

The Fifth Buddhist Summit



New Zealand delegation

November 2008 Kobe, Japan

Buddhist leaders from 32 nations around the globe joined hands in an extraordinary gathering to lend their support to world peace, participate in a global conference and commemorate the opening of a new Japanese temple complex of gigantic proportions. Ajahn Tiradhammo was joined by Ajahn Chandako and two members of the Wellington Theravada Buddhist Association to represent New Zealand. In this article Ajahn Chandako recollects some of his enduring perceptions of the summit:

"Our initial impressions were ones of being overwhelmed and a touch of embarrassment. The Japanese sect that organized the summit went all out to look after us in the best way possible. It began as we exited the departure gate of the Osaka airport. A bit bleary-eyed at 2:00 am New Zealand time after a long flight, we were met by the flashes of a veritable paparazzi of photographers. A red carpet stretched from the exit gate to the curb. Japanese women dressed in kimonos stood waiting to offer large bouquets of flowers to each of us in turn, while leaders of the sect were present to shake our hands. The red carpet directed us to our three black limousines, each with a New Zealand flag. These three cars were designated specifically for use only by our delegation. There was also a team of ten people—drivers, translators and attendants—assigned to care for our every need. That translated as 2 ½ attendants and ¾ black limos each. Welcome to the Nebutsumi sect of Japan, the wealthy and powerful group that was organizing and hosting the summit. As our motorcade whisked us away to our hotel in Kobe, I was glad I had planted so many trees to somewhat offset the Sasquatch sized carbon footprint of our escapade.

My next general impression was more in the realm of awe. After a day of being treated to a trip to Kyoto to view some of the world famous temples and ancient gardens, we attended the opening ceremony for the Royal Grand Hall of Buddhism. The stated intention of building this temple complex was to create a sacred space of architectural magnificence to rival or surpass the Vatican or Mecca. Comprised of halls, gates, gardens, lakes, a conference center, a pagoda, guest houses and a spa, each building or garden in and of itself would be considered a masterpiece. No expense was spared in bringing the finest craftsmen and raw materials together from around the world to create a traditional Japanese-style splendor that rivaled the emperor's palace. Situated on 370 acres amidst a stunning backdrop of forested mountains, their faith had literally moved mountains. Before construction commenced, it was decided to remove one mountain to create the optimal feng shui balance of energy. We were told that the number of people involved in the construction was approximately three million. That's nearly the entire population of New Zealand.

Their quest of realising the apex of architectural achievements was, I feel, largely successful, and the world has one more man-made wonder that it can be proud of. As we began the opening ceremony with a procession from the main gate to the main Buddha hall, treading silently on the 1.5 km long red carpet lining the entire pathway across bridges and up sets of wide stairs, ascending to the massive main temple, it was easy to feel impressed. With all the well known and very real problems that human beings have a propensity for creating on this planet, it is inspiring to also see that we are capable of such cultural heights of beauty.

The main hall is the largest Buddhist temple structure in the world, standing 51.5 m (18 stories) tall. The Guinness Book of World Records has also given them credit for the largest stone lanterns in the world, the largest carved guardian deity statues and the largest bells—3.3m in diameter, weighing 48 tons. The interior of the main hall is decorated with more than 10,000 elaborate wooden relief carvings, the largest 11m tall and many of them gilded with gold. The gardens incorporated huge boulders transported from China and trees 500-800 years old. The list of superlatives could be enumerated endlessly... and they did.

In the area of cultural achievements, special recognition deserves to go to the Nembutsushu toilets. Toilets are clearly something very important to the Japanese. It wasn't just the comfy heated seat or the unique elongated shape, but each one of them came complete with a console of buttons on the side with an array of options. You could have a squirt, a spray, a gush, a surge, in front or behind...heck, I just wanted a flush, but since the buttons were in Japanese I had to be careful not to suddenly get a jet where I least expected it. Some of the toilets had lids that would open automatically as you entered the stall like the ominous jaws of some toothless porcelain crocodile.

Back to the opening ceremony, a significant number of royalty and heads of state had gathered in addition to the Buddhist representatives, so it took quite some time just to work through formal pomp and frilly introductions. We then waited through long hours of elaborate ceremonial protocol, self-congratulatory speeches and repetitive waffle punctuated by the shouts, drums, bells and chanting of the Nembutsushu priests. All was done with a precision and seriousness reminiscent of the military. Seeing a hundred yellow-robed unsmiling Japanese priests marching in formation brought up a few (probably unintended) associations in the minds of visitors who had at least seen documentaries of WWII. Our delegation decided that that style probably wouldn't work very well in New Zealand.

