

“Buddhism Confronts the Gender Continuum: Gender and Sexuality Issues Raised at the Fourth International Buddhist Conference” A Report by Walter L. Williams

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While on sabbatical from the University of Southern California, Professor Walter L. Williams has been doing research on gender and sexuality issues in Thai Buddhism. For the past year he has been living in Thailand and working closely with Buddhist monks and speaking at Buddhist Universities. Dr. Williams has himself been a practicing Buddhist for over two decades. He was one of only six Americans invited to attend the Fourth International Buddhist Conference, held May 26-29, 2007 at the United Nations Conference Centre in Bangkok. At this conference he presented a statement, excerpted below, encouraging Buddhist organizations to take a leading role in the world in advocating total equality for women and sexual minorities.

*Due to the impact of the lectures that I gave at Mahachulalongkorn University, Koen Kaen and Roi Et campuses, I was very lucky to be invited to participate in the Fourth Annual International Buddhist Conference, held at the United Nations Conference Centre in Bangkok on May 26-29. Mahachulalongkorn University and the United Nations were the chief sponsors of this conference. With over a thousand people in attendance, there were only six Americans present, and I was honored to be one of those six.*

THE OPENING DAY of the conference was held at Buddhamonthon, a giant center for Buddhism in Nakhon Pathom just west of Bangkok. Ninety-five percent of Thai people are Buddhist (and most of the rest are Muslims who live in the extreme south of Thailand near the Malaysian border). The Thai government pays for this center and has offered it as a base for international Buddhist organizations. Before the opening ceremony took place, I took a seat in the giant main auditorium between a male delegate from Brazil and a female delegate from Italy, and had interesting chats with both of them. Delegates came from over sixty nations. Ultimately, I talked with delegates from all the nations of the Orient (from India and Nepal in the west, to Indonesia in the south, and to Korea and Japan in the east). But beyond this historically core area of Buddhism, it was fascinating to talk with Buddhists from places as diverse as the Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, Finland, Russia), Europe (England, France, Germany, Hungary, Serbia, Croatia, Ukraine), and Israel, Australia and New Zealand.

I ended up sharing a room in the fabulously ornate Prince Palace Hotel with a Buddhist monk from Uganda in east Africa. A member of the Baganda tribe, he had been educated in a Roman Catholic missionary school and received a scholarship to attend college in India. While in India he had investigated Hinduism, Sufism, and Buddhism, and decided he liked Buddhism best. He has purchased a few acres of land in Uganda as a site for a Buddhist Centre, and wants to establish Buddhism in East Africa. He and I spent the next few days planning a strategy for how to expand Buddhism in Africa, partly by appealing to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people who are so rejected by the Christian and Muslim religious organizations.

The first session began when everyone in the audience stood up for the grand entry of Somdet Phra Phutthacharn, an elderly Thai monk who is the Supreme Patriarch of Thailand. I happened to be sitting near the row where he walked down, and I got some great photos of him. He was not imperious at all, but was all smiles, stopping to say hello to many people as he slowly made his way down the aisle. After bowing to the statue of the Buddha, he made a short speech in Thai that was translated into English and several other languages on headphones placed at each seat in the auditorium. He began by saying that Buddhism is a religion of goodness, with a goal of happiness for all people around the world. He concluded by saying: "Perform all your duties, and live all your life, in peace and happiness."

This theme of peace and happiness was reiterated often by Buddhist leaders from many nations. This is of course a reflection of the basic teachings of the Buddha, "The Four Noble Truths," which say that life is inevitably full of suffering, and there is no possibility of going through life without encountering the illness and death of loved ones and ultimately of oneself. But rather than being depressed and defeated by this reality, the Buddha taught that there is a way out of suffering. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is the extinction of suffering, and the ability to gain and retain happiness in one's life despite the realities of life that can lead to suffering.

Next was a speech of welcome by the Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand, General Phaiboon Watthanasiritham. He was one of the leaders of the military coup that threw out the corrupt politician Taksin last September. What he said did not sound like a military man at all. He stressed that what the world most needs is peace based on loving compassion for all people. The need to be generous to others is often overridden, he said, by competitiveness, which he identified as the biggest social problem facing Thailand. The role of the Army is to provide for the development of the people. The Army should not, he said, bring about conflict. The job of the Army is to prevent conflict and to promote good governance.

