

Buddhist Studies International

Academic Conference, in association with the UN Day of Vesak 2552, Bangkok, Thailand, May 4-6, 2009

Sponsored by the Mahaculalongkornrajavidyalaya University (MCU), this is the 6th year the event has been celebrated, since the declaration by the UN of Vesak as an International Day (see www.icundv.com for details). ‘Celebration’, however, only partly characterizes the event. For while there were opening and closing ceremonies associated with the event that celebrates the triple event of the Birth, Enlightenment and Parinibbana of the Buddha, what makes the event of academic interest is that a whole day was devoted exclusively to scholarly deliberation.

Under the theme ‘Buddhist Approach[es] to [the] Global Crisis’, over 70 papers were presented with the participation of a hundred or so scholars, Asian and Western. The Conference was organized at the main campus of MCU in Ayuthya, along five panels as follows:

1. Buddhist Approach to the Environmental Crisis;
2. Buddhist Approach to the Economic Crisis;
3. Buddhist Approach to the Political Crisis and Peace Development;
4. Common Buddhist Text Project; and
5. Buddhist E-resources and Network.

The workshop session on the International Association of Buddhist Universities was intended to strengthen this one-year old organization, unique in that it is the one and only body that brings institutions around the world engaged in the academic study of Buddhism.

What was encouraging was that the breadth of the Panels was matched by an in-depth deliberation, each Panel taking a whole day with several presentations.

The Report on each Panel at the Plenary held in UN office in Bangkok the following day allowed all the delegates to get a sense of all the deliberations, and hear the recommendations, followed by questions from the floor with responses from the Reporting Panel.

But it was not all talk and no action. Indeed there were tangible outcomes.

One was setting up, at the end of the deliberations of the ‘One text project’, a committee of experts, drawn from the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, to develop a single source book that could be available to anyone who wants to get a sense of what constitutes Buddhism. Once published, it would be available at hotels and other public places internationally.

The Panel on the Environment had even a more tangible outcome. Thanks to some homework done in preparation, it was able to come up with a declaration regarding climate change, circulated among the delegates for signature via e-mail a day or two following the conclusion of the event.

A question from the floor at the Plenary raised the issue of striking a committee to develop an alternative Buddhist model in Economic, Political and Managerial Development, in response to a suggestion made by Hon Moragoda, Minister of Tourism of Sri Lanka, that the Conference explore it.

If this serves as an example of how our intellectual and academic land may be watered by the insights of practical politics, the three outcomes outlined above provide a wonderful examples of socially engaged Buddhism.

Of course, there was the usual camaraderie among the delegates, renewing old friendships and making new ones, but the significance of the event goes beyond that. And it is twofold. The first was that perhaps for the first time in the history of Buddhist scholarship, scholars of both the East and the West came to share their wisdom. In the past while there have been conferences and seminars on topics such as the ones listed above, they have been, generally speaking, limited to western scholars talking to western scholars and Eastern scholars to Eastern ones. But here we find that bridge gapped. Another related significance is that among the scholars were both laity and the ordained sangha.

An additional related significance of the at the UNDV conference is that another traditional divide came to be bridged – that between religious practice and scholarship. The issue of the keeping the lines sharply clear and separate between academic study and religious practice is one that has plagued the academy in the west, and the east, most likely in imitation of the west. But here at the conference, the ordained being as qualified academically, and many with training in the west, and holding academic positions in universities, there appeared no compromising of academic standards, both the lay professoriate – most if not all also being Buddhist practitioners, and the sangha professoriate speaking in a common idiom of scholarship.

Perhaps, it may be worth noting, that the possibility of the lay and the sangha academic coming together in intellectual deliberation, without

compromising the quality of each – academic objectivity and living the religious life, is something that can take place only in the context of Buddhism. They both draw upon the Buddha's invitation to 'come and see' (*ehi passika*) and for 'personal verification' (*paccattam veditabbo*). The last word in this phrase *viññuhi* 'by the wise' may give a hint as to why Buddhist practice need not compromise academic objectivity. It can only be done by the wise, Buddha's teachings generating such wisdom in the practitioners.

The one failure in the opinion of this writer is that meditation found no official space in the entire 3-day program, with more than lavish presentation of ritual.