

Establishing a Firm Foundation International Mahayana Institute (IMI)

In our last issue Ven. Losang Monlam, director of the International Mahayana Institute (IMI) introduced a new regular feature on issues that affect the Sangha in our midst. The saga continues as he describes a recent groundbreaking conference ...

In February 2008, twenty IMI monks and nuns representing the monastic communities and regions of the world participated in a four-day IMI Planning Retreat at Land of Medicine Buddha in Soquel, California. The conference drew on the experience and skills of the delegates to creatively assess and strategize on how IMI could serve its community of monks and nuns, and set the foundation for the future generation. When I took over as director, I was troubled by a lack of clarity on what was this thing called IMI, and exactly what direction was I to take it. Certainly, I had my ideas on who we were, and where we needed to go. Yet I was only one member of the community, and although I might consider my ideas to be visionary, others certainly may not. As a community it was crucial to get others involved, to share ideas and to grapple with the history of who we were, to understand where we needed to go. Key to where we need to go as a community is understanding where we have been, as envisaged by Lama Thubten Yeshe. And so we began by reviewing the development of the IMI community from its early beginnings in the '70s. Delegates also focused on those aspects within their own lives as monastics that have been beneficial and supportive. These successes were key in identifying what needed to be included in any vision we might embrace for the community. Plans for development will focus on:

IMI as a Family

"Bikkhus, you have no mother, you have no father, who might tend to you. If you don't tend to one another, who then will tend to you?"

SHAKYAMUNI BUDDHA

A recurring theme was the promotion of this concept of family; as monks and nuns we have something in common – this choice we have made in the way we practice. This interconnectedness extends beyond geographical limitations.

- Our ordination is based on entering a monastic community.
- As a family we are open to the differences in others – living in harmony.

- Sharing experiences; supportive communication with each other.
- The integration of service/support between the Sangha and the lay community is critical to ensure the lay community's connection with the Buddhist path.
- Human resources – appreciating our skills to benefit others. Recognizing that we as individuals are an invaluable resource, which can benefit others, IMI can establish facilities to share and enhance those skills around the world.

Administration – Building the Infrastructure to Serve

- A firm foundation with a clearly defined administrative structure to support the major areas for development of IMI is crucial.
- IMI Congress. Establishing a charter on how we govern our community, how we have a voice in determining our development, and the relationships we have within and outside the community.

Securing Financial Stability to Meet the Needs of the Community

"Being Sangha makes others respect you, and thereby, they create much merit. The more purely you live in your ordination, the greater will be your power of success when you pray for others. Also, since your life is pure, when sentient beings make offerings to you, they create even more merit, and also there is no danger to yourself in your accepting their offerings."

LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

- Without caring for the basic needs of the Sangha community, the stability of the monastic community (and the Dharma) is not secure. IMI must establish a firm financial footing to be able to effectively serve its community.
- Inherent in seeking financial stability is ensuring trust through good financial management and transparency.
- At a global level we seek to ensure that the four basic requisites of food, shelter, healthcare and clothing are available to all monks and nuns.

- Several forms of securing financial stability including existing social service programs were suggested.

- Understanding that the monks and nuns who are teachers serve as a basic resource for the larger Buddhist community, it is important to establish a connection between the teacher and support for the community as a whole.

- Sponsorship, estates and trusts, fundraising appeals and endowment campaigns can all serve to generate funds on an international level to serve the IMI community.

Developing and Nurturing Monastic Communities

“To actualize the fundamental paths, you need a great deal of study and meditation. For that you need much time and conducive circumstances. The most important thing is for your mind not to be distracted.” Lama Zopa Rinpoche

- Monastics living together serve as a protection for stabilizing our vows.

- Identified as one of the main themes for the IMI community as it moves forward is the nurturing and stabilization of monastic communities of many “flavors” as Lama Zopa Rinpoche suggested.

- New concepts: “thinking outside the box” is important in the development of monastic communities.

- Envisioned are resources and services to help the formation and ongoing operations for monastic communities including coordination to establish monasteries, financial tools and consulting services to help with real estate acquisition, construction/renovation, budgetary planning, operations management, and legal and financial planning.

Preserving the Lineage – Our Teacher

“I follow the Buddha, who has compassion for all, who has shown the complete path to achieve perfect complete happiness and freedom. The foundation of our practice is not to harm others or ourselves and to help benefit others as much as we can.”

LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE

- Geshes, teachers, and lamas serve to inspire, guide and bless us in our practice.

