



Annual DTO Retreat 2024 Question and Answer Session with Thay

What a wonderful year-end retreat experience! With an opportunity to see many of our old friends, and meet new ones. The retreat included our mornings in noble silence, sitting meditation, walking meditation (indoors and outdoors), many prostrations ("Cardio Dharma"), chanting (Heart Sutra & Om Mani Padme Hum), reciting the 5 Precepts, beautiful ceremonies (Beginning Anew, Touching the Earth, Tea Ceremony, 3 Refuges/5 Precept recipient ceremony, receipt of Buddhist Institute class work certificates, and Priest ordinations), Membership meeting, updates from all Sanghas as well as updates on all DTO programs, especially our first year of the fully online Buddhist Institute, and, of course, the always lively Dharma Festival.

We were also afforded an opportunity to ask Thay questions about the practice in general, as well as specific symbols within the practice. Some of the questions/answers discussed were:

The Meaning of the Altar Components

- **The Bell** -- The bell is a symbol of compassion
- **Incense** -- Precepts, concentration, wisdom, liberation and knowledge of liberation
- **Candles** -- Symbolize the light of wisdom and compassion
- **Fruit** -- Cause and effect
- **Flowers** -- Impermanence

Mogkyo -- the drum used for chanting practices, particularly in the chanting of the Heart Sutra, is in the shape of a fish because fish eyes never close, indicating taking in all the wisdom of the teachings, and accompanies the bell, symbolizing compassion.

Prostrations -- we prostrate as a full body practice, symbolizing "giving of your all." The palms together in the form of a Lotus bud signify the begging for the Buddha's teachings. The palms are placed at the forehead first (indicating the engaging of our mind), then drop to the chin (indicating the practice of Right Speech), then falling to the chest (for Right Intention, engaging our hearts).

Bowing -- While we try to always bow to the Buddha, we also bow to each other, when we place our palms together at our hearts, again in the shape of a Lotus bud, and bow, signifying "I recognize the Buddha-to-be in you."

Sanghati -- The Sanghati (the brown over-robe worn by priests and monastics) symbolizes the patchwork of the farmlands that the Buddha, while sitting high on the mountain vista. The robes were then created in patches of cloth just like the patches of land the Buddha envisioned. (Continued on page 2)

Ordaining Lay Persons to Teach the Dharma--A question was posed as to why some Buddhist traditions ordain lay persons as dharma teachers, while others do not. They explained that back in the time of the Buddha, India's historic caste system restricted non-monastics from teaching the Dharma. The Buddha was trying to emphasize equanimity and that all beings were imbued with buddha nature. Buddha nature is the natural goodness that we all possess inherently; we do not have to work for it, we just need to understand that we have it. The Buddha taught that the four pillars of Buddhism included male monastics, female monastics, male lay priests and female lay priests. Therefore They has always followed that model within the Dharma Teacher Order he created.

Bodhicitta--the quality of the mind that aims to be awakened with wisdom and compassion for the benefit of all sentient beings. Bodhicitta is a quality that we work to develop and nurture in our quest to become bodhisattvas.

Significance of the Number 108= there are 36 afflictions and we try to be liberated from them in the past, present and future. The afflictions are: the 6 senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind); 3 feelings (happy, sad, neutral); 2 wholesome/unwholesome states; all which can appear in the 3 times (past, present or future). Therefore, $6 \times 3 \times 2 \times 3 = 108$.

Why the Online Course, the Buddhist Institute is Student-Taught--Another question asked was why our four-year Buddhist Institute course was not taught by ordained teachers within the DTO organization but by the students themselves. They stated that in many other formal academic settings, a professional teacher leads the class while students only passively listen. He believes that to have the student read the material and teach the class immerses the student in the material and allows them to reveal their own understanding of the material. Of course the students are also guided and mentored by ordained Dharma Teachers as well as monastics during this process to assist in understanding the material and revealing the true meaning of the teachings presented. This method also promotes a creative process as each student uses their own process to teach the material, as opposed to following some mandate forced upon them by the educational staff. They explained how other organizations, like Order of Interbeing for example, do not have structured curriculums in forming their Dharma teachers, but just recognize those who have, through time, shown their understanding of the Dharma and their skillful means of relaying it to others, and are then are granted the title of Dharma Teacher.

Prison Programs--They also talked about the uniqueness of our Prison ministry in that, apparently, other Buddhist prison programs are referring students to our Buddhist Correspondence Course due to its "comprehensive" coursework and mentoring. In addition to our written correspondence course, we have live support teams that go out to certain Units in Texas and other states in order to support Buddhist prison sanghas.

Submitted by Sondra Kaighen