

Following is a report on the CONFERENCE OF UNITED WORLD RELIGIONS, held at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, August 1-8, 1987, written by Judith Randall, who represented Pendel Hill, of the Society of Friends (Quaker), during the eight days of the Conference:

A CONFERENCE OF WORLD RELIGIONS, A BUDDHIST MONASTERY, AND A QUAKER

3:30 a.m. The shramaneri (novice Buddhist nun) walks through the women's side of the campus striking the hollow wooden fish--tock, tock, tock-tock--to awaken us for the 4:00 a.m. recitation. I wash and dress and emerge into the chill darkness. Total silence. Millions of stars overhead. There, a shooting star. There, another. The August scents of broom and wild anise are faint now. They'll be strong by afternoon when the golden hills lay under the dry 100° sun. A few other women move silently toward the Buddhahall at the center of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas.

Inside, the pungent smell of incense is strong in the large hall. A hundred kneeling benches fill the room. "Ten thousand" gold Buddha statues, large and small, line the walls from shoulder level to the ceiling high above. Gwan Yin, the Bodhisattva with a thousand arms, looks out over the hall with great, compassionate eyes. Banners of red, green, purple, yellow hang above a high platform from which the Dharma talks are sometimes given. Fresh flowers and fruit--offerings to the Buddha--rest on every altar.

Now the ceremony has begun. I follow along, chanting the Chinese transliteration of the Great Compassion Mantra accompanied by the hollow "tock" of the wooden fish, the occasional gong of the large, deep brass bowl, or the ring of the tiny bell, signaling a time to bow to the floor three times, then once from the waist. The chanting begins to take on a life of its own. Then we are on our feet, falling into line in order, circumambulating the hall, chanting "Namo Syau Dzai Yen Shou Yau Shr Fwo (Homage to Medicine Master Buddha, Who Dispels Calamities and Lengthens Life)".

Thus began the days at the Conference of United World Religions (Conference participants were free to join or observe the ceremonies or not, as they chose) held at this orthodox Buddhist monastery in Talmage, California, 2½ hours drive north of San Francisco, in August, 1987. The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas occupies what was once the Mendocino State Hospital. The hospital won an architectural award in its time for being the most peaceful design for a state hospital; it looks like a monastery with white stucco buildings, cloisters, and Spanish tile roofs. The Dharma Realm Buddhist Association purchased it in 1976, and has since begun Dharma Realm Buddhist University, Instilling Goodness Elementary and Developing Virtue Secondary Schools, and for six years ran a program assisting Southeast Asian refugees, and a vocational training program for both the sangha (ordained monks and nuns) and laity is functioning.

The most important work which takes place here (and at the five smaller Way Places in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, Vancouver, and Calgary) is the cultivation and teaching of the Dharma by Master Hsuan Hua and the monks and nuns (both Western and Asian) and lay people who reside here.

Master Hua's vision for the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas is at least twofold: 1) to bring orthodox Buddhism to the West in as pure a form as possible, so that it may take hold with good roots, and 2) to provide an ecumenical center where people of all faiths can learn from one another and thereby promote world understanding and harmony.

8:00 a.m. Pots of chrysanthemums of purple, yellow, rust, and white line the entrance to the Conference Hall. Inside, tables are in two long rows. Bhikshunis with shaved heads, wearing bright yellow robes and sashes set up sound equipment at the front of one side of the room, as they prepare for the day's work of translation. The Bhikshus, in gray and brown robes, and sashes, talk quietly with the guests on the men's side of the room. Disciples of Master Hua in their black robes, and the other guests begin filling the hall. Flowers grace many of the tables. The room is warm in the morning chill; in the afternoon it will be cool when we close the windows against the heat. The moderator for the day takes her place, speaks briefly about the topic and the format, and invites the keynote speaker to begin. The first speaker is Chinese, and I listen to the soft rise and fall of the syllables; then the English translation is spoken. For a moment the nuns confer over the translation of a particular phrase, then reaching agreement, the translation continues. The rhythms of the Chinese to English, English to Chinese are a constant accompaniment to the ideas being spoken.

This Conference is the first major ecumenical effort of the Dharma Realm Buddhist Association. Fifty to seventy-five people attended each of the eight days, though not always the same fifty to seventy-five. The attenders for the entire week included a Catholic priest, who is starting a world religions program at a California college; a teacher of religion at Washington State University; a Buddhist abbot from London; a Taoist and Confucian scholar from China; Dharma Masters (Buddhist teachers) from China and Bangladesh; a Malaysian Buddhist student from the University of Iowa; a man from India; and me, a Quaker. Another Quaker attended briefly, but left early to attend Pacific Yearly Meeting.

