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## alaysia: Banners and Music

by Elizabeth Turner

**B**ecause Singapore canceled its permission and Malaysia allowed for only an abbreviated pilgrimage, we had almost a month to make individual pilgrimages within India, to Darjeeling, Rajasthan, Rajgir, Bombay and other cities. Some chose to make personal retreats in Malaysia and Thailand during this time. Reverend Sasamori and a few other pilgrims went to Singapore and offered prayers at the Kranji cemetery and the citizen's war memorial there.

We came together in Penang, an island city of Malaysia, on April 20th. Dr. Vidya K.V. Soon of the Community of Dharmafarers and Dr. Latif Kamaluddin of the University of Malaysia were our hosts, with hospitality provided by the Malaysian Buddhist Association Center in Penang. Buddhist nuns live and take classes at the Center. Each morning at 5:00 a.m., we lay "asleep" on the upper floor listening to their melodious antiphonal chanting, accented



Photo: Bill Ledger

**Ceremony at  
war memorial  
commemorating  
invasion of  
Japanese military,  
Penang, Malaysia**

**Each morning at 5:00 a.m., we lay “asleep” on the upper floor listening to their melodious antiphonal chanting, accented with drums, chimes and bells.**

with drums, chimes and bells. We would gather an hour later in front of our portable interfaith altar for prayer.

As a result of foreign industry having been invited in, there is toxic waste, and the government is trying to institute environmental protection laws but is not trying hard enough. Condominiums and golf courses are a part of the developmental picture. Sixty percent of Malaysia’s population is under twenty-five years of age, with large numbers between eighteen and twenty-five. The youth is strongly influenced by the consumer culture. The official religion is Islam, while about 45% of the population, mainly Chinese, are Buddhists.

Consumer groups, with women as leaders and activists, have been active since 1969 educating and monitoring development so that a multi-ethnic society can live in peace and harmony. They educate the people about consumer products coming into their country—whether they will contribute to the quality of life or damage the health of individuals and the environment. They work for land rights of farmers and monitor toxic waste from mining operations and other profit-driven industries.

Elections were coming soon and political banners were everywhere. We prayed and offered incense at the Second World War Memorial in Penang which was festooned with strings of flags displaying party emblems. The twenty-foot tall stone column seemed forgotten and ill-placed until Mr. Fong, a World War II Chinese survivor, was moved to speak but could only weep. After the tears had washed

through the memories of fifty years, Mr. Fong gave a simple, moving talk about the meaning of our being there. He said we were the first international group that had ever come to the memorial and this gave him hope. One by one, the pilgrims expressed their thoughts and emotions in prayers and statements of peace. Some of the Japanese pilgrims wept as Mr. Fong had also spoken of the cruel treatment of the Chinese by Japanese soldiers during the war.

We walked to the base of the monument where we placed sticks of burning incense. Vidya, our guide, then led us in a walk around the memorial, weaving in and out and under the election banners, with the youngest going first. The chanting and beat of the drums rose with the incense among the fluttering banners, reaching beyond politics to the spirits we commemorated. Was it a prayer to end all wars or an early Maypole dance celebrating life?