

# Behind the Scenes of the Twelfth Whole World Is a Single Flower International Zen Conference

Hoeh Beng Buddhist Temple

*Already one year has passed since the conference was held. It was held in such a smooth manner despite its shift to an online platform during the preparatory process. Primary Point sent a set of questions for the organizers to reflect on. We asked them to reflect especially on the power of working together during the process—because without people coming together and working together, it would have been difficult to manage such a big event. Five organizing members had a Zoom meeting to reflect on the questions.*

**Question:** The Whole World Is a Single Flower 2020 was the first WWSF conference that was held online. How many people joined the conference? Where were they from?

**Do Hwa Sunim, chief coordinator:** After two-and-a-half years of preparation and promotion, the conference attracted the attention of Zen practitioners from more than twenty-five countries. The number of registrants for the conference was more than a thousand, and the average number of attendees was 680 for every session.

**Q:** What do you consider to be the best gift you received from organizing the conference online?

**Chuan Wen Sunim JDPS, guiding teacher:** Our technical team has gained much experience from hosting WWSF 2020 online, and that gave us confidence in conducting other events online. After WWSF 2020, members of the technical team have stayed committed to supporting other online programs of the temple, and have become a

great pool of expertise for the temple. We have even received requests from other local Buddhist organizations for advice and support in holding and hosting events through an online platform. We are very happy to help them.

Also, the online conference allowed people to transcend geographical boundaries. We welcomed not only local participants but also many from China, Taiwan, and Singapore. Of course, members of the Kwan Um School of Zen (KUSZ) from places such as Korea, the United States, and Europe joined also. There were also participants who did not know about the Kwan Um School. They had the opportunity to learn about the school's teachings for the first time.

**Looi Wei Li, head of the conference program subcommittee:** We can now connect with Zen practitioners all around the world, even with people from some countries who are restricted from entering Malaysia. The switch to having the conference online has helped us to realize our vow to spread the spirit of the Whole World Is a Single Flower to every corner of the world.

**Q:** Could you share the participants' feedback about the conference?

**Chuan Wen Sunim:** A nun from Taiwan told me that the answers and sharing by Tim Lerch JDPSN were full of Zen. An example she quoted was during the Q&A when a participant asked, "What do you mean by the receiving culture?" Tim replied, "I have received your question." She

