

Elephants and Tigers: The Whole World Is a Single Flower Tour in India

Jo Potter JDPSN

It was Zen Master Seung Sahn's vision that the Kwan Um School of Zen would organize the Whole World Is a Single Flower conference every three years. India had been chosen as the destination for the conference in 2011. Zen Master Soeng Hyang, successor to Zen Master Seung Sahn, began in May 2009 to consider what kind of team could plan and carry out the conference in India in 2011. She envisioned a team that would "not let the ball drop," a team that would work independently and be self-motivated. She was very clear that the *feeling* of "The Whole World Is a Single Flower" would best emerge through an international team of teachers and students.



The team that came together included two teachers and three students: Carlos Montero, representing the North American sanghas; George Hazlbauer, representing the European sanghas; Grace Tam, representing the Asian sanghas; and Zen Master Bon Haeng and myself, representing the teachers' group. We chose not to have a chairperson. Each of us simply committed to doing the best we could in our areas. It was interesting to note that the teacher and student roles dropped away almost immediately and we became a team of five people each doing what we were best at.

Zen Master Bon Haeng (Mark) would sit quietly during the meetings, encouraging us to stick to clear priorities. He was also a wiz at the finances during the actual trip. Grace was likewise a wiz with organizing the travel details in Hong Kong and keeping track of participants. George gravitated toward all things technical, while I gravitated toward designing the program and wrote the letters and minutes for the meetings. Carlos had incredibly clear commentaries and vision, and ended up being the best master of ceremonies ever during the actual trip. We laughed often and respected each other's opinions—no matter how wacky they might have been. We grew toward each other and came to know each other well over the two years of preparation time. For me this time was a precious example of the direction of our school: people working together for others. I wouldn't have missed these two years for anything!

Something really funny happened at the first meeting. We tried to convince everyone to change the destination from India to somewhere "more comfortable, safe and known" and where there would be a Kwan Um School of Zen community waiting for us. But deep down inside we understood that this was an awesome chance to grow beyond the mind, which wants to remain safe and comfortable and in familiar surroundings.

It helped that one of the great teachers of the school, Zen Master Dae Bong, sent an e-mail stating that: "Korea or some known place for the WWSF trip would be okay but I feel that for this WWSF we ought to do something that has an effect beyond our group!"

Zen Master Dae Bong's wise words sealed India as our destination. And there was no doubt that going to India would be an adventure to look forward to and which would present all kinds of challenges. The team was now focused

and we began wholeheartedly. At this point we were already mentally on the way to the “Land of Primary Point,” the land where our Zen practice had started—even though the conference was still two years away.

But where would we start? Four of us had never been to India, and I had been there 30 years ago. Zillions of questions appeared. Our initial meetings were filled with imagining all the things that could go wrong, as well as discussing the fun stuff: traveling through this mystical land where Buddha was born, taught and died. What did the Bodhi Tree look like, and how would it feel to sit under it? We learned that we would visit the caves where Shariputra and Ananda practiced, trudging up Vulture Peak, visiting myriads of Buddhist temples and meeting the people of India. What would Varanasi look like? And what about the boats on the Ganges River? We were going to the land of kong-ans, the land of the Heart Sutra and Primary Point!

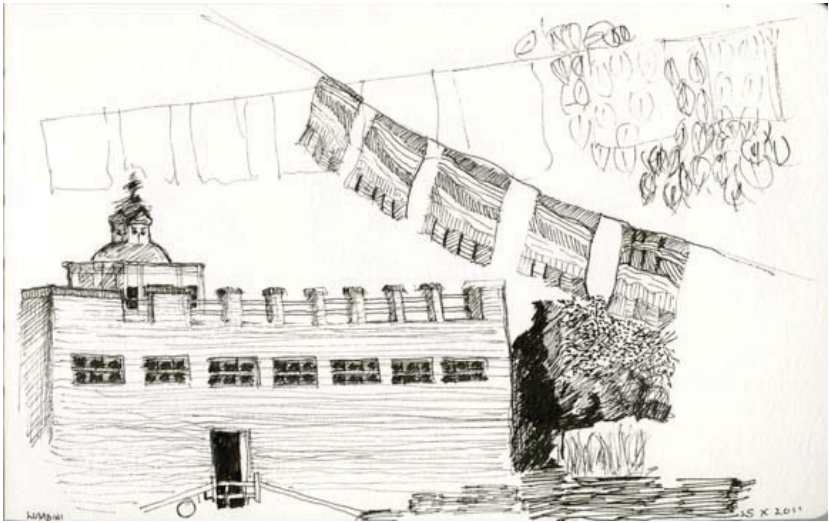
We thoroughly evaluated setting up a Whole World Is a Single Flower conference like all the previous ones: structured around talks given by teachers invited from the greater sangha, with some entertainment in the evenings. But it turned out impossible to tailor this huge unknown India into an already known pattern.

Finally with the green light given by Zen Master Soeng Hyang, the School Zen Master and Guiding Teacher for the Kwan Um School, the team agreed to the following setup:

This Whole World Is a Single Flower event will be a pilgrimage and practice trip. The conference will be the 11-day trip in its entirety, where we start in Varanasi with a welcoming dinner and orientation. There will be dharma talks, chanting and lots of practice led by different Zen masters in our school along the way in places like Sarnath, Bodhgaya, Vulture Peak and many others. The final stop—the Korean temple in Lumbini—will be where we will have some dharma talks, sharing and completion. In this case one day for the official part of the conference will be enough.

A very important part of our Zen teaching is to stay flexible and keep a wide-open mind to the arising situation. The Buddha used skillful means to teach all dharmas. Skillful means here meant setting aside any previous ideas of past conferences and completely opening to a very different kind of event.

Of course, practical things loomed huge on our horizon: How many people would actually come? Which month should we go? Where would everyone sleep? What kinds of things would we need to know about traveling to India? What kind of program should we design? How much should each person pay? Who would be our contact people in India?



How would we transport everyone from point to point? And what about the advertisement, the Web site and logos? And of course hundreds of other details.

I noticed that team coalesced quickly, arranging itself like the five fingers of the hand, which allowed all of the energy to be projected to the planning. Once the inner mind was focused and the team had gelled together, the details were easy to fix.

Really great help came from so many people not on our team. Elisa, a student in Berlin, would e-mail, telling us she was in India and asking if we needed anything to be researched. Another student, Arthur Collins, was often in India and sending reports to George, as well as soothing our worries. Zen Master Dae Jin, who lives in Korea, went to Lumbini to talk to the abbot and arrange the details of our stay. Frances in Hong Kong worked on the beautiful programs, and Katka Grofova in Hungary designed the logo with the elephants. Cat in the United States designed the very useful Web site. And many more brought pieces of the big puzzle to us. Zen Master Dae Kwan, head of Su Bong Zen Monastery in Hong Kong, helped enormously with ideas of day-to-day activities during the trip. And all of the teachers on the trip committed immediately to give the dharma talks. I heartily thank all of these wonderful people for their generous offerings!

The years went by and after about 70 Skype sessions and more than 600 e-mails, the team Skyped for the last time on October 11: George in the Czech Republic, Grace in Hong Kong, Carlos in Miami, Zen Master Mark in Boston and myself in Berlin. We surrendered our plans to the unknown and got ready for the reality of India. We discussed last-minute cancellations with sadness and welcomed new participants with happiness. Then we boarded airplanes from our different nations and flew to India, the land of the Enlightened One, the land of the Dharma of the Enlightened One and the land of the Sangha of the Enlightened One.

We couldn't wait to meet our beloved sangha family members in Varanasi, all 88 of them! ♦