The next major project on line for the sect is the construction of Nalanda University a short distance from the Royal Grand Hall. Their wish is to recreate the ancient Indian Buddhist center of study, and bring the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions together in harmony and unity of purpose. The size and scope of their plans matched what they had already accomplished. To get to the site we drove past 500 Arahants Park, a lovely strolling garden filled with 500 life-sized stone carvings of animated sages engaged in contemplation and discussion. That afternoon was then spent on the grounds of the future university engaging in (or disengaging from) a series of ceremonial speeches and blessings reminiscent of the morning.

My next general impression was "Where's the beef?"...or a more spiritually correct, "Where's the Soba and tofu?" The Nembutsushu stated ideals of bringing together all the major schools of Buddhism, returning to the original teachings of the Buddha and bringing peace to the entire world were undeniably

noble and worthy of support. As the days proceeded it was noticeable, however, that there seemed to be no concrete suggestions about how to realistically implement those grand ideas. Once Nalanda University was built, for example, who would teach and what would they teach? What exactly do they consider the 'original teachings of the Buddha'? After spending untold millions to build the university, would there actually be people interested in studying there? The Royal Grand Hall was built to be a "spiritual center for the 370 million Buddhists in the world", yet once the ceremony and conference was over, it was not clear if the complex would be used at all, either by a resident community or visitors from abroad. It could easily end up little more than a fantastic tourist site with a resident community of the hundreds of workers needed to keep it clean.

Even a minute fraction of the money spent on the conspicuous display of wealth could have gone a long way to fulfilling the Nembutsushu ideals through printing Dhamma books and organizing meditation retreats. Enthralled by the vast scope of grand material projects, it is easy to forget that the buildings are just there to keep the rain off people's heads while they are purifying their hearts through meditation and contemplation. It is always a challenge not to be seduced away from the essence.

The vagueness of their sushi-in-the-sky ideals made me question if the end result would justify the samsara-sized expense. Still, all phenomena are empty, not just their platitudes, and the oft repeated intention of "bringing peace and tranquility to the entire world" was a mission statement that resonated with me. It clearly contrasted with the objectives and activities of many of the other major religions in the world.

The opening ceremony was attended by approximately 10,000 Nembutsushu followers, all of them dressed identically in black suits and black dresses. As the delegations arrived in long caravans of expensive black cars, the lay people lined the sides of the road with excited smiles waving the flags of the countries represented. We put our 'good morning!' in Japanese to use with positive effect. To mark this rare occasion, innumerable photos were being taken, but they wanted to get one photo with everyone together—all 10,000. That posed certain logistical challenges, but no obstacles were too great for them to overcome. They had a truck prepared with a large hydraulic arm that lifted the

photographer in a bucket 30 metres up off the ground.

The second day's activities moved to the convention center, a beautiful and well designed complex with a large auditorium, a great many rooms of various sizes, dining facilities, large stone Buddha statues and a courtyard garden. The speeches continued. It was now the dignitaries' turn. Highlights included the King of Cambodia's deep devotion and humility. The Prime Minister of Sri Lanka was the first to mention some Dhamma teachings, and the young king of Uganda, because of his profound wish for peace, expressed his pledge to promote Buddhism in his country.

The founder and leading figure of the Nembutsushu sect, a layman named Dr. Kyuse Enshinjoh, then kicked off the speeches from the 32 delegations of Buddhist teachers. These presentations continued for the next two days. Speeches by Ajahn Brahm and Ajahn Tiradhammo stood out not only for their vision but also for their realistic suggestions born of decades of practical experience living in monastic communities and teaching in multi-cultural situations in the west.

There was a noticeable difference in style between the Asian and Western speakers. The Asian monks tended to give formal, prepared talks of flowery thank yous without much attempt to go beyond the superficial. Often reading their talks in their native language without looking at the audience, it seemed that many were there simply to fulfill an administrative duty.

