

Buddhists arrive for Talmage assembly

Chinese delegation's first visit

By LI BEI WEN
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It was a touching, almost tender scene at the busy San Francisco airport Thursday when 63 Buddhist monks from mainland China walked together through the crowds of curious onlookers.

Traveling to the West for the first time, the delegation has come to attend the Water-Land-Air Dharma Assembly which opens Saturday at the City of 10,000 Buddhas in Talmage.



Ming Yang, leader of the Chinese group, said, "We have flown over the vast ocean and arrived at the beautiful and splendid land of the United States of America, which is so richly endowed with natural resources and so advanced in her scientific and technological achievements."

Yang said the Chinese monks have come to the U.S. to "promote friendship, pray for peace, propagate the Dharma (the teachings of the Buddha), and to extensively establish wholesome affinities with the faithful."

The Assembly they came to attend will be the first of its kind held outside Asia, according to Hsuan Hua, chairperson of the Dharma Realm Buddhist Association and abbot of five monasteries in the Western United States and Canada.

It includes, he said, rites that are the most intensive and elaborate of all ceremonies in Buddhism, performed to rescue and liberate souls who have died in war and other natural and man-made disasters, according to the Buddhist belief.

In their bright yellow robes with brilliant red over-tunics, the Chinese walked undaunted through rushing travelers, who stopped to stare, take pictures and make way for them to pass.

The delegation was also met by a kneeling group of students and teachers from the local monasteries who could be heard softly singing a chant as the visitors approached, at which time the hosts bowed their heads to the floor in a show of respect and honor.

The Chinese delegation includes Abbot Ming Yang representing the Guangji Monastery in Beijing and the Longhua Monastery in Shanghai; Abbot Zhan Chan of the Jade Buddha Monastery also in Shanghai; and Dharma Master Ming Zhe of the Guangji Monastery in Beijing, representing the Buddhist Association of China.

This group will be joined by 500-600 other Dharma masters from Australia, Indonesia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Canada and other countries at the assembly in Talmage, staying in the facilities there.

The assembly rituals have a long history in Buddhism, originating during the Lyang Dynasty in China in 505 A.D. when a ceremony was composed and became the official Buddhist ritual for rescuing the souls of those who had died in war. The seven-day water, land and air ceremony will be followed by a week-long Conference of United World Religions.

Leaders of the world's major religions, scholars and seekers of truth and proper belief are invited to attend, Hua said.

For more information about the times of group discussions and speeches during the world religions conference, call the administration office at the City of 10,000 Buddhas, 462-0939. The conference is open to anyone in Ukiah and a free vegetarian meal will be provided each day at no cost to participants in the conference.

Buddhist monks and nuns from the monastery at the City of 10,000 Buddhas chanted and bowed as the delegation from China filed by in one of the busy concourses at the San Francisco airport.

Buddhist assembly gets underway

*By LI BEI WEN
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The opening ceremonies for the Water-Land-Air Assembly got underway Saturday at the City of 10,000 Buddhas, and will reconvene at 10 a.m. today.

The Great Buddha Hall on the grounds has been decorated with red lanterns and large red banners with messages in gold Chinese characters. Four flag poles at the entrance gate fly the flag of the United States, as well as those of the Dharma Realm Buddhist Association, sponsors of the event.

A delegation of 63 monks from China arrived Thursday to assist in performing the elaborate ceremonies associated with the Assembly, which is being reenacted in the local monastery for the first time in the western world.

The assembly, one of the most intensive in all the repentance ceremonies in Buddhism, does not concern environmental issues, as the name might indicate, but is devoted to saving souls who died unexpectedly in wars and other kinds of natural and man-made disasters.

It is the Buddhists' belief that these souls roam in darkness and undergo continual suffering until they are rescued and liberated by those alive on earth today.

The purpose of the assembly, according to Hsuan Hua, abbot of the monastery at the City of 10,000 Buddhas, "is to liberate the departed so they'll be saved, and to teach and influence living people to turn the light around on themselves."

"The ceremony," he said, "is really praying for world peace — sincerely doing it."

"We must teach and influence the living to bring forth a vast resolve for enlightenment. Everybody has to be especially sincere to support the ceremony. This is important for world peace," he said.

Speaking in an interview before the conference opened, Hua said people need to be awakened to the reasons for the disasters and the crises in the world, which he attributed to the condition of men's minds.

The words used in the ceremonies are from the writings of dharma masters of old and from the teachings of the Buddha.

Ceremonies will be conducted at various sites on the property of the City of 10,000 Buddhas, in rituals of tying up and purifying the boundaries, sending out talismans and messages of invitation to different beings of the various realms.

Other ceremonies include making offerings to spiritual beings, bathing the Buddha images, feeding the ghosts, transmitting the precepts, seeing off the sages and so on.

