Abbot's teaching, Philip Hellmich, Senior Officer at Search for Common Ground, facilitated a deep reflection and discussion on the notion of "desire" versus "need." He used the theme to explain how these behaviors are in fact a direct expression of our relationship with the environment. His key recommendations for healing this imbalance:

- Embrace simplifying.
- Use mindfulness to move into the seamlessness of our existence.
- Explore what drives our desires (need to have/consumerism) in society and let this go.



#### Day 2 - Afternoon

Addressing the notion that climate change is perhaps a reflection of the inner (a spiritual crisis within humanity), Dr. Kurt Johnson, GPIW retreat mentor and Founder of InterSpiritual Dialogue suggested it is therefore possible to ascertain that outer challenges are a manifestation of our very human development. By encouraging an evaluation of who "**we are**," Johnson

suggested that the collective awakening that is happening around climate change is part of the human trajectory of experience. He explained that a few decades ago people believed the earth could be used limitlessly and recuperate on its own. Johnson offered that contemporary times, however, brings us to "...a crossroads in the evolution of consciousness, and both climate and consciousness are reaching a convergence." He shared that this *exteriority* (problems of the world: pollution, extremism, human rights, poverty) challenge us to run away. As such, he suggested that "A radical stepping up of the *interiority* of who **we are** (meditative, spiritual, conscious beings) is needed to confront this. Though the challenges are seemingly insurmountable, humanity is also at a level of consciousness like never before seen in modern times. Some of the positives at this point in human evolution are various forms of collective action, as well as the unprecedented appearance of "egolessness" spreading throughout social networks. Skillful use of conscious choices takes a new momentum and exponential growth toward communalism. To better understand and work within our times we may be forced into sharing. Consciousness awareness through spiritual practice is the way to be prepared and embrace this shift."



#### Day 3 - Morning

On day three, the group gathered to discuss framing the **Language of Spirituality and the Role of the Media in Fostering a Change in Consciousness** led by Gorakh Hayashi, Professor at Columbia College. Joined by recent alumni of Columbia College, Gorakh delivered a video presentation about a movement his students have been shaping in Chicago, Illinois called "Light Circles."

The premise behind this group is to create sacred and safe spaces in which young adults can share a universal spirituality and initiate support networks for conscious activities rooted in love. Having worked with young adults over the years, Gorakh affirmed that the traditional language of religion does not resonate with the generation now beginning their spiritual work--evidenced by declining numbers of youth in spiritual vocations. The spiritual mentors serving the retreat agreed, and reinforced the value of groups like Light Circles in which young people can shape a more inclusive language in keeping with the spiritual sensibilities of today. Gorakh concluded by offering a clear view on the needs and wants of youth of today directly related to the evolution of their spirituality.

Following this the group split into small discussion pods for brainstorming on the language and ideas needed to communicate the emerging spirituality reflective of contemporary times.



#### Day 3 - Afternoon

Dena Merriam, Founder and Convener of GPIW and Adam Bucko, Founder of the Reciprocity Foundation led a discussion on **Addressing Climate Change by Cultivating a Culture of Non-Greed**. Together they explained that non-greed is a defining principle applying to every area of life, and suggested that the first step would be to establish the meaning of non-greed to a new generation of contemplatives. It was shared that the inspiration for the Young Contemplatives Retreat was to help cultivate the seeds of a youth movement around "reframing the idea of prosperity in our time." The role of GPIW is to support young contemplatives to play a significant position in generating a conscious culture and the emergence of a new spiritual voice. She said, "Great shifts only happen through will, power and creative energy - all of which is embodied in younger generations."

Following this Ven. Chang Ji of DDMBA led the group in a one hour silent walking meditation called **The Living Nature of Water**. The purpose behind this activity was to impart active meditation techniques for deeper contemplation on the ways humans utilize the Earth. She asked the group to be mindful that one of the most significant changes that humans must work toward is a shift in the way we regard water. Everyone was asked to carry the stone they collected at the start of the retreat in a small bowl of water through the woods. Ven. Chang Ji encouraged the participants to establish a reflective relationship with the water. Being conscious of its preciousness, each participant tried not to spill the water. The group gathered at a hill top overlooking a pond where Buffe Laffey of the Dharma Drum Retreat Center performed an invocation from the Native American tradition in honor of the Earth's rivers and lakes. The group returned their rocks and water to the Earth and held space in silence to put forth collective reverence for the living nature of water.



The invocation was based on the Native American concept of the Medicine Wheel, or the 4 compass directions. Each direction has a specific set of qualities, which complement each other and work together to create a harmonic balance. In addition to the 4 compass directions, some traditions include up (the sky) down (the earth) and center (self, present moment) for a total of 7 directions in the Medicine Wheel. The words or concepts associated with each direction vary according to the needs of the ritual. The basic purpose is to invite an awareness of the totality of the universe, and of one's self as fully present and connected to the universe.

The words of the chanting were in Abenaki, one of the Algonquian languages.

#### *Day 4 - Morning*

Facilitating the discussion on ***The Role of Contemplative Practice in Addressing Climate Change***, Dena Merriam shared that she is fully committed to joining young adults in bringing contemplative practice (the inner) to the world (the outer), and was moved by the depth of wisdom within the group.

She also spoke on her vision to integrate the spirit of the young contemplatives with the wisdom of the GPIW Contemplative Alliance. Emphasizing the role and value of contemplative practice, she encouraged the group not to forget the power of prayer: "Youth are not alone in their endeavors; they are guided by the sages, saints and guides of the universe." She explained that the divine ones do not leave (permanently), and contemplative practice enables one to know this and receive their energy. She shared that the group was not responsible with coming up with all the answers in the retreat weekend. Instead, she suggested that the next step for the gathering was to work collectively to build a community to do something visible with the public at large.





With this in mind the participants expressed what they felt young contemplatives could bring to society to raise public consciousness. The points below reflect some of the group's aspirations and recommendations for bringing seamlessness to the inner and outer aspects of young contemplative life:

- Commit to gathering, it is important to maintain momentum.
- Forbearance is needed to sustain this effort.
- Model ways for people to live a new conscious paradigm.
- Make contemplative action visible - do inner practices within the public realm.
- Return home and invite 2 friends to join you in dialogue/action/spirituality.
- Be the teacher you already are and share your spirituality with counterparts.
- Consciously make this movement outwardly visible.

#### *Conclusion*

This retreat marked the creation of a young contemplative alliance or network dedicated to promoting contemplative action and a shift in mindset. While many activists have highlighted the negative impact of climate change, spiritual leaders can be a guiding force in encouraging contemplative action that unites the human community. Young practitioners play an important role in encouraging others to change towards a more sustainable lifestyle. This gathering was designed to deepen their collective understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things and motivate them to take individual action.

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