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Buddhism and A Culture of Peace

by

Michael Yap Gan Chuan

Introduction

Firstly, many congratulations to Asian Media Information & Communication Centre Ltd (AMIC) for hosting this very significant Symposium just before the dawn of the New Millennium. Secondly, on behalf of Singapore Soka Association I would like to extend our deepest appreciation to Dr Sankaran Ramanathan of AMIC for the invitation to take part in this Symposium on "Facilitating Asian Media in Promoting a Culture of Peace."

It is estimated that in the ten years following the end of the Cold War in 1989, more than fifty states underwent the wrenching drama of violent conflict, division or independence. These wars claimed some four million lives.

As part of the global effort to transform the tragic legacy of the twentieth century, the United Nations has designated the first decade of the new century (2001-2010) the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World. In this sense, we have a truly unique opportunity to muster the will of the international community and to initiate action that will transform the age-old "culture of war" into a new culture of peace.

Seen in this light, the 3 days' Symposium on "Facilitating Asian Media in Promoting a Culture of Peace" is timely and important. The objective of the symposium "to examine and develop strategies that promote and sustain a culture of peace" is laudable, bold and vision inspiring.

We are in so many ways infants when it comes to our cooperative

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1 A local Buddhist movement in Singapore which promotes peace, culture and education based on the teachings of Nichiren, a 13th century Buddhist from Japan to advance the happiness of people, and peace and harmony in society.
capacity for peaceful co-existence, for building a global society congenial to the life of the planet and responsive to the human spirit.

We need fresh ways of thinking about the issues. We need new ways of interaction to find solutions to the greatest challenges of our times. We need to transform the culture of war and violence into a culture of peace.

I hope that the dialogue that is taking place in this beautiful capital of Manila will plant seeds in the Asian media to promote a Culture of Peace. I also pray that this Symposium will assist in building a culture of peace to reverse the tragic trends that had happened in the last few decades.

**Culture of Peace**

The UNESCO Charter states, "Wars begin in the minds of men." So it is a change in our way of thinking that is required, a shift of emphasis. It is time to remember that nothing is more precious than life.

How do we transform the culture of war to the culture of peace? This would be one of the greatest challenges of humankind. From one perspective, Elise Boulding in her book "Culture of Peace - The Hidden Side of History" attempts to give a definition. She writes:

"Put in the simplest possible terms, a peace culture is a culture that promotes peaceable diversity. Such a culture includes lifeways, patterns of beliefs, values, behavior, and accompanying institutional arrangements that promote mutual caring and well-being as well as an equality that includes appreciation of difference, stewardship, and equitable sharing of the earth’s resources among its members with all living beings. It offers mutual security for humankind in all its diversity through a profound sense of species identity as well as kinship with the living earth. There is no need for violence. In other words, peaceableness is an action concept, involving a constant shaping and reshaping of understandings, situations, and behaviors in a constantly changing lifeworld, to
sustain well-being for all."

Johan Galtung, the pioneer of peace studies offers a definition of peace from another perspective. By peace he means something dynamic. Inherent in peace is, of course, the reduction of violence. Peace is not just passive peace. Peace is not just the absence of conflict or war. You can have structural violence in a country even in the absence of war, The violence is frozen into the structure and the culture legitimizes the structure to accept violence to children or women.

A more dynamic understanding of peace, however, refers to the ability to transform conflict in a creative and non-violent manner. It does not mean shunning or denying conflict, but transforming it.

President Daisaku Ikeda2 of Soka Gakkai International, my mentor in life and Buddhism has constantly raised the issue of how to create an enduring culture of peace? What is a culture of peace? What is the difference between the culture of war and the culture of peace?

He elaborates and says that culture manifests two contrasting aspects. "One resonates with the original sense of the word "culture" and involves the cultivation of the inner life of human beings and their spiritual elevation. The other is the aggressive, invasive imposition of one people's manners and mores on another, inscribing there a sense of resentment and sowing the seeds of future conflict. In this case, culture serves not the cause of peace, but the cause of war." 