"Hu" or offerings of grain and vegetables are placed in square wooden boxes and presented to the myriad sentient beings of the three realms of existence.



According to traditions established centuries ago, the ceremonies last for seven days and nights, and this historical one in Talmage will conclude on Saturday, July 25.

For more information about the times of meetings and ceremonies, contact the administration office at 462-0939.

Three leaders of the Water-Land-Air Assembly underway at the City of 10,000 Buddhas, are Hsuan Hua (l-r), chairperson of the Dharma Realm Buddhist Association, sponsor of the event; Ming Yang, leader of the delegation from China; and the group's advisor, Zhan Chan.

Historical Water, Land, and Air Dharma Assembly Held at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas

A major world event for praying for world peace came to a successful culmination at the Sagely City of Ten Thousand Buddhas on July 24, 1987. The week-long ceremony, held for the first time in a Western country, received positive recognition from the public media, and delighted the thousands who came to participate in the ceremonies.

The Water, Land, and Air Ceremony, the most elaborate of all Buddhist repentance ceremonies, originated in the sixth century. Emperor Wu of the Lyang Dynasty, together with virtuous Buddhist Dharma Masters, compiled this ritual for making extensive vegetarian offerings to both sagely and ordinary beings living in the water and on the land throughout the Dharma Realm. Although the

ceremony has been revived throughout all the major Buddhist centers in China, this is the first time it has ever been held in full-scale in the West.

The Sagely City was host to about one hundred Dharma Masters and lay delegates from the People's Republic of China. The Sangha at Longhua ("Dragon Flower") Monastery, headed by its Abbot, Dharma Master Ming Yang, "crossed the ocean" and came to America for this historical event. Other guests of honor with the delegation included Dharma Master Jen Chan, Abbot of Jade Buddha Monastery in Shanghai; Dharma Master Je, Head-Monk at Guangji Monastery, Beijing; and Dharma Master Jing Hwei, Editor-in-Chief of "Dharma Sound" Magazine, Beijing, as well as other visiting Dharma Masters and lay devotees from Harbin, Manchuria.

Preparations for this event were well underway over a year ago. All the elaborate Dharma instruments and artifacts of adornment, such as canopies, banners, flags, lanterns, drums, gongs, icons, and images, ceremonial robes, tapestries, painted scrolls, and so on, were made especially for this occasion. The Dharma instruments alone that were flown here from Mainland China weighed over four tons. The monks who presided over the ceremonies are highly skilled in this ancient ritual. The saffron robes under sashes of bright red cloth stitched with golden thread worn by the visiting monks were a brilliant contrast to the azure skies and verdant rolling hills surrounding the beautiful Sagely City. Red lanterns swayed and colorful banners fluttered in the gentle breeze. Sounds of ceremonial gongs, drums, cymbals, bells, and holy chanting resonated throughout the Way-place. The stately rituals combined with the magnificent music and colorful pageantry inspired deep faith in the hearts of the participants.

Ceremonies were conducted simultaneously in the Great Platform in the Hall of Ten Thousand Buddhas, and the Inner Platform where altars--twenty-four shrines in all--were set up for the sagely realms of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Arhats, as well as for the common realms of living beings revolving in the six paths of rebirth (gods, asuras, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings). Several senior masters presided over the rites of worship in the Inner Platform. Ceremonies began at 2:30 a.m. and continued on until the late hours of the night. In the large platform, there was bowing of the Jeweled Repentance of the Emperor Wu of Lyang, as well as Morning and Evening Recitation, the Grand Meal Offering at noon, and Universal Bowing to the Buddhas. There were five other platforms, where the Sutras were recited around the clock by Sanghans and laypeople: The Rebirth Platform (The Amitabha Sutra and recitation of the Buddha's name); Prolonging Life Platform (The Vajra Sutra, perfect Enlightenment Sutra, Golden Light Sutra, Sutra of Contemplating the Buddha's Limitless Life, and others); The Dharma Flower Sutra Platform, Shurangama Sutra Platform, and The Avatamsaka Sutra platform. Over ten major scriptures were recited. The merit was dedicated several times each day in the Rebirth and Long-Life Halls, so that the souls of the departed who have died in disasters, war, and from illness could be liberated and sent off to a good rebirth, and so that those now living would obtain long life and good health. The merit of the entire Dharma Assembly is especially dedicated to world peace, the longevity of world leaders, and the prosperity of all nations. Its aim is to teach and transform both the living and the dead. It is through such efforts as these that the violent energy that has been spreading over the world can be eradicated and replaced with an auspicious, healing light. It was through the sincerity of the faithful from many countries that this extremely successful Dharma Assembly was brought to accomplishment.



Photo, above: Invoking Amitabha Buddha's name, and reciting the pure Land Sutras.



