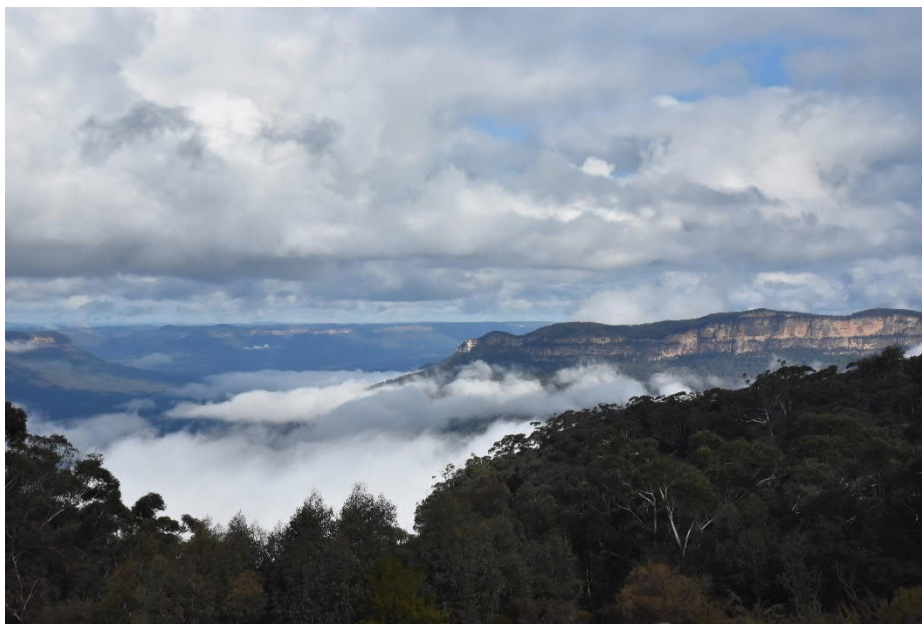


Discussion

The 2019 Sakyadhita Conference, Australia

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View of the Blue Mountains from the window of the hotel. Photo: Di Cousens.

The 2019 Sakyadhita Conference, an international conference for Buddhist women, included four days of talks and workshops and was held at the Fairmount Resort in the Blue Mountains near Sydney, Australia. It was my fifth conference and the sixteenth since the inaugural Nun's Conference held in Bodhgaya in 1987 (Tsomo 1988). The primary focus of the original conference was on reinstating the full ordination of Buddhist women, and while much progress has been achieved in that regard, this remains an unresolved issue in many countries. However, the scope of the conference now is much larger, and indeed the title of this one was “New Horizons in Buddhism”.

With the focus on new horizons, some of the most compelling presentations were concerned with climate change and the environment, the astonishing work of a Japanese artist who has visualized the Heart Sutra through cosmic imagery, and a panel on sexual misconduct by

teachers. Buddhist monks have always attended Sakyadhita conferences and a paper that touched on the climate crisis and other contemporary issues by Australian monk, Bhikkhu Sujato, gave valuable insights gleaned from his experience in translating the four Theravada *Nikayas* and from a local Aboriginal myth. In this indigenous story a quoll (a small Australian ‘tiger cat’) named Mirragan catches a dragon named Gurrangatch who lives deep underground, with the aid of his friend, a bird. The bird and Mirragan do not kill the dragon but are content with taking a small piece of his tail which they eat, thereby becoming one in flesh. The story has lessons to tell about incorporating and not excluding the old, about taking only what is needed and about the importance of friendship. Bhikkhu Sujato made the point that:

The Buddha said that good friendship is the whole of the spiritual path, and creation of meaningful intentional communities (Sangha) has always been a core aspect of his dispensation, and through the Sangha, the Dhamma has survived for 2,500 years. In the days to come, those who survive will not be the preppers or the survivalists in their bunkers, or the billionaires with their walled estates and private armies. It will be the villagers and tribespeople. Those who know how to work together, to create local, small-scale systems of work and exchange, who understand and respect the land and the sky and the water, the beasts and the plants. These are skills still found in Buddhist villages across Asia—perhaps we should start learning from them (Sujato 2019, p.85).



Bhikkhu Sujato, The Monastery at the End of the World, Australia. Photo: Di Cousens.

