

## ***Welcoming Address ...***

Conference on Buddhism and Leadership for Peace,  
University of Hawaii

**by Rev. Ruth Tabrah**

As president of the Hawaii Association of International Buddhists, I was particularly happy to note the subhead "Theory and Practice" linked to the recent seminar on *Buddhism and World Peace* sponsored by the Dae Won Sa Cultural Institute and the University of Hawaii's Department of Philosophy.



Not only scholars but laymen like Sri Lankan community development Sarvodaya leader Ariaratne participated in three days of intense deliberations at Honolulu's East-West Center. The added component of practice to what is often an exclusively theoretical viewpoint was stimulating and refreshing. In the view of those of us who are practicing Buddhists, the Buddha's basic teaching of the interdependent, ever-changing impermanent nature and dependent origination of all that exists is empty without practice, as practice is empty without that foundation of theory.

The demarcation between theory and practice is to me an illusory one. Each is necessary, neither is sufficient by itself.

In my own case, I am a practicing Buddhist whose initial encounter with the teachings was intellectual. As a Shin Buddhist for the past thirty-five years, my practice has been that of life itself, of hearing and reflecting on the life-affirming teachings of Shinran Shonin's true Pure Land Way. The process has been an integration of heart and mind in which I have come to view my life as a spiritual journey of crossing inner frontiers in the great and sometimes appalling adventure of seeing myself as I am and, hopefully, appreciating and accepting others just as they are. In any Buddhist tradition, living the oneness of theory and practice is, it seems to me, the source of the inner peace that is the beginning of a peaceful society and Buddhism's universal ideal of well being and happiness for oneself and others.

To those of you who have not seen it, I recommend the Chicago Buddhist Temples' "Path of Enlightenment," a small booklet that presents in simple text and exquisite illustration the theory and practice of Buddhism. On the last page this question is asked: "Is Buddhism a religion? a philosophy? a psychology?" The answer to all three is a resounding **YES**.

Since I am a writer who is also an editor, I am always wishing I could add one last page to this wonderful little book. It would be a page linking Buddhism with the fourth dimension of our twentieth century lives -- science. To add a component that was but sparsely represented in the papers at this seminar, I offer these examples of the potential for science helping us along the way to Buddhism and Leadership for Peace by its post-modern insights into the nature of change, interdependence, impermanence and illusion.

We tend to view science as antithetic to religion but Edward Wilson, whose work in sociobiology has spurred bitter debates in the scientific community insists that "people have a deep-seated, genetically based need for a religious connection with their own identity." He adds that, significant to contemporary fulfillment of that need is the impact of evolutionary biology which, Wilson says, "has shown that in theistic traditional religions like Christianity, the creation myth is just that."

One of the most popular readings in our Jodo Shinshu service book at Hongwanji's Hawaii Betsuin is "Hard it is to be born into human life, now we are living it." What an affirming and joyous spin the late cell biologist and author Lewis Thomas puts on that in his comment that, "Any one of us results from the chance encounter of an egg and one sperm from among lots of competition. From that encounter comes first a single human cell. People ought to be walking around all the day, all through their waking hours, calling to each other in endless wonderment, talking of nothing except that cell." As to our common misunderstanding of the nature of science in its new horizons, consider Professor Thomas' statement that "The greatest of all the accomplishments of 20th century science has been the discovery of human ignorance."

Likewise Timothy Ferris, author of "Coming of Age in the Milky Way" writes, "Our ignorance of course, has always been with us and always will be. What is new is our awareness of it, our awakening to its fathomless dimensions." And Karl Popper, philosopher of science reminds us, "The more we learn about the world and the deeper our learning, the more conscious, specific and articulate will be our knowledge of what we do not know, our knowledge of our ignorance, for this indeed is the main source of our ignorance -- the fact that our knowledge can only be finite, while our ignorance must necessarily be infinite."

The Buddha diagnosed ignorance as the root cause of the dis-ease that leads to conflict and violence. Since contemporary science (at least those at the post-modern horizons of theoretical science) acknowledges this, perhaps we all can feel more optimistic about the coming century. Perhaps in future seminars we Buddhists can invite our colleagues in science to join with us in seeking a broader post-modern view of Buddhism and Leadership for Peace and a more insightful understanding of Buddhist theory and practice in the chaotic, naturally evolving universe in which the flow of life on our small planet is an interdependent and probably impermanent phenomenon.