The importance of this conference was underscored by the attendance of General Surayud Chulanont, the Prime Minister of Thailand. When he gave his speech I was impressed by his flawless command of the English language. I tend to think of the military as a conservative political force, but in Thailand the military seems to be pretty progressive. General Surayud is a popular leader, and in his speech he emphasized that the Buddha rejected the idea of god, and therefore no one elite group can claim any divine right to rule over another group. All people, he stressed, are equal in Buddhist religion. The big challenge facing a Buddhist country like Thailand, he said, is how to make the Buddha's message of peace and equality more widely known around the world.

Buddhists hesitate to criticize other religions, but some statements were made by some of the following speakers about the torture and murder of many Buddhist monks in southern Thailand by Muslim extremists. I saw some pretty gruesome photos of monks who had been slashed to death by violent Muslims. I talked with monks from Bangladesh, who said that violent attacks on Buddhist monks in their majority-Muslim nation are common, and that many Buddhist monks are being killed. This is not different than the way Muslims moved into India a thousand years ago, beheading Buddhists by the thousands and destroying Buddhist sacred sites and then building Islamic mosques on the ruins. I also heard criticism about many governments in the Middle East today not allowing Asian Buddhist guest workers (who sometimes lived there for years) to practice

freedom of religion while in that Islamic nation. It is hypocritical of the Muslims, one speaker said, to loudly protest their place in European nations, but then to turn around and deny freedom of religion to Buddhists in their own nations.

Later in the day Her Royal Highness Princess Sirivannavari Nariratana, the 22-year-old granddaughter of the King of Thailand, made her grand entry into the auditorium. Again she walked right by me, but the audience was ordered not to take any photos of the Princess. She was a pretty woman, but her expression was quite grim and she looked like she was not comfortable, and was only following the motions of what she was directed to do. But after her brief speech welcoming delegates she bowed at the feet of the Patriarch, and as she talked with him she started smiling. I don't know what he said to her but as she left the auditorium she was all smiles. The Patriarch must have some kind of means of making people happy, because I saw others smiling a lot after talking with him.

It is interesting that when the Princess entered all laypeople were expected to rise, but monks and nuns remained seated. As a member of the Royal Family, all government officials and military officers bow to her. But then she bows to the head monks. Even the King bows to the head monks. What this is designed to show is that everyone is below the Royal Family and the King, but the monks are above even the King. This reflects the almost sacred position of monks in Thai society. Everything in Thai religion centers around monks.

The big controversial issue relating to gender in Thai Buddhism is the position of nuns. In countries like Taiwan and South Korea nuns and monks are virtually equal in status and power. Nuns in many other nations, like Nepal and China, are making great strides toward equality. In sharp contrast, Thailand is way behind the times on the issue of gender. I spoke with a number of female nuns at this conference, and all of them agreed that nuns in Thailand are considered much less prestigious than monks. Women lay members are treated quite well in Thai Buddhism, but females who wish to follow a monastic life are just not as respected as male monks. This is justified as being due to the fact that the lineage of nuns from the time of the Buddha to today was broken many years ago in Thailand, and so a Thai nun cannot be ordained in Thailand. She can go to another nation and be ordained, and then come back to Thailand as an ordained nun, but that is not seen as legitimate as the ordination of a male monk.

Nuns do not have the prestige of monks. They have the reputation of going into the nunneries for reasons of being unable to attract a husband, or because of being brokenhearted by a man, or other reasons that imply a less than honorable motivation. As a consequence, most young women do not feel inspired to become a nun in the same way that young men are inspired to become a monk.

I think this lack of balance between nuns and monks is the great flaw in Thai Buddhism. Thai monasteries are much more accepting of gay monks than they are of female nuns. I found that Buddhist leaders from other nations were very critical of Thai Theravada monks for not promoting the equality of nuns and monks. There are progressive monks in Thailand who are calling for this change, and there is a big controversy in Thailand about the issue, but nothing much is happening. I do not think Theravada Buddhism will be able to spread much in the rest of the world until they settle this gender issue.