Photo, above: Two of the five Elder Dharma Masters presiding over the Yoga Ritual for Bestowing Sweet-Dew Food to Ghosts with Flaming Mouths. This ancient ritual was performed in its entirety for the first time in the West.

Many of the rituals performed in the Water, Land, and Air ceremonies had never been seen before in a Western country. Several of them in particular will no doubt live on in the memories of all those who participated in them. For five consecutive nights, from 6:00 p.m. until midnight, the Yoga Ritual for Dispensing Sweet Dew to relieve the Hungry Ghosts with Flaming Mouths was performed. This ritual, evolved from the Secret School, is presided over by five great Dharma Masters, who represent the Buddhas of the five directions. Donning their magnificent five-Buddha crowns, the Masters re-enacted a splendid ritual consisting of praises, mantras, mudras, and powerful sutra passages to evoke the aid of the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and sagely Sangha of the ten directions to bless the vegetarian food which was then offered to the souls roaming in darkness who have been eternally undergoing hunger, thirst, and great distress from the time of their unfortunate deaths. The intonations and richly-textured orchestration of the Dharma instruments made this an extremely moving and inspiring experience, at times poignant and at other times jubilant.

In addition, the Precepts for Wandering Souls were transmitted, rescuing them and ensuring their rebirth in the Pure Land. On the second to last day of the Dharma Assembly, a Liberating-the-Living Ceremony was held, during which over six hundred birds were given the Three Refuges and then set free, delighting everyone there.

The Jeweled Repentance of Emperor Wu of Lyang, one of the longest repentance ceremonies in Buddhism, which took the entire week to perform, consisted of bowing to the titles of Buddhas, interspersed with reciting passages from the Sutras. Participants bowed on behalf of all sentient beings and dedicated the merit to their speedy liberation. A holy and reverent atmosphere filled the Sagely City as hundreds came and went, filled with respect and awe for the Dharma and a new-found sense of harmony and hope.



Photo, above: The magnificent "Sending off the Sages" Ceremony, the final event of the Water, Land, and Air Dharma Assembly. Twentyfour Dharma Master, bearing gilded basins containing the dedications, preceded by flag bearers and lantern bearers. The colorful pageant, replete with reeds and pipes, circumambulated the Sagely City. At the end, the plaques were burned in the open courtyard, and dedications of thanks were made to all the sages throughout the Dharma Realm.

The closing ceremony on July 24th was especially spectacular. A long procession, consisting of thirty-six attendants carrying streamers, flags, glass lanterns, twenty-four basins of varicolored paper images to be burned and dedicated to wandering souls, as well as the entire delegation of the many laypeople who sponsored vegetarian meals, bearing flowers and censors, filed out in full regalia and circumambulated the Sagely City. A sense of exhilaration and joy passed over the assembly as the final verses of dedication were sung and all the rebirth and long-life plaques were burned and the merit transferred. As the entire group gathered in front of Five Contemplations Dining Hall for a group picture, the Venerable Master made the following announcement:

"This week-long assembly has been conducted in a way that is in keeping with the Dharma. The visiting Dharma Masters have worked very hard, and the laypeople have been extremely sincere and reverent, and for this reason, this assembly has been a great success. This event has been unprecedented in the history of the West, but in the future, there will be many more such Dharma assemblies. The leaders of the world's countries will soon recognize the impact this kind of ceremony has on world peace, and they will invite lofty Sangha members to conduct Water-Land ceremonies in their own countries.

"Today, infinite numbers of beings from the various realms have been liberated. When the Bodhisattva Precepts were transmitted this afternoon, Marie Antionette along with her retinue of thousands who met their deaths under the guillotine during the French Revolution (18th century) came and received the precepts and were liberated. The spirits of several American presidents who were assassinated also came and took the precepts, and hence have been reborn in the Pure Land. The Dharma Assembly is now complete; however, you should continue to hold a Water, Land, and Air Ceremony in your own mind. At all times take across the beings of jealousy, obstructiveness, fighting, greed, selfishness, and dishonesty within your own minds. If you can constantly adhere to the Six Principles of no fighting, no seeking, no greed, no selfish-ness, no pursuit of personal advantage, and no lying, then you will always have an adorned place of the Way in your own mind. That's the essence of the spirit of the Water, Land, and Air Dharma. You should embody this spirit so that it can fill the entire Dharma Realm, reaching every single particle of dust."

The Chinese delegation departed amidst many praises and well wishes. The Sagely City will host a Conference of United World Religions August 1 through August 8.



WATER, LAND, AND AIR DHARMA ASSEMBLY--reciting sutras in the Hall for prolonging Life and dedicating the merit especially to the health and long life of the world leaders, and prosperity for people of all countries.