By Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron
Imagine Chinese Buddhists going to the airport to pick up Catholic nuns, looking for figures swathed in long black habits and starched veils, and being puzzled when women in ordinary skirts appeared instead. Imagine Catholic nuns at dinner at a Chinese temple gingerly picking at the unfamiliar, strange looking food before them.

This was the first evening of the Catholic-Buddhist nuns’ conference organized by the Catholic organization, Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, and sponsored by the Hsi Lai Temple in California, May 23-26, 2003. From this beginning, we soon became spiritual sisters, with remarkable trust and exchange between us. The 30 participants were split equally between Catholic and Buddhist, with a Hindu nun and an Orthodox nun as well. We marveled at and learned from our diversity: among the Catholics were nuns from the Order of St. Benedict, and sisters from orders that focused on active service to society. Among the Buddhists were nuns from the Korean, Chinese, Theravadin, and Tibetan traditions, and priests following Japanese Zen.

It was just us nuns – no reporters, no observers, no formal agenda. We wanted to be able to discuss freely, without presenting papers or making statements. Of course the press and men were interested. “What in the world do a group of religious women talk about behind closed doors?” they wondered.

Our days began with morning prayers with the monastic community at Hsi Lai Temple, continuing with several morning and afternoon sessions, and concluding with an evening circle. Our sessions began with Buddhist chants and Christian inspirational songs in which all joined. The first day each of us gave a snapshot of her life and spiritual quest. We spoke not of theology but of practice and experience. From this emerged various common concerns that we discussed in depth on the second day.

One theme was balance: How do we balance our inward spiritual life of prayer with our active outer life of social service? How do we balance tradition and customs with being pioneers who adapt to ever-changing societies? How do we balance community life with the need for solitude?

A second theme focused on community: What types of communities do we live in? What are elements of healthy communities? How does community life enhance our spiritual development? How is living in spiritual communities a form of social engagement? What is community leadership?

A third theme was spiritual cultivation: What does meditation consist of? What is contemplation? What does cultivation mean in our respective traditions? How do we remain engaged when we traverse times of spiritual impasse? How do spiritual cultivation and emotional maturity relate to each other? What is the role of a teacher, and how does a teacher discern what is necessary for a disciple at any particular time?

I was moved by the integrity and confidence of the Catholic nuns. Some of them had been ordained forty or fifty years, had gone through the changes of Vatican II, canonical norms, and had helped so many other people in so many countries. These women are strong and dedicated, yet without arrogance.

One afternoon, the Catholic nuns did the Eucharist [an action of thanksgiving to God involving the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ] in the meditation room of the temple. They sat in a semi-circle, with the Buddhist nuns sitting as supportive observers in an outer circle as the sunlight filtered into the room. It was a special moment: the first time the Catholics had done Mass in a Buddhist setting, and the first time a Catholic service was done at Hsi Lai Temple.

When I shared with them that I am founding Sravasti Abbey, a Buddhist monastery, they were delighted. Some offered welcome advice on fund raising, while I asked others for suggestions on how to screen candidates and how to prepare them for ordination. The Catholics have centuries of experience in this area, so there is much to learn from them. As Westerners, we all face similar issues: How do we create genuine community in a society that emphasizes individuality? How do we enable each person’s talents to blossom while also subduing self-preoccupation? There are no quick, easy responses to these questions, but getting “the” answer isn’t the point. Spiritual practice is about continuing to gently hold our questions, living our lives with curiosity and joy as we learn.

Ven. Thubten Chodron is an American nun who is spiritual adviser to the Dharma Friendship Foundation in Seattle. She travels worldwide to teach the Dharma and is currently involved in founding Sravasti Abbey, a place where monastics and those preparing for ordination can learn and practice according to the teachings of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. She is the author of several books including Open Heart Clear Mind, Buddhism for Beginners, Working with Anger and Blossoms of the Dharma and has made a set of 14 audio CDs: Guided Meditations on the Lamrim.

