

Greatest Buddhist Convocation of Recent Times in South Asia – GBC 2011

Global Buddhist Congregation (November 2011)

New Delhi, India

An informal report

by Alpo Ratia ©

Some 2600 years ago Shakyamuni Buddha attained Enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree at Bodh Gaya. For one and a half thousand years Buddha's teachings flourished in India and suffused its spiritual culture. Ever since the time of enlightened Indian emperor Asoka (reigned 268 - 232 BCE) Buddhism spread far and wide in Asia enriching the lives and spiritual culture of countless people, and in more recent times also of many people in Europe, the Americas, etc. Over the centuries Buddhism's modes of expression and traditions diversified in many creative ways.

Historic Convocation

To commemorate the anniversary of Buddha's great Awakening this year Asoka Mission (New Delhi) organized and held a huge international conference in the Indian capital. The "Global Buddhist Congregation 2011" (GBC) was the greatest Buddhist convocation to be held in South Asia since the Buddha Jayanti in 1956. GBC drew over 900 invitees - 300 from India alone, while the majority came from over 40 different countries and from all continents (with the possible exception of Antarctica). Participants included religious, spiritual and worldly leaders, as well as 800 Buddhist monks, nuns, scholars and notables from literature and the arts. The Global Buddhist Congregation thus offered a wonderful meeting-ground for representatives of the three main Buddhist Vehicles, the fourfold Saṅgha, as of science and culture to come together, examine Buddha's message, share insights, and engage with pressing concerns of the modern world. GBC's four-day series of events (November 27th – 30th) centred upon five lovely five-star hotels in the heart of New Delhi: hotels Ashok, Lalit, Oberoi, Park and Shangri-la, their convention and conference halls with fine seating arrangements, audiovisual facilities, gardens, accommodations and sumptuous cuisine. Most costs were generously borne by the Asoka Mission.

Inaugural Plenary Session

The two Plenary sessions (Inaugural and Concluding) of the GBC at Ashok Hotel's Convention Hall were grand affairs with nearly 1000 people in attendance including news media. Lovely floral displays invariably bedecked the podium or stage where three groups of eminent representatives of high Sangha and state guests flanked the speaker's pulpit. On Sunday November 27th Inaugural proceedings began with prayers recited in Pali and Sanskrit, followed by circa 15 addresses presented by chief guests or in their absence by their representatives. Sangha presentations included first of all a Welcome address with prayer-wishes by H.H. Rizong Setrul Rinpoche (Gaden Tripa of the Tibetan Geluk order), and addresses by HH Sakya Trizin, HH Thich Pho Tue (Patriarch of the All-Vietnam Buddhist Sangha), Ven. T. Dhammaratana (France and Vice President of the World Fellowship of Buddhists), supreme Sangha representatives from Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), and Thailand. I was especially touched by an audiovisual presentation on Dharma Mistress Cheng Yen and the Tzu Chi Foundation's (Taiwan) humanitarian work done around the world. Memorable presentations were also delivered by Chief guest Dr. Karan Singh (Director of the Indian Council for Cultural Research), Shri Balmiki Prasad Singh (Governor of Sikkim), Lyonpo Minjur Dorji (Culture Minister of Bhutan), and Dr. Victor Wee Datuk (Tourism Minister of Malaysia), etc.

GBC seminars

The Global Buddhist Congregation's seminars on important topics were a prime reason for most participants to come to New Delhi. Seminars generally entailed experts' presentations, panel discussions, questions and answers, and often useful meetings or private discussions afterwards. Between November 27th and the 29th many seminars ran parallel in New Delhi. Because it was impossible to be at different venues simultaneously, because of schedule changes and regrettable information glitches, and due to lack of time it's not feasible to draw a complete picture here. Suffice it to list GBC seminars and afterwards add general characterizations of *seminars attended together with several assessments or stray remarks on highlights.

