

INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Spiritual Sisters: A Communion of Catholic and Buddhist Nuns

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.



Ven. Thubten Chodron, far left, with her spiritual sisters

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 [the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, which initiated major changes in the liturgy, robes, form of monastic life, etc.] 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 Safransky 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

speaking more generally as a pool of consciousness splits off and evolves and then goes back into a vast pool and then reemerges with some change?

A: None of that is a Buddhist way to express things. Firstly, it's not a question of belief. The Buddhist path is very much a way of discovering for oneself the truth of the teachings, or indeed not the truth. The Dalai Lama says that if we discover that what Buddha says is wrong, we should reject Buddha. Buddha himself said, "Don't believe a single word I am telling you." We need to check it carefully, making sense of it, and finally testing it by practicing. We'll then discover that it's either true or it's not.

Second, according to Buddha, the being that is inside the womb is not a soul. Buddha would use the words "mind" or "consciousness," which refer to the entire spectrum of our inner experiences. There is the grosser level – the conceptual, the sensory, and the emotions – but Buddhism would also assert that we have much subtler levels of conscious awareness. And so at the time of conception, what goes into the egg and sperm of the parents and what causes the beginning of Robina, basically, is a previous moment of this very mind that we call "Robina" now, which is necessarily very subtle, and which manifests at the grosser level as the person develops. Each living being has its own personal river of mental moments, if you like. At the first moment of conception we are not a blank slate that our parents and society begin to fill up. We bring with us all our own tendencies and imprints, interests and characteristics, things that we have thought and said and done before.

What causes Robina to be the kind of person she becomes is her past karma – not God or Buddha or parents. Karma is a Sanskrit word that means "action." Whatever we say or whatever we do or think leaves an imprint or impression or a seed in our mind that ripens in the future as our experiences. We are the fruit of what we have done before. You could say that karma is the "creative principle" in Buddhism. So, yes, reincarnation is a literal thing. [For a teaching on karma and reincarnation, see "Ask a Lama" page 16.]

Q: Regarding your prison work, and considering the Buddhist perspective that we live in an interdependent world where all beings are worthy of respect, how do you approach, understand and work with individuals who are awaiting death due to their crossing this line of respect?

A: The way I work with people on death row or in prison for life or for a day is exactly the same way that I deal with people anywhere. We all have "Buddha nature." The word "Buddha" means fully awake, completely developed, you know. Buddha would say that every living being is innately perfect, that we all possess the potential for perfection. This is not fantastical or naive. There is no karma that can't be changed, Buddha says. And so, from that point of view, we're all in the same boat. Some of us are on death row in this life, some have been in the last life, some are murderers in this life, some have been murdered in this life. We've all been through the mill in countless lives. So I treat everybody the same.

Q: When a person is labeled a "murderer," and put behind bars, does it seem to you that he or she might lose the potential to rediscover that Buddha nature and spend their remaining time just living out that label that they're given?

A: I think that's exactly what we all do. We have a very fixed view of who we think we are, and if we have, say, low self-esteem, we are walking around feeling that "I am a horrible person, I'm hopeless, I'm no good, nobody loves me." We all label ourselves all of the time.

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



Ven. Robina Courtin

other words.

Q: It sounds like it must be pretty intense sitting with prisoners, talking with them, given the shape of their lives.

A: I think for the prisoners themselves it can be quite intense, but not for me. Those in high security prisons are in lockdown all the time. They are in small cells, often two people, many for 23 hours a day, and many of them are there until the day they die. Others have more freedom, relatively speaking. For some, prison is a very violent place. For sure you can say that being in prison is not a pleasant experience, and unless you've really got the tools to use that situation, it can be a recipe for complete insanity.

What I do see about humans is that when we are in a situation, no matter how bad, we have an enormous capacity to adapt. It's the most appalling situation when you read about it, but somehow, people have this amazing resilience. It might sound appalling to be in a cell, wearing those red clothes for the rest of your life on death row. But these people are human beings just like you and me. They get anxious, they want this and don't want that, and they have their arguments and their dramas. And that becomes their life, their little scenario. They have the same human concerns that any

of us have, whether we're living in a multi-million dollar house or an ugly cell. The issue is internal. And, of course, for those with the tools and the inner strength and courage to use them, these conditions become a catalyst for their freedom.

Q: What about the internal?

A: It's 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: In the movie, you remarked on the strong energy in the prisons. Will you speak about that?

A: I am really attracted to strong energy. When there's a lot of uncontrollable, even berserk energy, often that same person has the potential to transform that very energy into something positive. I've seen this many times with guys in prison who have been gangsters, who have done heavy things in their lives. They've got this big heart, and they've been able to transform themselves and use that same energy to now be positive and to benefit others.

Q: What's the Buddhist perspective on the death penalty?

A: It's 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 that 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 don't think of it 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. ●