

Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue in Ladakh, 2010

By Maria Reis Habito

A Buddhist Muslim dialogue on the topic “Addressing Violence: Religious Resources for Conflict Resolution” was held at the Mahabodhi International Meditation Center (MIMC) in Leh/Ladakh, India from June 28-30, 2010. This dialogue was the twelfth in a series of dialogues organized by the Global Family for Love and Peace (gflp.org) and the Museum of World Religions, this time in collaboration with the Mahabodhi Center (mahabodhi-ladakh.org) and its founder, the Venerable Sanghasena Mahathera. The series was initiated soon after 9/11 by Dharma Master Hsin Tao, founder and abbot of the Wu-sheng Monastery and founder of the Museum of World Religions in Taiwan. The dialogues seek new perspectives of Buddhist and Muslim co-operation in facing the challenges brought on by political, religious, economic and ecological crises of the twenty-first century. The first dialogue took place at Columbia University, followed by dialogues in Malaysia, Indonesia, with UNESCO in Paris, Iran, Spain, Morocco, China, and with the United Nations in New York, Taiwan, and Australia. The dialogue in Ladakh consisted of three panels addressing the following topics:

- 1) Aspects of Buddhist-Muslim relations in History and Present Times
- 2) Buddhist and Muslim Visions for Global Peace
- 3) Tasks and Challenges for our Contemporary World

Since the arrival of Islam in Ladakh at the end of the fourteenth century, Buddhists and Muslims there have maintained a predominantly peaceful kind of co-existence, with both communities deeply connected by intermarriages and cultural ties. But the political and economic tensions that led to a boycott of Muslim businesses by Buddhists in the 1980s still have repercussions today. Nevertheless, Ladakh is regarded as a model of peaceful co-existence and cooperation between the religious communities, one very different from the neighboring crisis region, Kashmir.

At the conference, representatives of both traditions spoke about the importance of reading texts, understanding their historical contexts, and applying the messages to present day circumstances. The question was raised as to why the teachings on peace, justice, love and non-coercion contained in the scriptures of both traditions are not more widely realized in practice. The pervading reality of violence in our global society was described in its multi-leveled dimensions, including the structural violence that continues to dehumanize a significant portion of the global population and which results in the deaths of 30,000 children under the age of five due to hunger and malnutrition on a daily basis; the many forms of physical violence perpetrated by humans against each other; and notably the violence against nature brought about by our lifestyles in this technological civilization.

From a Buddhist point of view, the basic problem is the dualistic view of Self and Other which makes us hold on to the three poisons of ignorance, greed, and anger, not only on the individual level but even more destructively on the collective level of interest groups, governments, and global corporations. On the Muslim side, a local imam portrayed the United States as “a manifestation of the Devil Incarnate,” and cited it as one striking example of a violent and destructive power exercising hegemony over the rest of the world, a comment which provoked a lively exchange among participants.

Ongoing tasks and challenges as emphasized by the participants include the continuation of interreligious dialogue and cooperation in order to break down the barriers that lead to misunderstanding, prejudice, and demonization of the Other (as brought up in conference exchanges). One concrete outcome of the conference was the proposal for the establishment of an Interfaith Academy and Museum of World Religions in Delhi, an educational institution that would invite leaders, scholars and practitioners of this country that is so rich in spiritual traditions to encounter each other and to collaborate towards understanding and peace between the religions.

The participants of the conference agreed at the conclusion that this dialogue was characterized by a great depth of content and exchange. In addition to the quality of the presentations and the open discussions, the atmosphere of the spectacularly beautifully located Mahabodhi Center and the tireless engagement of its founder, the Venerable Sanghasena, its staff, volunteers, students, nuns and monks greatly contributed to this success of the conference. The cultural programs and the shared visits and conversations at the Jama Mazjid (Suni) and Imam Bada (Shia) mosques, the Jokang temple and Spituk monastery also gave participants a deep impression of the cultural and spiritual richness of Ladakh and its diverse religious traditions.

Conference Participants: H.H. Gyalwang Drugpa (opening), the Most Venerable Togadan Rinpoche, Shri Lobzang Rinchen, Shri Nazir Khan, Shri Ashraf Ali, the Venerable Sanghasena

Mahathera, the Venerable Dharma Master Hsin Tao, Shri Ghulam Hassan Khan, Shri Nawang Rigzin Jora, Imam Moulana Umer Ilyasi, Mr. Zaffir Iqbal, Professor Michael v. Brück, Dr. S.T. Phuntsog, Moulvi Mohamad Omar Nadvi, Professor Siddiq Wahid, Professor Chandra Muzaffar, Sheikh Mohammad Javed, Haj Azgar Ali Karbalaie, Professor Ranjana Mukhopadhyaya, Professor Ruben Habito, Dr. Maria Reis Habito, the Venerable Tejananda, Ms. Sonam Dolkar, Dr. Afroz Achmad Bisati, Zain-Ul-Abedin, Ms. Asmat Jan.

Maria Reis Habito is the International Program Director of the Museum of World Religions. She is also an Assistant Zen-teacher at the Maria Kannon Zen-Center in Dallas. She studied Chinese Language and Culture at Taiwan Normal University in Taipei from 1979-81 and received her M.A. in Chinese Studies, Japanese Studies and Philosophy at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich in 1985. She was a research fellow at Kyoto University, Faculty of Letters from 1986-1988 and completed her Ph.D. at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in 1990. After teaching at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, she assumed responsibility for the international Interfaith program of the Museum of World Religions in 2002. She has organized many international Interfaith conferences, notably an on-going series of Buddhist-Muslim dialogues published under the title of *Listening: Buddhist-Muslim Dialogues 2002-2004 (2005)*. Other publications include *Die Dharani des Großen Erbarmens des Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara mit tausend Händen und Augen [The Great Compassion Dharani of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara with a Thousand Hands and Eyes, 1993]*, and „*Weisheit und Barmherzigkeit. Meister Hsin Tao [Wisdom and Compassion: Master Hsin Tao, 2001]*, *Die Krise des Heiligen [The Crisis of the Holy ed; 2009]* as well as articles on Buddhist and Buddhist-Christian topics in academic journals. She is married to Ruben Habito and has two sons, Florian and Benjamin.

Reports on the conference can also be found at the following websites:

<http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=42,9312,0,0,1,0>
<http://www.andhranews.net/India/2010/June/30-Buddhist-Muslim-Dialogue-Ladakh-25985.asp>
<http://www.yahind.com/news/directory.php?id=16570>
<http://sify.com/news/buddhist-muslim-dialogue-at-ladakh-to-promote-communal-harmony-news-national-kg4lOfbdbcg.html>
<http://sify.com/news/buddhist-muslim-dialogue-at-ladakh-to-promote-communal-harmony-news-national-kg4lOfbdbcg.html>
<http://www.earlytimes.in/earlytimes1/newsdet.aspx?q=55890>
<http://www.visitladakh.com/en/the-news.html>
http://www.kashmirobsrver.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4882:intl-buddhist-muslim-dialogue-begis-at-leh&catid=3:regional-news&Itemid=4
<http://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/2010/Jun/29/buddhist-muslim-dialogue-49.asp>