Part of my motivation to attend this conference was not only to learn more about Buddhist organizations but also to try to influence them to stand up strongly in favor of women's rights as well as gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender equality. Since the theme of the conference was on Buddhism's contribution to good governance, and since none of the other speakers had brought up this issue, I decided to speak up. Professors are highly respected in Asian cultures, and my status as a professor has opened many doors for me while in Thailand. I was granted some time in the program, and read a statement to the full general assembly of the conference at its morning session on May 28. Speaking in the context of discussions about how more effectively to spread Buddhist ideas around the world, to promote good governance, I made this statement:

AT THIS CONFERENCE I have been delighted and impressed that speaker after speaker has extolled the ideals of peace and happiness for everyone, human rights for everyone, and the absolute equality of all humankind. Yet what remained unsaid is that this commitment to absolute equality must include a commitment to the equality of women. Females are fifty percent of the world's population, yet all four of the world's major religions (Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism) come at the issue of gender from a patriarchal tradition.

This commitment to total equality is crucially related to the theme of this conference on good governance. Good governance is impossible if fifty percent of the population is shut out of the ability to participate in government on an equal level. I offer as the most glaring example the Islamic Taliban government in Afghanistan, which severely oppressed women and gave them *no* power in governance. I don't think there is anyone in the world, other than fundamentalist Muslims, who would claim that the Taliban practiced good governance. In contrast, look at the government of Finland, which is consistently rated by political scientists as the most effective and least corrupt government in the world. In Finland, a majority of elected officials are women. It is no accident that high participation of women on an equal level makes for good governance. How can there be good governance if half of the population is not adequately represented? Their concerns and issues are not brought up, or even thought about, if only men are in power.

Buddhism has the potential to drop this patriarchy much more easily than Hindus, Muslims, and Christians can, because our ethic is already committed to happiness for all people and holds that every sentient being has a sacred Buddha nature and deserves respect. And yet, even here in Thailand the position of nuns is hardly equal to the position of monks. Becoming a nun needs to be made just as attractive for young women as becoming a monk is for young men.

A genuine commitment to the absolute equality of all humanity also means equality within Buddhism for youth, for the elderly, for ethnic minorities, and for sexual minorities. In the United States, a significant factor in the spread of Buddhism is that ethnic minorities, as well as GLBT people, are attracted to the non-discriminatory ideals of Buddhism. In sharp contrast to the scriptures of Christianity and Islam, which are filled with condemnation of homosexuality and cross-dressing, Buddhism emphasizes happiness for all people. Buddhists are nondiscriminatory in action, but are largely silent on the rhetorical front. This commitment to human rights for women, youth, and sexual

minorities is what needs to be made explicit. If this is done, I predict that we will see a sharp increase in the numbers of Buddhists in the world.

In many cultures, women and girls are oppressed. In even more cultures, homosexuals and transgender people of all ages are subjected to discrimination, extreme violence, and even murder. The current Islamic government of Iran has on record executed several thousand people for the “crime” of homosexual behavior. Buddhists have to be the most prominent in standing up and saying this kind of mistreatment of people is wrong and has to stop.

I think it is crucial for the survival of humanity that Buddhism to spread as widely as possible in upcoming years. Otherwise, at the rate the world is going, especially in environmental degradation and global warming, I fear we have only a short time before catastrophe and collapse occur on a massive scale. Look at the vast increases in human populations in the world today. Only 75 years ago, the number of people in the world was two billion. Now, within the lifetime of a single person, the number has mushroomed to over six billion. No species can increase so drastically in numbers without massive impact on other species, and we see large numbers of species of animals becoming extinct as a direct result. Deforestation, water shortages, poverty, pollution and global warming, all are results of the recent human population explosion that is unprecedented in all of human history.

One of the main reasons for this drastic expansion of humanity is the strong notion of Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam that says that *everyone* should get married and produce children. That kind of thinking has led to the vast increase in human population that so overtaxes the resources of the world today. It is mainly Buddhism, of all the major religions, that offers an alternative model. What is that alternative model? The society of monks and another society of nuns, both of which should be equally available and have equal potential for everyone.

Having another respected and psychologically satisfactory alternative way to live life without getting married and reproducing, can be one among several ways that we can help to save the environment and the world. Our whole future as a species depends on Buddhists taking this right action right now.