With a seemingly irreversible climate catastrophe upon us he stressed the importance of friendship, collaboration, cooperation and community. Unfortunately, it could also be argued that Bhikkhu Sujato has a romantic and nostalgic view of Asia and Asian Buddhists. The

persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar is evidence of a divided society where people are not working together in harmony with nature. It is also the case that agrarian societies in the Global South are most likely to feel the harshest effects of climate change with fewer defences against catastrophic droughts, storms and floods, not to mention the potential devastation brought about by the melting glaciers in the Himalayas and the Tibetan plateau.

American Roshi Joan Halifax gave voice to an aspiration she calls ‘wise hope’. This is the hope embodied in Buddhist vows such as, ‘Reality is boundless, I vow to perceive it. The awakened way is unsurpassable, I vow to embody it’. This is a hope free from desire or uninformed optimism but grounded in service that faces and relieves suffering. She said:

If wise hope is not present, we might be afraid to take a stand and choose to ignore or back away from situations of harm. We might be in denial or wilfully ignorant over the suffering experienced by others when transgressive situations arise. We might be morally apathetic, or paralyzed by hopelessness, or living in a bubble of privilege and be blind to suffering. But if we aren’t trapped by these defenses, we might step forward and meet harm with the determination to end suffering, even when our actions might appear futile; and we do so without a “gaining idea”, to quote Suzuki Roshi (Halifax 2019, p.65).

With wise hope Joan Roshi proposes that transformation is possible, one day at a time.



Ven. Miao Fan Shih, Fo Guang Shan, Australia and Taiwan. Photo: Di Cousens.

The keynote speech by Australian Roshi Susan Murphy proposed that the great work which is needed right now is reconciliation with the earth, and that:

True reconciliation is the realization that each of us is inseparable from one great body, one benefit, of awake compassion and care. That in fundamental reality, there is no ‘self’ to be found that stands alone, and against some so-called ‘other’. (Murphy 2019, p.6).

Another exceptional paper was given by American academic Paula Arai, who has assisted in the publication of paintings by the Japanese artist, Iwasaki Tsuneo (Arai 2019). He was inspired by the Heart Sutra and turned the replication of the words of the Sutra into forms of landscape and skyscape. These are extraordinarily beautiful but also multi-layered images with references to inter-relatedness, nourishment, compassion and the wisdom of emptiness.

One of the more well reported parts of the conference was the panel on sexual abuse by Buddhist teachers. A paper by two nuns in the Tibetan tradition, Ven. Dr Tenzin Dadon from Bhutan and Ven. Dr Karma Tashi Choedron from Malaysia, described the sexual abuse of nuns in nunneries by monk teachers. They called for transparency, complaint mechanisms and remedial measures. In a paper by Damcho Dyson, Tahlia Newland and Jacqueline Wicks, the complex situation of Rigpa and the now late Sogyal Rinpoche was explored. Former Australian nun Damcho Dyson was one of the eight senior students who wrote Sogyal Rinpoche a letter in 2017 which documented a long and painful history of abuse. In the paper and the earlier letter Dyson recounted her experience of receiving many physical beatings from Sogyal Rinpoche over many years and many other forms of exploitation and abuse. After exposing what had happened there was a backlash from supporters of Sogyal and the Rigpa community was split.

His defenders blamed the victims for ‘feeling’ harmed, saying that they lacked pure perception, didn’t understand Vajrayana, and lacked the capacity to practice it. These students accepted abuse as part of the tradition and blamed their troubles not on Sogyal’s behaviour but on those who spoke out, calling them samaya breakers who would go to hell. (Dyson et al, 2019, p.43)

The paper called for an acknowledgement, ‘that any mistreatment of others is not consistent with the teachings of the Buddha’ (Dyson et al, 2019, p.44). This would seem to be a non-controversial request but in fact it is not. There are wider issues at play such as deep structures of gender inequality, unquestioned hierarchies, and a lack of teacher supervision which enable abusive relationships.



*Tahlia Newland, Damcho Dyson,
Jacki Wicks, formerly of Rigpa,
Australia. Photo: Di Cousens.*

Another feature of the conference was its workshops held by participants on all possible topics. I attended several workshops that I found personally significant.

After putting my nose randomly in a room, I found myself sewing a button on a baby jacket for a child born to a single mother in Korea. The workshop was intended to raise the consciousness of the attendees about the plight of single mothers. We were all asked to write messages to the mothers to accompany the baby jacket and this was a moving experience for me. I shared with the room that the suffering of single mothers was not exclusive to Korea, but that the poorest people in Australian society are also single mothers.