The representatives from non-Buddhist countries included the major western nations but also countries such as Croatia, Brazil, Mexico, Bangladesh and (the new hit) Uganda. The non-Asians displayed a fresh aliveness. They spoke of meditation, spoke of issues relevant to teaching Buddhism in a modern multi-cultural world, and most of all, they spoke from the heart. While the Thais, Tibetans, Sri Lankans, Japanese and other Asian monks tended to look down upon each other and made few real attempts to get to know and understand each other, the non-Asians immediately felt a sense of warm kinship and shared purpose. They spoke of the necessity to go beyond cultural isolation, perceived superiority, empty ritualism and gender discrimination.

The monastic representatives chosen by the hosts were entirely male, reinforcing the unfortunate perception that the Sangha is a patriarchal anomaly of repression. Among the Nembutsushu priests in robes there were no women, and the leaders of each delegation were actually referred to as the supreme patriarchs. It seemed that gender equality did not even yet have a toe-hold in the Japanese religious mindset.

At the conference one could sample a wide spectrum of monastic and semi-monastic traditions. It was a colorful bunch. Such occasions tend to attract high ranking Asian monks who are more professional administrators than seekers of spiritual transformation through reduction of their egos. Often portly and sometimes disheveled, they are a friendly lot, but most would not be at home meditating in a frugal hut in the forest. Ajahns Brahm and Tiradhammo upheld the contemplative/Vinaya tradition, and beyond a handful of us there were not many who were concerned about respecting the monastic discipline. In the Tibetan tradition they still have a Mahayana form of the Vinaya, although it is rarely studied or practiced. The Zen tradition has lost the Vinaya altogether. Their priests wear robes for formal occasions but usually have partners and jobs and are not bound by the five precepts. There are strict monastic traditions within Mahayana, especially in Korea and Taiwan, but they were not present at this conference.

Some of the younger attendant monks were present more as tourists. Even during the solemn opening procession many had their cameras out, turning this way and that taking photos. During the speeches, the monks next to me from Nepal and Burma dealt with their boredom by playing with various high tech gadgets. Next to them the monk from Mongolia actually had his laptop out working on some business or other. While the Nembutsushu laypeople exhibited the extreme of Eastern conformity, the Western extreme of non-conformity manifested in the Spanish delegation. Their impressive leader had grey hair down to the middle of his back, a long grey beard, large jewelry and a unique, ankle length white robe tied with a rope. Although he looked more like a well fed Gandolf than a Buddhist monk, he gave a good speech about the beneficial work being done by his group.

The Nembutsushu priests, from what we could ascertain, had families and only wore their yellow robes for ceremonial occasions. Their Buddhist practice

seemed to be comprised of service, giving donations, obedience, performing rituals, mammoth construction projects and some basic Mahayana studies. They were heavily influenced by Pure Land Buddhism, a tradition that teaches that by chanting the name of the Bodhisatva Amitabha one will be reborn in a particular realm of heaven. There seemed to be little emphasis on insight or putting an end to rebirth. Although they now had the best meditation hall in the world, meditation was not taught, practiced or even spoken of.

As the conference proceeded, another impression gradually arose. There was an air of secrecy that was unexpected and a bit strange. There were certain things that our guides and translators were not supposed to talk about, and questions in certain areas always elicited vague responses:

“How much did this all cost to build?”

“What do you have to do to become a member?”

“Is the leader a monk or a layman?”

The answers were predictably, “It is unclear” or “We can’t talk about that.”

Being hosted by the Nembutsushu was an honor of choreographed precision. At first the degree of control was attributed to being very well organized and to the Japanese way of doing things. But it extended beyond that a bit. For example, in their speeches the delegates were not supposed to say anything that had not been previously approved by the Nembutsushu elders. We were not allowed to walk around the grounds of the temple alone. A large number of serious men in black suits were positioned at every corner, united by their earplug speakers and lapel mics. If a delegate attended the Nembutsushu summit, he or she was not supposed to attend any other Buddhist conferences. On the third day a museum to honor their leader was opened, and the elements of personality worship emerged more strongly. Dr. Kyuse himself was rarely seen except while giving his speech and in the mandatory private meetings with him.