Whether we can be successful in generating a culture of peace hinges on several factors. We must first succeed in transcending the excessive attachment to difference that is deeply rooted in the psychology of

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2 DAISAKU IKEDA was born in 1928 in Tokyo, Japan, and joined the Soka Gakkai ("Society for the Creation of Value") at age 19. As a disciple of second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda, Ikeda worked for more than a decade to develop the organization's peace, culture, and education movement. After Toda's death in 1958, Ikeda succeeded him as Soka Gakkai president, and in 1975 he became founding president of Soka Gakkai International (SGI). He is a prolific author and is the recipient of numerous awards, including the United Nations Peace Award and The International Tolerance Award of the Simon Wiesenthal Center. His annual peace proposals, issued each year on the anniversary of the founding of SGI, review the state of the world and suggest practical initiatives grounded in Buddhist philosophy.
individuals; and we must conduct dialogue on the basis of our common humanity. I believe that only by confronting this intensely difficult challenge can we transform our societies and ourselves.

The Buddhist Humanism

I would like to touch on two key points in the Buddhist philosophy namely (1) the need for dialogue and (2) the interdependence and interrelationship of all things. I believe that these two points can serve as the philosophical and ethical framework to assist in the formulation of approaches and strategies to promote a Culture of Peace in the twenty-first century.

The foundation of the Buddhist spirit of humanism is respect for all life, which discerns an incomparably precious "Buddha nature" inherent not only in humankind but in all living beings.

In the Lotus Sutra, the Buddhist scripture most widely known, respected, and influential among the peoples of Asia, Shakyamuni Buddha elucidates the one great reason a Buddha appears in this world.

In the Expedient Means (Hoben) chapter, he explains that his mission as a Buddha is to open the door of Buddha-wisdom to all beings and fulfill his pledge to raise all beings to his own enlightened life-state.

Nichiren, who appeared in Japan in the thirteenth century and established an accessible, populist Buddhism, was seeking to realize this same commitment to enable all people to open for them the door of Buddha-wisdom. In one of Nichiren's writing, he writes:

"The Hoben chapter [of the Lotus Sutra] states: "At the start I pledged to make all people perfectly equal to me without any distinction between us. By now the original vows that I made have already been fulfilled. I have led all the people on the path of Buddhahood." The enlightened life of Shakyamuni Buddha is our flesh and blood. His
practices and resulting virtues are our bones and marrow."

(The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, Vol. 1, 64.)

Buddhist Emphasis on Dialogue

Daisaku Ikeda of SGI is a person who "walks the talk" of promoting the values of peace and culture. It was just a quarter of a century ago, in 1974 that he paid his first visit to China. A little girl asked him: "Why have you come here?" Daisaku Ikeda told her: "I came here to meet you."

Some three months later, during his first visit to the Soviet Union, Premier Alexei N. Kosygin asked him, "what is his basic ideology?". He replied: "We are committed to the values of peace and culture- the underlying basis of which is humanism." After travelling to more than 54 countries engaging with people in all form of dialogues to promote peace, culture and education he concludes:

"I have come to realize that, regardless of differences in outlook or ideology, so long as people share the common aim of working for the happiness and lasting peace of all humanity we can invariably reach an understanding of one another as human beings and open the door to solidarity based on friendship and trust."

The stance of a Buddhist is always to see things from the standpoint of respecting and trusting in other human beings. I believe that mutual understanding is always possible when we conduct dialogue from the common ground of our shared humanity. This is the spirit of a Buddhist and it is this kind of spirit that should motivate a Buddhist in his behavior as a human being.

Buddhist practice is based on compassion. The word compassion in Japanese is written with two Chinese characters, ji and hi. Ji corresponds to metta in Pali and maitri in Sanskrit, and conveys the meaning of "true friendship," while hi represents karuna in both languages, and conveys the meaning of "sympathy" or "shared feeling."
Thus, in Buddhism, compassion signifies the sublime endeavor to share the suffering of another from the stance of our common humanity and to create an expanding network of genuine friendship and trust.

