



bearing WITNESS

A Buddhist nun braves a Kingdom Hall to discover how Jehovah's Witnesses teach the truth.

Before my sister became a Jehovah's Witness, my only encounters with them had been brief, as I tried to edge them out the door while telling them I wasn't interested and didn't really want their magazine, thank you. Even now, I would never under my own steam go into a Kingdom Hall on a Sunday morning, but my sister really wanted me to go with her to meet her new friends there. So I went. I wore a sweater over my nun's robes, and maybe they noticed, and maybe not, but they didn't say anything. They put me in the front row, and they were very friendly.

As I've been ordained for ten years now, people sometimes ask me to teach, and I try. Even though I still feel as if I only have the barest grasp on the basics of *lam-rim*, I guess I must know something that I could tell to a beginner that they haven't heard before. But even though I'm already teaching, I'm still learning how to teach. For some people teaching might be second nature, but I have always been an introvert, and I tend to weigh my words, say just the essentials, and hope they'll ask questions if they don't understand. And sometimes I wonder if people really grasp what I am trying to say.

So with that background, I was very interested in the way they were teaching that Sunday morning at the Kingdom Hall. In fact, the class started the day before, when my sister and her friends got together at home and worked their way through a magazine article on leadership, which they would be discussing during the service. When I later looked at the article, I noticed that all the paragraphs were numbered, and there were related questions at the bottom of the pages, as footnotes.

When the group met the next day, everybody brought their own copies of the magazine, and they read it together. After every paragraph, the leader questioned the main points, and members of the group volunteered to answer. Since they were prepared and comfortable with the material, everyone seemed eager to participate. So slowly that way we worked our way through the article. Then at the end, there were a few questions to summarize the whole thing. To me it seemed a good way to really get people to process the material, to think about it and to understand it well enough to explain it to someone else.

It struck me that it had some similarities to the way that Buddhism is traditionally taught, and that it might give me some clues to ways I can adapt my teaching style to serve Western students. And we all need to know how to explain the teachings of Buddhism, because even though we don't go from door to door, we all have to answer questions, and in that way we are all teachers.

As I understand it, in the Tibetan monasteries, the students first memorize the root text that they will be studying. Following that, maybe years later, their teachers go through it with them, explaining the verses one by one. I've been told that after the teacher explains it, it is traditional to review and then to debate it, or to review and then to meditate on it, so that in all you go over the material at least three times, and after that you really know it. I also know that we Western students don't tend to do the follow-up in a disciplined way. I myself have lots of notes from old teachings that I never look at again.

But that approach really won't cut it. Now is the crucial time of the introduction of Buddhism to the West, and ready or not, we are the ones who need to take the precious teachings, make them our own, and then teach them to others. Without altering the essence of the teachings in any way, we have to present them in a way that is familiar and easy to take, so that our students, and we ourselves, will come to feel that these beliefs are natural. *Of course* all beings have been my mother; *of course* I would never hurt another being in any way; why would I *ever* consider criticizing anyone if I don't know their mind – what sense is there in that?

For me as a teacher, my task is to present the subject, review it, and get the students to meditate on it or debate it, while keeping their interest and getting them to participate as much as possible. One traditional Western way to do this, following the academic model, is by having homework and quizzes. This works well for serious dedicated students. The Jehovah's Witnesses do it differently; studying together as a community, and their approach might work better with casual or smaller groups or with students who aren't as academically oriented, such as children's groups.

I don't think I'll be going from door to door explaining Buddhism, but when people ask me, I do like to be prepared to answer. Now I think when someone asks me to teach, I might have a few more tools in my kit for making it meaningful to the students. I really did learn something from the Jehovah's Witnesses. ☸

Ven. Elly van der Pas took novice vows in 1991 at Kopan Monastery, and full nuns' vows in 1994. A former editor of MANDALA, she also worked for His Holiness the Dalai Lama in New York. Currently she is caretaker at a retreat center in the Southwestern United States.



Photo: Pema Drolkar