



WORLD OF **THOUGHT** WORLD OF **SPIRIT** WORLD OF **ACTION**



HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL

2007
YEAR IN REVIEW

BUDDHIST ARTS OF MINISTRY AND LEADERSHIP

TEACHING AND ADAPTING MEDITATIVE SKILLS



CHERYL GILES
JANET GYATSO

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WHEN MORE THAN 50 PEOPLE SHOWED UP FOR WHAT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A 15-STUDENT SEMINAR, “BUDDHIST ARTS OF MINISTRY AND LEADERSHIP,” THE TWO HDS PROFESSORS OFFERING THE COURSE KNEW THAT THEIR INSTINCTS WERE RIGHT.

“There is a groundswell of student interest in Buddhism, which reflects the increasing interest in the culture at large,” said Cheryl Giles, Francis Greenwood Peabody Professor of the Practice in Pastoral Care and Counseling, who co-taught the yearlong course in 2006-07 (subtitled “Teaching and Adapting Meditative Skills”) with Janet Gyatso, Hershey Professor of Buddhist Studies. The course is part of a larger “Buddhist Ministry” set of courses which is in the process of being developed at HDS precisely to address the ongoing interests and needs of students in this area.

Giles and Gyatso ended up allowing 20 students in the class, who ranged in age from 21 to 78, and were an “exceptionally diverse and talented group in terms of their life experiences, and their own meditation experience,” Giles said. Though many students came with experience in Tibetan, Zen, or Insight meditation, Giles stressed, “for these students, it is not about using meditation for personal self-care, but about making use of meditation in their ministries.”

The theme of the class, Gyatso noted, was to study “how Buddhist meditation is being adapted in contemporary Buddhist ministry practice in the world and the United States.” Students were encouraged to explore the diversity of Buddhist practices in the past

and present, and to discuss questions such as “In what ways is a practice considered ‘Buddhist?’” and “Who does Buddhism speak to and why?”

Among the students were a man who intends to go to rabbinical school, several students who intend to be ordained in Protestant denominations (UCC, United Methodist, and Unitarian), and an artist who hopes to integrate art with meditation.

Gyatso, who came to fill the Hershey chair at HDS in 2001, only ever intended to teach Buddhism from a historical perspective, but soon discovered that some students wanted to practice Buddhist ministry in Buddhist centers in the U.S. and in Asian Buddhist countries. Others wanted to incorporate Buddhist techniques into their own ministries. “This school has long had a first rate, progressive ministry program, but in a loosely Christian mode,” Gyatso explained. “I started to think we should consider offering more pluralistic training for ministry.” And after all, Gyatso said, offering a program in Buddhist ministry is in keeping with HDS’s charter mission to “produce a learned ministry.”

Events conspired to support the creation of alternative tracks in ministry, including the school-wide effort to rework all of its degree programs, including the MDiv curriculum. Giles said that the ongoing work of the Diversity Committee was also important, as was Gyatso’s “visionary” convocation address in September 2003.

Rather than rushing into the idea, Gyatso decided to hold two years of an open colloquium for interested students and faculty to discuss how to go about creating a Buddhist ministry program. “We needed to



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discuss the pitfalls and problems, as well as the benefits,” she said. Gyatso knew she would need the support of someone in the ministry faculty, so she enlisted the help of Giles, who herself has knowledge of contemporary Buddhist communities and brings a wealth of contacts from her work with at-risk adolescents.

By the end of these fruitful discussions, the course was created and contacts were made with Buddhist scholars and practitioners within and outside of Harvard, including Zen Master (Roshi) Bernie Glassman, a world-renowned leader in the American Zen movement who is teaching a course at HDS in fall 2007 entitled “Buddhist Arts of Ministry in the Zen Peacemakers Order.” Glassman is engaged in an effort to establish Zen houses in U.S. inner cities.

Both Giles and Gyatso said they were surprised by how well their own course progressed, given that it was a first go-round, but student feedback indicated that they found the course to be “powerful and effective.” “There were really no nay-sayers,” Giles said.

Through the connection with Glassman, who is in the final stages of establishing a lay ministry program in his own Zen denomination, Gyatso hopes HDS students will soon be able to follow a Buddhist ministry track at

HDS that is similar to the kind of arrangement many Protestant denominations allow. “Students would complete their academic training in the MDiv program here, and then receive further ministry training with his organization to achieve lay ordination,” she said. “We’re simply tapping into a movement already afoot in Buddhist communities.”

Buddhism already has a powerful presence in the world of medicine and psychology, Gyatso said, with various hospice and chaplaincy movements being particularly influenced by Buddhist ideas. “A generation ago, people may have thought that it was just a fad, but now it’s clear that Buddhism is here to stay in the West,” Gyatso said.