Among the other denominations represented for shorter times were fundamentalist Christians, Seventh Day Adventists, Hari Krishna (Hindu), Unitarian, and those from no particular sect, but who engage in spiritual practices and meditation. The Buddhist monks and nuns, disciples, lay people, and guests from nearby Ukiah filled the complement. (Also attending briefly were a representative from the office of the California Assemblyman, whose district includes the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, and the Mendocino County Supervisor. President Reagan had also been invited, but sent a letter of regret, which was followed up by a phone call from a White House staff person, further expressing regret that the President or a representative would be unable to attend, and expressing support for the Conference.)

The representation was not wide, and the Conference was smaller than the organizers had hoped; however, this smallness allowed people to speak easily and frequently and in greater depth.

World peace was the theme of the Conference, and on each of the eight days, a separate topic was taken up and related to world peace:

- the world situation: pressing issues
- education
- the family
- the individual: development of character and self-respect
- religion: the inner aspects
- religion: the outer aspects
- toward a new ethic
- summary and perspectives

This agenda seemed at first overwhelming. However, the format for the Conference led us quickly to the edge of our thinking and to our most pressing questions on these matters. Each morning and afternoon began with a "keynote speaker"--chosen from among those of us who attended for the entire

week, or those who on two occasions were invited from outside for that purpose. After a talk of about one-half-hour, the microphone was open for anyone who wished to speak to the group for five minutes, offering his or her opinion, perspective, question, or response to the topic or the speaker--his or her "truth".

I found the format stimulating, challenging, and very rewarding both as a speaker and as a listener, and hope to introduce it among Friends. What else emerged from these days of rich dialogue which is useful for Friends? The overriding message of the Conference was this: Go back to your own religions; go back to the roots, to the message of the founder of your own religion. Study this, and practice this. As we can help one another adhere to the principles of our own religions, world peace will come. I am excited by the implications of the rapid spread of the Quaker Studies Program in this regard.

A second message was this: Take as many opportunities as possible to listen, learn, and teach with those of other religions, not to proselytize, but to share toward greater understanding. Take as many opportunities as possible to share or observe one another's religious practices. Take in what is true for us and let the rest go, rather than debating or arguing--or worse, cutting ourselves off from one another over points of belief or practice. What kinds of ecumenical work are we engaged in in the Society of Friends, I wondered? Are we members of our local ministerial associations? Are we working effectively there?

Third, as we cultivate our personal spiritual paths, let us continually extend our prayers and disciplines and works both inwardly and outwardly. A prayer of gratitude for a blessing that has come to our family, for example, can be extended inwardly as gratitude for personal blessing, and far outwardly to gratitude on behalf of all beings. A spiritual discipline of healing prayer done on behalf of a particular individual can also be for our own healing and the healing of all beings.

9:00 p.m. The long line moves down the sidewalk from the lecture hall to the Buddhahall slowly, chanting the Shurangama Mantra to the "tock" of the wooden fish--the visiting Dharma Masters, the Bhikshunis, the Bhikshus, the novices, the guests, the Abbot. We reassemble in the Buddhahall, chanting Amitabha Buddha's name, then move out into the cool night. The chant fills my head, as I walk to the women's side, to my dorm, my room, through the darkness. I know the way better now. From the woods behind the campus peacocks' cries--like great, meowing cats--break the silence now and then. The silence fills me, and I sleep.

INSTILLING GOODNESS, DEVELOPING VIRTUES FROM THE PAST FOR A STRONG FUTURE

The City of Ukiah (right next to Talmage), California, enjoyed a delightfully clear, warm and sunny early autumn day for its Civic Day celebrations on Saturday, September 26, 1987. Festivities included the dedication of the new Civic Center for Ukiah, during which local and state public officials addressed a large audience of local residents. Also included was a Civic Day Parade, which members of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, Dharma Realm University, and students from Instilling Goodness and Developing Virtue Boys' and Girls' Schools participated with a float. The theme for the day was "Ukiah, Past and Present," and the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas contributed a hopeful note by adopting the them "Instilling Goodness, Cultivating Virtues from the Past for a Strong Future."



PHOTO: IGDVS students, wave from the float submitted by the CTTB during the Ukiah Civic Day Parade.