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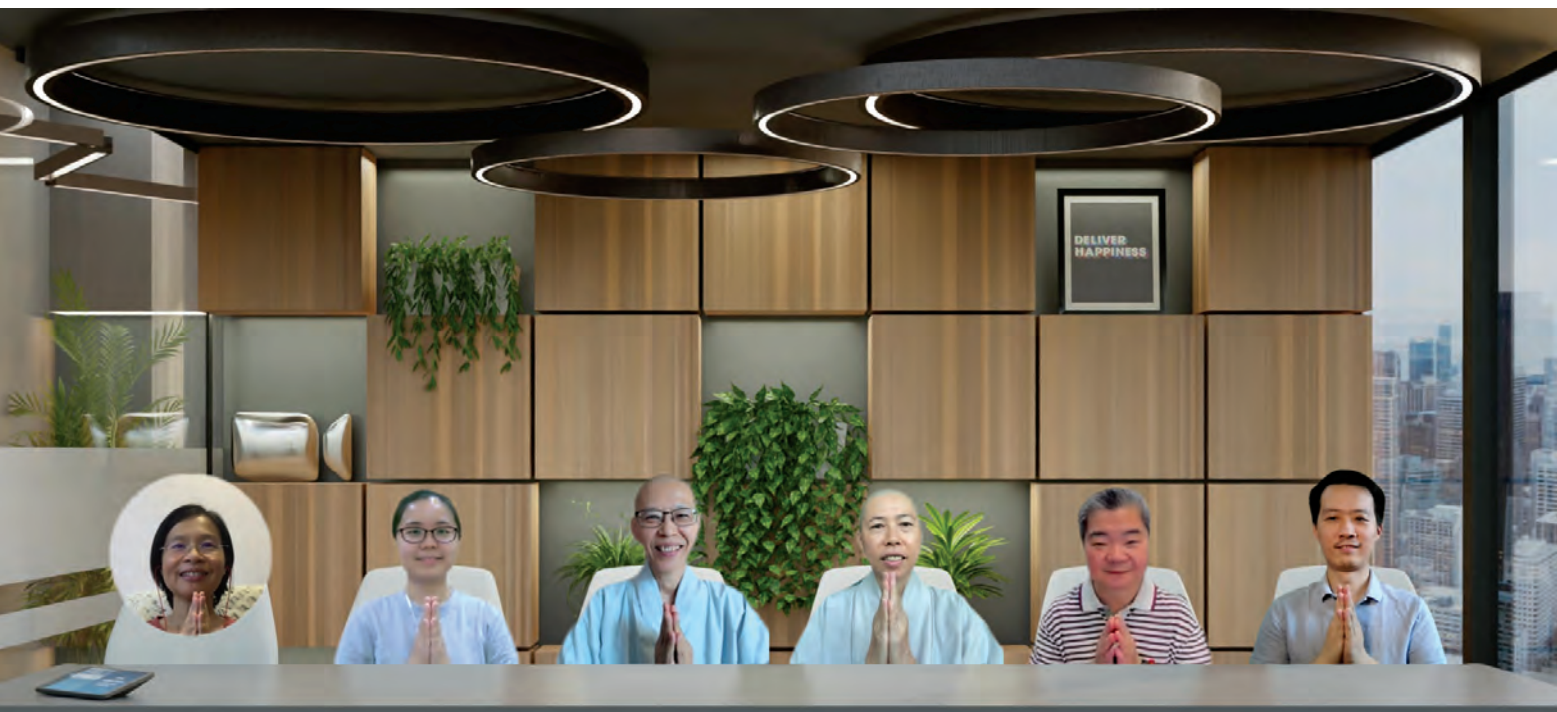


Photo: Hoeh Beng Buddhist Temple

said at that moment she truly tasted what Zen was.

Another participant observed during our teachers' talks that Zen practice was intrinsic in their lives—Zen is in everyday living, and everyday living is Zen. He realized that the teachers were not imparting knowledge, but rather they were sharing the experience of their practice.

This conference helped many people understand and have confidence in the teachings of the Kwan Um School, which was one of the objectives of the conference. After the conference ended in October 2020, I started a Zen meditation class for beginners, which now has about sixty participants. Most of them applied to join after their experience with the conference.

**Looi Wei Li:** We have also received much positive feedback from the organizing committees and volunteers. They were impressed with the simplicity and practicality of the Zen teachings shared by our teachers, as well as the smooth running of the events.

**Q:** We would love to hear about your journey in organizing the conference. Do Hwa Sunim mentioned you took two-and-a-half years to prepare and promote the conference. What did you do? And more important, how did you do it? How many people were involved in the preparation?

**12] Do Hwa Sunim:** When we received the decision from the Kwan Um School that Hoeh Beng Buddhist Temple would host the conference, we made it a long-term project. It included a fundraising “piggy bank” project, which was launched as the first program of a series. In 2018, we focused on the introduction of Zen teachings and the conference itself. And in 2019, the emphasis was to further increase the public awareness and appreciation of our school's teachings. We organized a number of activities: volunteer's camp, workshop, kido, and dharma talks with our school's teachers.

**Ng Siau Sun, secretary:** The initial organizing committee consisted of thirteen subcommittees and eighteen

committee members. We were all so excited to host—but alas! COVID-19 hit.

Soon afterward, the organizing committee decided to apply to have the conference online, and it was approved by the school. We regrouped quickly. Naturally, many of the subcommittees were replaced by a big online conference tech team, which consisted mostly of younger committee members. Under the guidance of Chuan Wen Sunim, Do Hwa Sunim, and the organizing chairperson, Datuk Lim Kee Ling, the tech team put in a great effort to make the online conference a reality.