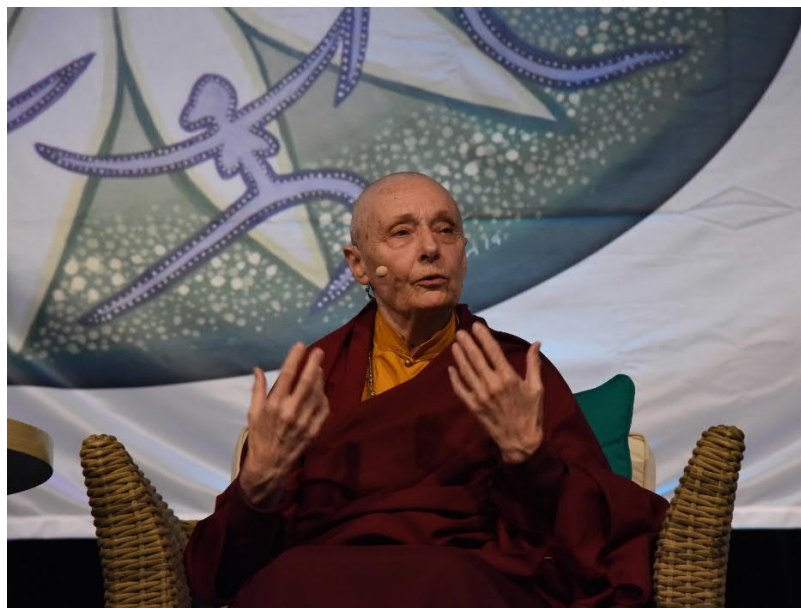
Sister Lucy Kurien, Maher Ashram, India. Photo: Di Cousens.

Another outstanding workshop was led by Sister Lucy Kurien, an Indian Catholic nun who runs homes for the destitute in India. She told us about her lifetime of service to the poor, particularly women fleeing domestic violence. Her life was turned around in 1989 after a pregnant woman came to her convent seeking refuge from her violent husband. Sister Kurien could not offer her a place to stay at the convent and so the woman was regretfully turned away. That night the woman was set on fire and murdered by her husband. Seven years later Sister Kurien opened the first of her now many refuges for destitute women and also men under the umbrella of the Maher Ashram (www.maherashram.org). She also recounted stories of turning away violent men who had come to attack her after she had given refuge to their wives through clever argument. Hers was an inspiring story of commitment to social justice and success in implementing change. One extraordinary feature of her institution is the multifaith banner that they use. It includes the symbols of not only the major religions, but also the hammer and sickle of the Marxists and also the bow and arrow of the tribals. She said it was necessary to have everyone's symbols so that no group would feel excluded.



Rev. Sangwon Hwang, Won community, South Korea and USA and Tina Ng, seated, Metta Legal, Australia. Photo: Di Cousens.

Just as important as the formal papers presented at the conference were the informal meetings and friendships. As it was my fifth conference I was pleased to meet again with many old friends, including Ven. Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, who was Sakyadhita International President for the past five years. Jetsunma is most famous for her 12-year retreat in a cave in northern India which was documented in the book, *The Cave in the Snow*. (Mackenzie 1988). We met at the 2004 conference held in Seoul, Korea, and she went on to assist me in my PhD fieldwork by providing a translator who knew the 50 dialects spoken in Himachal Pradesh. Jetsunma has built a very beautiful nunnery in north India for nuns from the Himalayan region which now has about 100 members and a full program of teaching and retreat. Her presence at the conference was inspiring as she always beautifully articulates the Dharma and shows what the fruit of practice looks like. It is precious to see the result of 50 years of full immersion.



Ven. Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, DGL Nunnery, India. Photo: Di Cousens.

The conference also provides a demonstration of what harmony looks like. On the first day each of the different Buddhist traditions takes the stage and chants in their own language or in the language of their texts, such as in Pali. Throughout the week everyone listens respectfully to explications of points of doctrine from all traditions as well as news from Buddhist communities all over the world. Ordained and lay women come from Burma, Thailand, Nepal, Korea, Sri Lanka and many other countries, and the Vajrayana, Mahayana and Theravada traditions are represented. It is a beautiful meeting of heart-minds. While the problems of the world, such as global warming, may appear insurmountable, the collaboration, cooperation and friendship of the conference demonstrates oneness and perhaps provides wise hope.

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