Titles of GBC seminar series:

*Environment and the Natural World: A Buddhist response

*Preservation and Development of Buddhism (I – III)

Buddhism, Science and Technology

Politics and Society: Buddhism engaging with the world

Women and Buddhism: Equality and equanimity

Ethics and Values: Context and continuity

Buddhism and Mental Health: Anxiety, depression and alienation

Livelihood and Development: Buddhism in a fast-changing world

*Conflict and Violence: A Buddhist response (I – II)

*The all-day seminar on "Environment and the Natural World" featured presentations by over 10 speakers. H.H. Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, youthful head of the Kagyü order of Tibetan Buddhism and founder of the Pan-Himalayan Khoryug environment foundation, chaired the seminar and delivered its opening address. Applying Buddhist principles of interdependence, compassion, and no-self, the Karmapa outlined a Buddhist response to the environmental challenges facing the world today. H.H. noted that the severe harm done to our natural environment is rooted in human minds and behavior. The underlying causes include a virtual "religion of consumerism" and a persistent egocentrism. We are in a dangerous state of denial about the consequences of our actions on the environment. The key problem lies in the way we conceive of ourselves in relation to others, including the environment. We feel we are separate individuals, but nothing exists independently. Our task now is to turn abundant information on our lifestyle's environmental impact into an awareness that we feel in our hearts, and to inspire us to live more responsibly and in a more loving and compassionate relationship to the natural world.

The second speaker Dr. George Schaller (New York), a veteran ecologist with experience from establishing 15 nature preserves in Third World countries, stressed that humankind is on a collision course with earth's biological limits. Buddhism as well as all other faiths must translate their moral principles into effective action and take greater responsibility for protecting our environment. Time didn't permit me to follow presentations by the remaining speakers from South Asia, Europe and North America. They included biologists, animal welfare advocates, conservationists, an Environment minister from Bhutan, Orientalists and a postmodern cultural scientist.

*The "Preservation and Development of Buddhism" (I-III) seminar series lasted two days and featured presentations by over 15 speakers from South, Southeast and Central Asia, Europe and North America. Dr. Gregory Kruglak and Michael von Brück, Prof. of Religious Studies at the University of Munich co-chaired this series focusing on Buddhist studies and practice.

Siddhartha Gauri, a filmmaker and spokesperson for the 'Buddhist Heritage' society raised concern over the state of Buddhist monuments in India. Aside from the eight major pilgrimage sites, some 300 once important Buddhist centres are now largely in ruins, unprotected and at risk of further deterioration (e.g. from pillaging of building blocks). One initiative to protect them is the Buddhist Monuments Development Council (BMDC) based in New Delhi. Another promising report came from Dr. Alimzhan Khamrayev, Senior research fellow at Kazakhstan's Academy of Sciences: Over 25 000 ancient Uighur Buddhist texts of the 6th to the 15th Centuries have been discovered in Central Asia. Dr. Khamrayev and Ven. Alexey Shmyglya plan to establish in Almaty a Scientific Research Centre for the Translation of Ancient Uighur Buddhist Scriptures. International cooperation is solicited for helping to translate these sutras, didactic, poetic works and dramas into modern Central Asian languages, Russian and English. Tibetologist Dr. Alexander Berzin (Berlin) reported on the progress made and plans of his Archives (www.berzinarchives.com): This free-of-charge website contains circa 2 600 articles and 800 audio files in 11 different languages representing his essays, books, and both audio and transcribed versions of his lectures on Tibetan Buddhism, history and culture, and Buddhist-Muslim relations. The pioneering Arabic, Urdu and Indonesian versions will hopefully promote inter-religious understanding and harmony.

At the "Preservation and Development of Buddhism" seminar Lama Surya Das (LSD, Boston), a Tibetan Buddhist Chant master, carried on a stimulating internal dialogue: On the one hand he spoke in favour of modern Western Buddhism as being more meditation-oriented, gender-neutral, meritocratic, democratic, lay-oriented, socially inclusive, and ecologically conscious than traditional Asian Buddhist cultures. But then he questioned Buddhism's form and very future in the West: Is Western Buddhism only "Dharma light"? LSD concluded that outer forms might be changed step by step, as Buddhists learn by doing. Japanese robes which require dry cleaning after each use might be exchanged for cheaper and meditation-friendlier jogging suits. It's more important to save the essence (Bodhicitta motivation) and awaken the Buddha from within. Future prospects of Western Buddhism could be strengthened through instituting Buddhist teacher training programs. Western Buddhists could strive towards an Integral Vehicle (Ekayana). Buddhists in cities could save money and energy, through competing less, having fewer centres and unifying resources (- An uncommon working example of this is the Buddhist Centre Sampo in Helsinki shared by four different Buddhist

associations). Geshe Tenzin Zopa (resident at FPMT Losang Drakpa Buddhist Centre, Malaysia) cautioned against distractions and 'New Age Buddhism' which may dilute the Buddha's Teachings, while Sogyal Rinpoche (founder-director of the international Rigpa network) gave an arousing talk about 21st century Buddhism as a 'force for good' in peoples' lives.