CONVERSATION WITH A NUN
Opening the prison door with Ven. Robina Courtin

In this fifth incarnation of Mandala, we wanted to feature Ven. Robina Courtin, its editor for six years (1994-2000). She’s hard to pin down, always traveling the world, teaching, overseeing the activities of Liberation Prison Project in the USA and Australia, visiting and writing to prisoners, and editing teachings. Then Lyn Siegel, freelance writer from North Carolina, sent us an interview she and psychiatrist Dr Norma Sajfrusky did with Ven. Robina last year, and voila! We have a conversation with the Australian-born nun who is still subject, reluctantly, to international fame since the release in 2000 of the documentary movie about her life, Chasing Buddha.

Q: In Chasing Buddha you said, “I found what I lost” when you found Buddhism. Do you feel that we are born inherently knowing what we want in this life, and that it’s a matter of getting through the experiences and obstacles of life to realize one’s path, or is it more a case of needing those experiences and obstacles to tap into that energy, the talent, the passion that brings us to where we are now?

A: Yes, when I met Buddhism I felt like I had found something I had lost, because, from a karmic point of view, it was something I’d had before, in previous lives. When I heard it again, it was like coming home. You could have a familiarity with anything, whether it is called killing or stealing or being a footballer. Whatever you have familiarity with is what you’re strongly attracted to again.

I’m not sure that it’s a question of “needing” our experiences; rather, it’s that we simply have them as a result of our past actions, karma. Based on Buddha’s view that we all possess the potential for perfection, it’s our job to work through our experiences, based on the laws of morality: cleaning up the negative and growing the positive.

Q: Do you believe in reincarnation in a literal sense, in the sense that you are preserved as a soul and continue to develop as a sort of separate entity? Or are you
A person who might be rich and famous and beautiful can also be extremely arrogant. That's the way they label themselves. "I'm so important, I'm so special." Maybe it's true that we're not so good at certain things. But the deluded, unhappy part of us always exaggerates certain aspects of ourselves, whether it's the good or the bad, and we walk around with this view, which limits us completely to that label. Even if, for example, we identify with being a piano player — we like piano playing, we think that's our identity, but actually it's too limited. Who we really are is deeper than that. Being a piano player, a footballer, being a nun, are temporary ways of doing something. Who we really are is the positive qualities within us and if we really begin to identify with that, then no matter what happens in our life, we can keep moving and developing until we become perfect — a Buddha, in other words.

Q: What is the potential for Buddhahood as I described before. As soon as we hear the words "love, kindness, patience, generosity, forgiveness, wisdom, joy," we know that they refer to the good parts of us. Buddha is saying that we have the potential to develop them to a point beyond which we can't develop them further — way beyond what we would think in our Western world.

That implies that the potential also includes the ability to remove completely all the negative qualities. And we don't need God or Buddha or a great philosopher to tell us when we hear words like "jealousy, anger, fear, stress, killing, lying" that they are negative and suffering — whether we're on the receiving end of them or they're inside us. This is really the very essence of Buddhist practice. What we're trying to do is develop the positive qualities, and decrease and eventually eliminate the negative ones.

Q: When a person is labeled a "murderer," and put in prison for life or for a day, what effect does that have on them? Does it help anybody?

A: It is a waste of time. It doesn't help anybody. And, anyway, according to Buddha, it's not valid to kill anyone, especially with the motive of wanting to punish someone, the vindictiveness that is so common. This is terrible, especially for the people who have this motive. This doesn't mean in a Buddhist society you wouldn't have laws. Of course you would have laws, but there would be no big wish to make a person suffer, or get them to die and go to Hell forever. The Buddhist view is that each of us will reap the results of whatever actions we do anyway, we don't need to determine it. Giving someone the punishment of death doesn't help anybody, and it doesn't stop crime. The real cause of crime is attachment, anger and the other delusions; they're the things we need to kill — in our own minds, not in anyone else's.

Q: Do you ever feel overwhelmed by the suffering of the people you're working with?

A: No, I don't. What it does, actually, is give me more encouragement, more inspiration for myself to keep practicing, and keep trying to be useful in the world.

Q: For you personally, what is the most difficult aspect of this work?

A: I love the work of that way. It's not difficult. Well, that's not true: what is difficult is to know how to properly help someone; to really have an understanding of a person's mind so that I can help in the most beneficial way, whether a person is on death row or they are my next-door neighbor. If a person comes to me and wants help, I need to have the skill to know how to do so. The key to that is the success of my own practice. I can't be useful to others if I can't put myself together.