The compassion, which Shakyamuni Buddha demonstrated through his behavior, is elaborated and extolled in the Mahayana tradition as the Bodhisattva Way - a profound and unshakable humanism. The SGI, which is headed by Daisaku Ikeda is a body committed to developing activities in the areas of peace, culture and education based on this Buddhist humanism.

Since it inception, the philosophy of Buddhism has been associated with peace and pacifism. The emphasis derives principally from the consistent rejection of violence combined with stress on dialogue and discussion as the best means of resolving conflict. Until the last moment of his life, Shakyamuni actively sought out dialogue.

Why was Shakyamuni Buddha able to employ language with such mastery and freedom and rely on dialogue to transform conflicts creatively? A simple quote will illustrate the point: "I perceived a single invisible arrow piercing the hearts of the people." The "arrow" symbolizes a prejudicial mindset, an unreasoning emphasis on individual differences. To the Buddha 's penetrating gaze, it was clear that the underlying cause of the conflict was attachment to distinctions, to ethnic, national, and other differences. Therefore the conquest of our own prejudicial thinking, our own attachment to difference, is the necessary precondition for open dialogue. Such discussion, in turn, is essential for the establishment of peace and universal respect for human rights.

It was Shakyamuni Buddha 's complete absence of prejudice that enabled him to expound Buddhism with such freedom, adapting his style of teaching to the character and capacity of the person to whom he was speaking.

Only by overcoming attachment to differences can a religion rise above an essentially tribal outlook to offer a global faith. If more people were to
pursue dialogue in an unrelenting manner to transform conflict creatively, the inevitable conflicts of human life would surely find easier resolution. Prejudice would yield to empathy and war would give way to peace. Genuine dialogue results in the transformation of opposing viewpoints, changing them from wedges that drive people apart into bridges that link them together.

In the early years of this century, Josiah Royce, an eminent philosopher of Harvard University has this to say:

"Reform, in such matters, must come, if at all, from within..... The public as a whole is whatever the processes that occur, for good or evil, in individual minds, may determine."

As Royce points out, the "invisible arrow" of evil is not to be found in the existence of races and classes external to ourselves, but is embedded in our hearts.

The Interrelationship of All Things

The symbiotic coexistence of all things is the foundation of the Buddhist philosophy, the heart of the Buddhist teachings.

Among the many stories in the Lotus Sutra, one compelling image that resides in my mind - is the merciful rain that falls everywhere, equally, moistening the vast expense of the earth and bringing forth new life from all the trees and grasses, large and small.

Firstly, this scene symbolizes the enlightenment of all people touched by the Buddha's Law. Secondly, at the same time, this image is a magnificent tribute to the rich diversity of human and all other forms of sentient and non-sentient life. Thus, each living thing manifests the enlightenment of which it is capable; each contributes to the harmony of the grand concert of symbiosis. In Buddhist terminology, "dependent origination" (engi) describes these relationship.

Nothing and nobody exists in isolation. Each individual being functions to
create the environment that sustains all other existences. All things are mutually supporting and interrelated, forming a living cosmos, what modern philosophy might term a semantic whole.

Speaking through Faust, Goethe gives voice to a similar vision: "Into the whole, how all things blend, each in the other working, living."

**SGI Peace Movement**

Based on the teachings of Nichiren, SGI members chant the mantra of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo derived from the title (daimoku) of the Lotus Sutra to the Gohonzon (or mandala) inscribed by him. Through this practice SGI members strive to reveal their own Buddha nature and build a life-state of supreme happiness. We refer to this process as "human revolution."

The SGI members carry out basic activities like discussion meeting, study meeting and the dialogue meeting. Through the process of participation in these meetings, the powerful Buddha nature that emerges from the combination of chanting daimoku and the mutual inspiration achieved by attending these activities enables the SGI members to polish their lives. Through these meetings the SGI members create value in the forms of beauty, benefit and goodness. Indeed, the word "soka" in Soka Gakkai means "the creation of value."