What was so special about this man who had been able to accomplish such extraordinary achievements in such a brief time? He was clearly a man of tremendous energy and enthusiasm. He had a clear message and has stayed focused on that message. He has tried to lift Japanese Buddhism out of the degeneration of mere ritualism, funeral business and hollow tourist attractions. In 1979 Dr. Kyuse founded the Nembutsushu sect, and it is now one of the most

powerful religious forces in Japan. Dr. Kyuse is not a meditator as such, but he has had the ability to inspire and organise large numbers of people. His sect is a tight knit community that provides a sense of security, connection, psychological safety and purpose. Once you're in, you're in, and the members look after each other. With the modern disintegration of village life, a sect offers a feeling of belonging and acceptance that can offset potential feelings of alienation within a metropolis of millions of unknown faces.

Bringing together Buddhist leaders from around the world created a rare and precious opportunity for meaningful exchange. Unfortunately there had been no time allocated for discussing important issues as a group. The personal connections from chatting in the hallways, dining at the same table, or waiting for our limos were invaluable, but the great potential of serious dialogue concerning the issues we jointly face in our different countries had never actualised.

On the final day of the conference there was a round table discussion planned. Many of us held out the hope that this would allow the chance for at least a few hours of group discussion between the delegations. So much effort and money had been invested to bring these people together from around the world, and there were so many truly important and useful things we could potentially discuss. The first thing we learned about the round table discussions was that the table was not truly round. The session began with the three head Nembutsushu priests monopolizing the speaking. It was an hour and a half before anyone else had a chance to say anything.

The three priests were very upset, one of them shouting. They had received a highly critical email from the head of the French delegation. The French group had been excluded from attending this summit because they wished to also attend a conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists taking place in Tokyo later that month. The five-page email accused the sect of being a manipulative, power hungry cult obsessed with money. The Nembutsushu leaders were clearly not used to receiving criticism. Instead of addressing any of the issues the French lama had raised, they reacted by discrediting him and attacking his character.

The rest of us weren't too worried about the email and just wanted to get on with some purposeful discussion. Even once leaders from other delegations were allowed to speak, the Japanese controlled the discussion and were not able to move on from the email topic. Many of the other teachers sensitively brought up the issue of the obvious differences in perceptions between Asian and non-Asian Buddhists, aiming at greater mutual understanding. The Japanese merely dismissed this by saying there were no differences between Asia and the West. Every suggestion seemed to be received by a judo throw of dismissive inability to hear or digest concepts outside their box. Each attempt to get some discussion going on significant issues got lost amid the jumble of subsequent comments unrelated to what had just been said.

We were then given a break. Another round table discussion was scheduled to take place in the main auditorium. When we entered, the auditorium was packed with Nembutsushu priests, lay followers and the press who had been invited to observe the discussion. The first thing that happened was that something was said in Japanese and all of them suddenly got up and left. The shouting head priest then picked up where he left off with visible anger, berating the lama in question for not working in harmony and friendship. "There is right and there is wrong, and we should correct those who are wrong."

The priests' reaction to criticism and even constructive suggestions was a defensive meltdown. It was in fact their own heavy handed tactics that were the source of the disharmony they perceived. Some of the wisest words on dealing with criticism came from the leader of the Thai delegation. It was a simple teaching that we hear often in Thailand about not taking the worldly dhammas of praise and criticism too seriously. As this was going on, many of the other delegates seemed out to lunch, in their own world, blindly optimistic or broadcasting their own views. In the end, the round table 'discussions' were so disjointed that one senior monk termed them "theater of the absurd."

Once the hope for meaningful connection with others had been let go of, we could return to our hotel in peace. Our translator and attendant, Yuko, had done a fantastic job throughout our entire stay. She had worked from before dawn until late at night to look after every detail and make our visit as pleasant as possible. And that was my final impression: gratitude. Gratitude to all the Nembutsushu lay followers for their sincerity and hospitality.

Such was the Fifth Buddhist Summit. As a cultural experience, the trip was fascinating. As a tribute to the might and organization of the Nembutsushu sect, the entire event was very impressive. From the vantage point of advancing the teachings of the Buddha for the benefit of people throughout the world, the ceremony and conference suffered mixed reviews.

Upon return to New Zealand, our humble Vimutti Buddhist Monastery seemed a bit shabby and poor by comparison. No Royal grand halls. No fantastic gardens. No Guinness Book of world records bells and not even a single black limo. But we do teach meditation. We do teach sila. We do encourage people to transform their hearts through wisdom. We put the ideals of going back to the original teachings of the Buddha into practice, and, hopefully, we have remained focused on the essence of the Buddha's Dhamma."