

Conference Report

11th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women

Ho Chih Minh City, 28 December 2009–3 January 2010

From 28 December 2009 to 3 January 2010 the 11th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women took place in Ho Chih Minh City, Vietnam. “Eminent Buddhist Women” was the topic of the conference.

Some 2600 participants from 37 countries attended the conference. The workshops and talks of the various panels covered a variety of topics including Buddhist Women of the World, Buddhist Women and Leadership, Eminent Women in Early Buddhist History, Eminent Women in Text and Reality, Buddhist Women’s Communities, Living Simply, Protecting the Environment, Eminent Buddhist Women of the 20th Century, Socially Engaged Buddhist Women, Buddhist Education across Cultures, Diverse Dharma Paths, Exceptional Role Models, and Buddhist Women of Vietnam.

In the first panel Malia Dominica Wong, a Catholic nun from Hawaii, talked about “Bhiksuni Rei Miao: An Embodiment of Transcultural Values”. Bhiksuni Rei Miao was born in China at the beginning of the 20th century. Educated in Hong Kong and also ordained there as bhiksuni she went to Manila where she as the first bhikshuni in the Philippines established a temple in the late fifties. But she also went to Malaysia, and the USA, where she spread the seeds of Buddhism in California and Hawaii.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, former President of Sakyadhita International, and one of the founders of the Buddhist Women’s Association talked about “Buddhist Women as Leaders”, and the problems women face. She came to the conclusion that “By challenging outmoded perceptions of women and reawakening women to their highest human potential, Buddhist women have much to contribute to the spiritual dimension of global dialogue in helping create a new consciousness for a new era.”

Venerable Tenzin Palmo, a Westerner, born in England, but a bhikshuni ordained in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, held a talk on “Mummy-la: The Life and Accomplishments of Freda Bedi”. Freda Bedi was the founder of Mahayana Buddhist Nunnery in Tilokpur, two hours by bus from Dharamsala, the seat of the Tibetan government in exile in India. Bedi, the mother of the Hollywood actor Kabir Bedi, worked in the fifties with Tibetan refugees,

who had fled from Chinese-occupied Tibet. In 1966 she was ordained as sramanerika (novice), later becoming a bhiksuni in Taiwan. Könchog Palmo, as she was called with her ordained name, died in 1977, but she is still well known even today.

“Cultivating Faith”, so the title of the dharma talk held by the Venerable Tenzin Palmo on another evening, made clear the difference between Christian belief and faith in a Buddhist teacher which is based on proving the teacher, his or her teachings, knowledge, and behaviour.

Sarah Harding, an American working as Assistant Professor at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, is unique in bearing the title Lama. “Seeking Niguma, Lady of Illusion” was the title of a talk given by her on this little known Indian women considered to have lived in the 11th century.

Morny Joy, a scholar from Canada talked about “Images of the Feminine in Buddhism and Christianity: Wisdom and her Bounty”, an interesting comparison between wisdom, sophia, in Christianity and wisdom in Buddhism. Her talk may stimulate inter-religious research, e.g. with Judaism and Islam.

There were not only interesting talks but also many workshops every day. Particularly interesting among the various workshops given was “Management Tools for Turning the Wheel of the Dharma” by Roseanne Freese, an American working at the US Department of Agriculture. Based on the work of John Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, and Jack Kornfield, the well known Theravada teacher, she tried to engage the participants in an active exchange, which proved quite a challenge particularly for the Vietnamese.

The panel “Buddhist Women and Diversity” had been cancelled by the Vietnamese government. Rotraut Wurst who had been in charge of organizing it together with international scholars decided to give a workshop instead. Wurst gave an introduction to this clearly sensitive issue, based on Buddhist texts compiled by Diana Y. Paul (*Frau im Buddhismus*, Hamburg 1983). The participants themselves – some 30 women from Vietnam but also from Malaysia, India, Indonesia, the Netherlands, France, Germany and USA – constituted “diversity”, representing as they did different cultural traditions, life-styles and sexuality. Personal testimony, be it of Western lesbian nuns, or of an Indian nun, who had to cope with her minority status when living in India, equally, however, since moving to the USA, stimulated intercultural understanding and removed prejudices.

A rap performed by DJ Jampa Sausage alias Dr. Rotraut Wurst, about the topic of the conference at the end of the workshop, was somehow a fitting conclusion, enabling the participants to understand that there are diverse ways of living the Buddha’s path.

And so that rap had to be given again on stage after Venerable Tenzin Palmo’s dharma talk.

The conference ended as always with impressive excursions, this time to various temples outside Ho Chih Minh City. The next conference will be held in summer 2011 in Singapore.

For further information see: www.drwurst.de; www.iwmd.de or www.sakyadhita.org.

Rotraut Wurst