*The GBC seminar on "Conflict and Violence - A Buddhist response (I – II)" focused on Buddhism's contributions in past and present towards preventing and remedying societal and human tragedies. Shantum Seth (New Delhi), a Dharmacharya in Thich Nhat Hanh's Zen lineage, served as moderator. There were eight main speakers.

The presentation by Dr. Sunil Kariyakarawan (Sri Lanka and UK), first Buddhist Chaplain in England's Armed Forces, reflects some of the dilemmas in which Buddhists find themselves. At present there are 3600 Buddhists in the UK Military, including 3000 Gurkhas from Nepal. Many people join in order to maintain themselves, family and relatives, or out of a sense of duty. Once in the military they must follow orders. Of course, the Buddhist ethos does not condone wars of aggression. On the other hand, warfare brings with it besides injuries and deaths, also tremendous stress and traumas. Soldiers can understandably crave pastoral advice or care. The tale of bhikkhu Yos Hut Khemacaro reflects the need for courage and resilience amidst tragedies. Nearly one third of Cambodia's population died during the Red Khmer reign of terror. Since returning from exile, Ven. Khemacaro has taught and worked on NGO projects for the sake of rebuilding a more peaceful and humane Cambodia. Ven. Dr. Thich Nhat Tu, Vice Rector of Vietnam Buddhist University (Ho Ch Minh City), offered a diplomatic discourse on "Peace and sustainable development in the multi-religious and multi-cultural contexts of Asia".

Dr. Yajneswar Shastri, Prof. and Head of the Dept. of Philosophy at Gujarat University, Ahmedabad, India, gave a spirited presentation on the contribution of Buddha's teachings towards world peace. Professor Shastri's tour de force of a paper spanned most of classical Indian Buddhism's literary tradition. He noted that Gautama Buddha's life and exemplary handling of numerous critical situations was itself a message of peace. Moreover, the Pali and Sanskrit Buddhist literature provides a wealth of relevant texts, analyses and advice on resolving conflicts and promoting peace. Prof. Shastri highlighted Lord Buddha's Noble Eight-fold Path and Five precepts (Panchasila), the Dhammapada ("Hatred never ceases by hate but by love"), and the Mettasutta ("May all beings be happy and secure..."). He noted that Buddhaghosa's opus Visuddhimagga explains 10 ways to overcome negative emotions such as anger, hatred and jealousy. The Majjhima-nikaya's Samagamasutra elucidates six causes of conflicts, and ways to

settle disputes and promote harmony in a monastic community. The ideas underlying those venerable practices can be adapted to modern applications. Also noteworthy is Mahayana philosopher Shantideva's Four-fold formula for establishing peace and harmony in society. Professor Shastri dwelt at length upon the Buddhist theory of 'Dependent arising' (pratityasamutpada). According to it, the universe is an endless net of causality, where every event sends ripples throughout the ocean of existence. The minds of living beings could be likened to transmitting and receiving stations, intimately interconnected and interrelated. Even insignificant emotions and thoughts have effects on other beings. Peaceful human minds lead to peaceful speech and actions. If people assume personal responsibility and create an atmosphere of peace within, and then expand that to include family, community, nation, etc., they can establish world peace!

