

Interreligious Dialog Meeting of Religious Leaders in Japan -2013

In October of this year I was invited to participate in a meeting of religious leaders from around the world which took place in Kyoto and Osaka, October 25-27. The meeting was a joint venture sponsored by the GPIW (Global Peace Initiative of Women) and Shinnyo-en, an international Buddhist community (with around two million members) originally established in Japan in 1936. Sinnyo Buddhism is based on Mahaparinirvana Sutra which is considered the “final teaching” of the Buddha Shakuamuni. This set of teachings emphasizes that all people have the “seed” of enlightenment within them and by acting with compassion and concern for others, everyone can cultivate that seed and find their true self. Shinnyo-en now has a head priest who is a woman: Her Holiness Shinso Ito. H.H. Shinso Ito is very concerned to spread peace in the world through interreligious meetings and sharing. She also performs the Fire and Water ceremony for Peace in many parts of the world.

Our group met in Kyoto in a beautiful meditation center surrounded by a large Zen garden. The center itself was a former Ryokan with tatami mats and painted wall partitions, typical of Japanese temples. Our group was from all over the world, and from every tradition. We spent two fruitful days in informal dialog. One interesting thing, I found, was that on the question of “enlightenment” experiences, or (in our Christian context), moments of deep prayer, moments of grace, we were all in agreement that these moments are “given.” They are not something we can “make happen” ourselves.

On the third day, Oct. 27, we were taken to Yuon Sanctuary in Osaka. This was a massive building and the audience numbered 12,000 persons! The ceremony was also broadcasted to Shinnyo-en temples around the world. After partaking in the Fire and Light ceremony, a very moving experience, we had dinner followed by a panel of five persons, including myself. We each had 20 minutes to share a way of meditation from our own tradition. I spoke on *lectio divina*. This was to an audience of 2000 Buddhists. The reception to our panel was heartwarming. We felt they were so much with us, and eager to hear what we had to share. At the end, there was a long applause and as we left the room, they wanted to shake our hands or bow or have some sort of contact.

The next night we had our final banquet (although each meal seemed a banquet in itself) and then spent the final day visiting temples in Kyoto. This was a rich experience I will not forget. Some good friendships were formed with persons far and near. I am very grateful for the opportunity.

Sister GilChrist Lavigne, ocso Tautra Mariakloster, Norway



An article about H.H. Shinso Ito:

Today Shinnyo-en is led by Her Holiness Shinso Ito, Shinjo's direct successor. Shinso was born in Japan in 1942, the daughter of Shinjo and Tomoji. She began her formal Buddhist training as a child under the care of her parents, who were also her primary spiritual teachers, and eventually became their formal and spiritual successor. She was ordained in the Shinnyo tradition in 1966 and undertook her initial priestly training between 1970 and 1982. In 1984, Shinjo announced Shinso's accomplishment as his disciple and future successor. She is one of the few women to become a Buddhist master and attain the highest priestly rank of daisojo. Shinso has twice conducted

important services at Daigoji, the 9th-century Shingon monastery in Kyoto where Shinjo trained as a priest.

While Shinso draws inspiration from Buddhist tradition, she is profoundly aware that the teachings must be meaningful for people living today. She teaches an engaged form of Buddhism, that guides both the individual and Shinnyo-en as a whole. Shinso preserves the spirit of the founders of Shinnyo-en and guides people with her warmth and conviction. Her inspiring message of peace and enlightenment is infused with palpable joy and gentleness.

In recent years, Her Holiness has conducted ceremonies dedicated to peace and harmony between cultures and religions. She has also partnered with secular philanthropic foundations throughout the world, acting on her belief that all life is interconnected, and that Buddhism should actively engage in serving the global community. Shinso is also committed to assisting with disaster relief, humanitarian and medical aid, social welfare, women's empowerment, environmental protection, educational aid, the preservation of traditional culture, and the promotion of innovative artistic and cultural programs.