**Looi Wei Li:** The tech team was formed in June 2020, three months before the online conference, with fifteen members. In the three months of preparation, we explored many platforms for online events and finally decided on using Zoom. We provided technical advice on the event flow, arranged the workforce and planned the execution. Our weekly online live events served as an ideal training ground for the online conference tech team.

Many people may be surprised to know that there were about forty-five volunteers on duty during every session of the online conference, including people in charge of hosting, screen sharing, recording, the chat room, the Q&A admin, timekeeper, technical support for participants, and local and international interpreters. It took good planning and clear instructions from the head of the tech team, plus much cooperation and commitment from the volunteers, to make this online conference a success. This is the power of together action and the beauty of the practice.

**Q:** What were the difficulties that you encountered along the way? How did you overcome those obstacles?

**Lim Kee Leng, organizing chairperson:** We were fortunate that we did not encounter many difficulties in terms of interaction or communication. I attribute this to the frequent reminders by Chuan Wen Sunim of the spirit of “just do it” and the mindset of “we are all dharma protectors, so count me in!” The global COVID-19 pandemic posed the first real challenge we faced in organiz-



*Photo: Hoeh Beng Buddhist Temple*





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ing the conference. We had to make a decision to cancel the in-person conference in March 2020. Luckily, we had confidence to move the conference to online only, because we already had experience holding online programs.

**Ng Siau Sun:** We had a team of interpreters who had started to train for the online conference three months in advance, but the rest of the interpreters had joined more recently. At a rehearsal less than two weeks before the conference, Chuan Wen Sunim requested that the new interpreters be reassigned to interpret only for the emcee and moderators. She observed that these interpreters were not ready to interpret for the main speakers, and more experienced interpreters should take over for the benefit of those who understood only Mandarin. This change caused unhappiness among the interpreters. And as the team leader I felt particularly bad, because I had disappointed those members who were replaced. But the objective of our team was clear: to benefit the participants from the teachings of the speakers. When we were reminded of the objective, we put aside our disappointment and unhappiness and did our part to support those who were on duty.

**Q:** Is there something you have learned from this experience that you would like to share with us? Are there changes in your life or practice after the conference?

**Ng Siau Sun:** I see that Zen practitioners, even guiding teachers and Zen masters, differ in upbringing, cultures, personalities, interests, and preferences, but we see that we are one when we put down the differences and work toward the same objective. It has reminded me that whomever I work with, we are a single flower. I accept that we are different, but I don't see the differences as conflicts.

**Loui Wei Li:** I got to meet and learn from many teachers who shared their different experiences and unique teaching styles. But all experiences shared and teaching styles point to the same thing – don't know. This is the best illustration of the Whole World Is a Single Flower. I see the faith, dedication and a heart of "How may I help you?" in all the teachers. I see the light of true freedom and happiness shining from within them. Moment to moment, how may I help you?

**Lim Kee Leng:** For me, the most beneficial thing I attained is greater insight into the teachings of the Kwan Um School—most notably through the various sharings and teachings of Zen masters, Ji Do Poep Sas, and speakers throughout the conference, especially on how to apply Zen in everyday life, and also in addressing the current global issues. It has inspired me to be more diligent in my Zen practice.

**Do Hwa Sunim:** Through this conference, I have had the opportunity to frequently and closely interact with teachers and other sangha members from the Kwan Um School. It has helped me to gain an in-depth understanding and appreciation of together action. Just like the Whole World Is a Single Flower, we are indeed one.

**Q:** Could you please give some words to conclude?

**Chuan Wen Sunim:** This end is another beginning. We are most grateful to the Kwan Um School of Zen for giving us the opportunity and providing us full support in hosting the conference. It was an opportunity for us to experience the teachings of Zen Master Seung Sahn: together action; putting down our own ideas; situations, and opinions; only go straight with a clear direction; and just do it. ♦