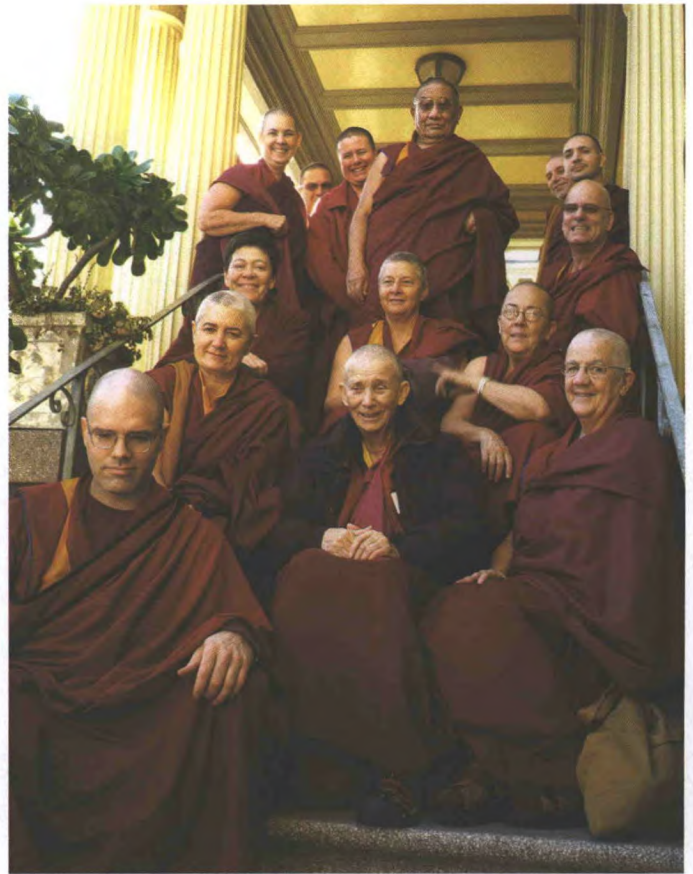
- The teacher is not only important in our decision to become monks or nuns but often anchors us in our practice as monks and nuns. This teacher-student relationship was identified as a key for many of us in keeping our ordination.

- As the Sangha, we play a critical role in the preservation of the lineage, establishing the teachings for future generations.

A Monastic Education Program

“Buddha himself commented that: “Wherever there are these basic Vinaya practices, then I can rest and relax.” So, isn’t it wonderful if you’re able to observe these Vinaya practices sincerely?”

HH DALAI LAMA



Bottom left: Ven. Jinpa; Row 2: Ven. Paloma, Ven. Ann, Ven. Chonyi. Row 3: Ven. Elisabeth, Ven. Yeshe Khadro, Ven. Robina. Row 4: Ven. Rigtsal, Ven. Lhundrup, Ven. Chokyi, Geshe Ngawang Dakpa, Ven. Tendar, Ven. Olivier and Ven. Monlam.

- Monastic education in Buddhist philosophy and vinaya (code of conduct) is the pillar of our practice as Buddhist monks and nuns. Developing and implementing a monastic education program is crucial.

- For a successful monastic education program, teacher, students, facilities and staff are necessary in the overall structure.

- Retreat is a vital component of any monastic education program.

- Monastic education resources should be easily available.

- Clarity and consensus about what exactly IMI is solidified: It represents the monastic communities around the world, as well as individual member monks and nuns. IMI Inc., the newly formed legal entity, is the body through which services to the community are provided, and through which the monks and nuns have a voice.

This is how we see ourselves as a community:

International Mahayana Institute is an FPMT community empowered to respond to, and take care of the needs of its family of monks and nuns through the development of quality education programs, harmonious monastic communities, effective communications, financial support, and advocacy.

As emissaries of Buddhism (teachers, spiritual caregivers, ritual practitioners, meditators, retreat leaders, counselors) IMI members inspire others through their speech and behavior, and provide the opportunity for lay practitioners to integrate respect and support for Sangha into their practice of Buddhism.

The IMI community contributes to world peace and individual spiritual growth by keeping the Buddha's teachings alive, inspiring others with values of ethical behavior, tolerance, compassion and wisdom.

IMI is known for taking especially good care of its community and for the qualities of its monks and nuns and their invaluable contribution towards happiness in the world.

IMI is distinct in preserving the unique lineage of Lama Tsong Khapa, integrating study and practice as manifested by its teachers, HH Dalai Lama, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Lama Yeshe, all the while adapting to various cultures and situations around the world.

I have no clairvoyance to know where our community of monks and nuns will be in five or ten years. I can only hope that we are beginning to establish a clear and stable foundation for the future generation.

IMI would like to thank Tse Chen Ling Center for Tibetan Buddhist Studies, Liberation Prison Project, Vajrapani Institute, Land of Medicine Buddha, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, facilitator Karuna Cayton and the various sponsors and friends who contributed in so many ways to the success of this meeting. And a big kudos for the delegates who gave their heart and minds for the future of the IMI community. ☸

To learn more about IMI, please visit our website www.imisangha.org.

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"It has truly changed my life"

- Grant A (Toongabbie)

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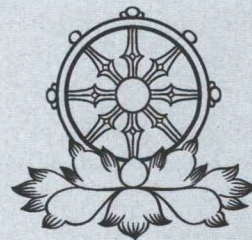
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