Dr. Parichart Suwanbubbha, a Professor at Mahidol University in Bangkok and Director of the Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, gave an enlightening presentation on her field experience and conclusions from reconciliation and peace-building efforts in the troubled, deep south of Thailand. There she taught 'the process of dialogue' for the military, local religious and student leaders, Buddhist and Muslim villagers, women and youth. Peace presupposes justice, proper understanding and behavior, also in regard to distribution of goods, rights and responsibilities. Injustice may entail hidden violence of an ecological, structural (in politics and economy) or psychological kind. Severe injustice may lead to physical violence. From a Buddhist perspective, efforts should be made to remedy injustice, protect people from violence and promote reconciliation. Dialogue is a peaceful means to promote justice and reconciliation. It requires both outer and inner work: One must listen without prejudice - deeply, with kindness, heart-to-heart, learn the convictions of the different parties involved, increase one's understanding and sympathy, dissolve biases, and increase mutual trust. Lastly Ven. Hsin Tao introduced a film documentary on the Museum of World Religions (Taipei, Taiwan) which he had founded. The exhibitions, audiovisuals and diverse programs are intended to promote tolerance and understanding towards different cultures, respect and appreciation for all religions. The museum also serves as a conference venue for interfaith communication and ecumenism.

Cultural program

Convocation proceedings were complemented by cultural programs, partly at hotels and at the Asoka Mission itself, but especially by the Buddhist Cultural Heritage Festival held at the so-called India Habitat Centre. It was open also to a wider public and signified out-reach to India's youth. The Heritage Festival featured a varied program ranging

from photo exhibition, book fair, Dharma talks by Sogyal Rinpoche, etc., traditional Asian song and dance performances, folk-rock of the 'Dharma Bums' and a fascinating Indian musical drama, "Mandala of 10 Bodhisattvas [of the Lotus Sutra] Predicting a New Cosmic Era".

Promise of an International Buddhist Confederation (IBC)

Perhaps the most enduring contribution of Asoka Mission and of GBC2011 is the launching of an International Buddhist Confederation (IBC). Already on August 27th and 28th Asoka Mission had organized an international pilot workshop during which delegates from 10 countries agreed to form a new world Buddhist body, the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC). Two subcommittees (one for Vision, Mission Statement, Aims and Objectives, and the other for Structure and Membership) began preparatory work also towards a draft constitution for the IBC.

At the end of November the International Buddhist Confederation project gained further momentum and definition. I chanced to attend one of the large IBC project meetings at the GBC where questions regarding aims and structure were aired. Further work committees were set up and the scope of their memberships was expanded numerically and geographically. The new International Buddhist Confederation is to become an independent organization. It seeks to bring together Buddhist organizations and eminent individuals of all three Vehicles (Theravada, Bodhisattvayana and Vajrayana), and to draw upon their collective wisdom, and lend a united voice to ensure that Buddhist values and principles are represented at international forums and that these become a part of social and political discourse globally. Moreover, the IBC will seek to safeguard India's and Nepal's Buddhist legacy and nurture Buddhist development. Thus it is hoped that the International Buddhist Confederation can complement the good work done by the World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB, Bangkok), but will at the same time be more representative.

IBC's work committees have challenging work ahead. Let's wish them support and success, so that the International Buddhist Confederation will soon become a reality. It's also worth noting that supreme religious heads (Patriarchs, Sangharajas, Khambo Lamas, etc.) of all three Vehicles held closed joint meetings at the GBC. Such meetings and exchange promote understanding and augur well for increased and more effective Pan-Buddhist cooperation in the future.

Outdoor ceremonies

On GBC's final day November 30th, 2011, ceremonies were held in the morning at the Gandhi Memorial and at midday at Nehru Park in New Delhi. Ceremonies began with an All-faith prayer meet and service at the Gandhi Smriti. Hundreds of GBC delegates, observers and eminent invitees gathered before the canopied dais where addresses, prayers and bhajans were delivered. Also under the canopy sat Sangharajas of Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Burma, Mahayanikas of Sri Lanka, Tibetan hierarchs (the Dalai Lama, Gaden Tripa, Gyalwang Karmapa, etc.), representatives of all religions from India: Buddhist representatives, leading Hindus and Sikhs (Swami Saraswati of Parmath, representatives of the Ramakrishna and Chinmaya Missions, Gurudwara Bangla Sahib), a Muslim representative, the Archbishop and Chief Rabbi of Delhi. Cameramen recorded the ceremonies for broadcast on Indian TV and Internet.

