

The 4th Global Conference on Buddhism: Confronting the Controversies – To Create a Better World.

They were humorous, inspiring, insightful and well informed. Dressed in red, yellow, brown or grey robes, about a hundred monks and nuns from the Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana traditions converged at the Perth Convention and Exhibition Centre on June 10 and 11 to give their views on contemporary and prevailing Buddhist issues. Joining them were other renowned speakers, including voluntary euthanasia campaigner Dr. Philip Nitschke, Buddhist author Vicki MacKenzie, former Western Australia Premier Dr. Geoff Gallop, and President for Public Affairs in the Buddhist Fellowship, Angie Monksfield.

The conference was divided up into six sub-themes: Fundamentalism, The Future of Buddhism, Women in Buddhism, the Bodhisattva and Arahant Ways, different types of meditation, and Politics and Euthanasia. With the diversity of traditions represented and the differences in opinion heard, it appeared that the conference would deliver on its theme of ‘Confronting the Controversies’. At least, that was what the ‘cheeky monk’ and conference convener Ajahn Brahm was hoping for.

‘I like to stir things up,’ he said, and in some ways he did. Several raised their brows when he introduced the Perth GALS (Gay and Lesbian Singers) to the stage; some were visibly disturbed when two ‘scantily-clad’ female singers took to the stage to sing a Buddhist song in the closing ceremony. The concerns perhaps highlighted many male sangha members’ views on women, an issue Ajahn Brahm addressed in a speech following the session on Women in Buddhism.

In an effort to introduce humour to Buddhism, Ajahn Brahm also worked with a Melbourne comedian in conducting an on-stage interview, with ‘John Howard’, represented by the comedian’s puppet. In response to Ajahn Brahm’s question of what he was doing at a Buddhist conference, ‘John Howard’ replied that Buddhism was the only religion where he could possibly be reincarnated as Prime Minister of Australia. He also said that euthanasia would be acceptable in extreme cases, for example, for all the members of the opposition.

Frivolities aside, some speakers delivered chilling conclusions. ‘The systems analysts say that as a species, we have a maximum of twenty-five to thirty years. If

we don’t transform our consciousness and our consumer habits, we are simply not going to make it’, said Dr. Karma Lekshe Tsomo.

Dr. Karma’s speech echoed the common perception that Buddhism is too passive a religion in light of its focus on meditation and spiritual attainment, rather than active engagement with society. Venerable Ajahn Sujato, by contrast, put forward the view that spiritual attainment was not always coupled with solitude, citing an example of a well realised monk who actively contributed to society. Passivity was also an idea picked up in the session on fundamentalism, with Dr. Geoff Gallop conceding that in his experience as a politician, it might be necessary to use force if all other peaceful alternatives had been exhausted.

The conference was well attended, with approximately 900 people turning up over the two days.

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