The SGI aims to apply a philosophy of humanism, rooted in respect for the sanctity of life, in the fields of peace, culture, and education. In this way, we seek to foster a robust and universal culture of peace.

In 1957, Josei Toda, the second president of the Soka Gakkai, issued a declaration for the abolition of nuclear weapons and entrusted the younger members with the task of implementing this desire. "Nuclear weapons," he stated, "are an enemy of humankind; their use, an act that would deny humanity its fundamental right to live, must be judged an absolute evil.

This declaration was made at the height of the Cold War and was a cry for
peace founded in the Buddhist spirit of reverence for life. It sparked a wave of reaction throughout society.

Josei Toda's peace proposal is the wellspring for the SGI's peace activities, which have developed into a series of movements to actualize peace among humankind and to protect the environment (thus realizing peaceful coexistence with the natural environment).

Daisaku Ikeda has also brought his mentor's principles to bear in the academic field by founding the Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research which has initiated a dialogue of civilizations to avert the clash of civilizations.

The SGI has consistently supported the United Nations as the "Parliament of Humankind," and has cooperated with the UN Department of Public Information in organizing the "Nuclear Weapons—Threat to Our World" exhibition, which seeks to publicize the dangers of nuclear weapons and has been shown in 18 cities in 15 countries around the world.

SGI has jointly organized with the UN Department of Disarmament Affairs the "War and Peace" exhibition, which also covers environmental problems and has likewise been shown around the world. Our efforts to support human rights education include the exhibition "Toward the Century of Humanity: An Overview of Human Rights in Today's World" and, in conjunction with the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, "The Courage to Remember—Anne Frank and the Holocaust" exhibition.

President Ikeda has been making peace proposals to mark SGI Day (January 26) since 1978, aiming to promote the ideal of the United Nations and call for reform of UN systems to expand the role of NGOs. A consistent theme of these proposals, written from a Buddhist standpoint, is the call for the abolition of war.

The activities in the field of peace, culture and education are the practical examples of SGI's efforts to give concrete form to the Buddhist virtues of compassion and responsibility and wisdom which ultimately constitute the actual content of humanism.
Carrier of the Peace Culture

There is the urgent need to build a culture of peace to renounce war and violent conflicts. When Gandhi was asked "What is the road to peace?" he answered "Peace is the only royal road to peace!"

The movement of building a culture of peace is now taking place in the world and is gaining momentum. It can only succeed when top-down efforts and bottom-up efforts by citizens, NGOs, MNCs, civil societies, governments and United Nations are being made. We need multiple tracks' actions and programmes.

Who are the carriers of the message of peace? The answer is everyone. We have to win the hearts and minds of the citizens of the world. We have to inculcate in every child the correct values of a culture of peace and non-violence. We have to influence the daily habits and lifestyles of peoples all over the world. We should aim to persuade every citizen of mother earth, civil societies, MNCs, NGOs, governments and nations and United Nations to raise the awareness and consciousness about the culture of peace.

The Asian Media will be playing the important role as carrier of the peace when you disseminate these values. The Asian media could adopt the following strategies:

(a) Education on Culture of Peace

Firstly, to promote education on the culture of peace (one good vehicle to promote the culture of peace is to educate the citizens of Asia about the Earth Charter)

(b) Research on Peace Studies

Secondly, be pioneers in learning and introducing new knowledge on peace studies, conflict resolution skills and peace journalism to help to transform conflicts creatively and non-violently
(c) Programmes for Application

Consciously adopt programmes or policies that bring about the meeting of hearts and minds between people of different culture, religions, and ethnic background. One concrete example is to provide fair and balance and creative analysis of different culture or religion and zoom in on the commonalities and the shared values rather than the differences to bring about new cultural understanding.

As the saying goes: "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a first step." Today we take that small step. But it is a significant step.

Michael Yap
Vice General Director
Singapore Soka Association

List Of Works Consulted