Next the assembly moved to Nehru Park and watched as proceedings unfolded upon a cordoned-off, anointed hillock. There a group of monks first performed a puja. Thereafter a small group of Buddhist patriarchs and VIPs arrived, and in their company the Dalai Lama planted three Bodhi tree saplings from Bodh Gaya, Sravasti and Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka) into freshly dug holes. These saplings are cuttings from the pipal tree under which the Buddha attained Enlightenment. Stone platforms are to be built near the saplings as a place for contemplation. This Dhamma Sangam and the Bodhi trees will become Delhi's newest Buddhist landmark.

Concluding Plenary Session

The four-day Global Buddhist Congregation 2011 drew to a close on the afternoon of November 30th 2011 with a Concluding Plenary session at the Convention Hall of Ashok Hotel. Close to a thousand dignitaries, VIPs and diplomats, delegates and observers from over 40 countries gathered to follow the speeches and ceremonial ending. Vietnamese monk Thich Quang Ba, the founding abbot of Van Hanh Monastery (Canberra, Australia) read out points from the GBC Communiqué which he had helped to draft. It summarized findings and recommendations from the nine seminar series. Essentially we are enjoined to use the Buddha's teachings to lead a more mindful and compassionate life, benefitting (the conventional) 'self' and others.

H.H. the Dalai Lama gave the GBC Valedictory speech in which he drew together many different strands of insight gained from a lifetime of service. In an increasingly

interdependent world our own welfare depends on many other people. Other humans have a right to peace and happiness equal to our own. Therefore it behooves us to help those in need. Different religious traditions meet the needs and mental dispositions of different people. All major religions share similar ethical systems and seek the betterment of humanity. The greatest obstacle to inter-religious harmony is the lack of contacts and consequently a lack of appreciation for their mutual value. Buddhism has a special role to play in propounding interdependence, which accords with modern scientific thought. Members of the monastic community should study and practice Buddha's teachings, abide by their vows and abstain from tempting materialism. It is time for proponents of the Pali and Sanskrit traditions to engage in dialogue. We should improve communications and foster exchange of knowledge and experience among our different traditions. The 20th century was a century of war and violence; now we need to work to make the 21st century one of peace and dialogue!

At present only Theravada nuns (bhiksuni-s) enjoy the possibility of receiving full ordination, while Bodhisattavayana and Vajrayana nuns are merely novice nuns due to their ordination traditions having become defunct. Ven. Tenzin Palmo, a UK expatriate resident in India, took the opportunity of making a short impassioned plea for re-establishing full ordinations. His Holiness acknowledged that Venerables had deliberated on the subject in closed meetings and that some progress could be expected in the near future. In his concluding presentation Lama Lobzang, President of Asoka Mission, acknowledged that Buddhists in Asia had been disappointed at too little being done to re-establish Buddhism in the land of the Buddha. Now however, steps are being taken - the Global Buddhist Congregation 2011 has been held in India and an International Buddhist Confederation is being established to better organize and unify Buddhists. For organizing this convocation Asoka Mission and its President received a hearty round of applause from all those present. H.H. the Dalai Lama oversaw the handing over of Bodhi tree saplings to Buddhist patriarchs from Asia, while GBC delegates received lovely scroll painting (tanka) facsimiles. An extraordinary international Buddhist convocation had just ended.

Afterword

Something new is beginning in the Buddhist world. The ancient home grounds of Lord Buddha –India and Nepal – are reviving as vital centres of Buddhist activity in the modern world. One sign of this was the holding of Global Buddhist Congregation 2011 - the greatest Buddhist convocation of recent times to be held in South Asia. It drew hundreds of talented Buddhists and Dharma friends especially from South and Southeast Asia, but also from the rest of Eurasia and the Americas. GBC was a grand opportunity

for representatives of the three Buddhist 'Vehicles' (Theravada, Bodhisattvayana and Vajrayana), of the fourfold Saṅgha (monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen) as of science and culture to meet, examine Buddha's message and Buddhist traditions anew, share insights, and examine Buddhism's capacity for renewal and for engaging with pressing concerns of the modern world. There are plans afoot to make GBC 2011 not the last, but the first in a continuing series of international convocations. The launching of the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC) also holds great promise for the future. Asoka Mission, its Ven. Director Lama Lobsang and Patrons merit hearty thanks for the foresight, hard work and remarkable generosity that made Global Buddhist Congregation 2011 possible.