

## **MESSAGE TO THE SIXTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE SOCIETY FOR BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN STUDIES DIALOGUE BRIDGES DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS**

During the week of August 5-12, the Sixth International Conference of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies was held at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington. Representatives from many different sects of Buddhism and Christianity gathered together for the conference with the theme, "Buddhism, Christianity and Global Healing." The following is SGI President Ikeda's message to the participants. He discusses his views on the importance of inter-religious dialogue in promoting peace and global healing and the role of religion in restoring the environment. Gatherings such as yours, the Sixth International Conference of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, bring together Buddhist and Christian voices in sustained dialogue on the future of humanity. To provide the opportunity for this type of engagement is an important endeavor, and I offer my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation for what you are achieving.

Buddhism, which reflects on the unity of cosmic and individual life, is central to the spiritual heritage of East Asian philosophy. Christianity, which reflects on the relationship between God and humanity, likewise has a central place in the spiritual heritage of Western philosophy. The encounter between these two streams of philosophy which have influenced peoples of South and North as well as East and West is perhaps one of the most important in any attempt to address the complex and tenacious problems afflicting humanity. I, among many concerned others, hold the greatest respect for each participant of this conference, as you open this forum of dialogue and continue to move forward in your exchange of views.

This year's assembly will deliberate on "Buddhism, Christianity, and Global Healing," a theme immediately relevant to the survival of the human species. In my view, restoration of the global environment is in the vital interest of all planetary inhabitants.

### **THE FOREMOST OFFENSE TO LIFE IS WAR**

As we stand at the doorway to the 21st century and peer outward, we find no exaggeration in the claim that we are now faced with an ecosphere critically fragmented and disintegrating. We adjust our eyes to the light and our sight rests once again on global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, pollution of the seas and oceans, accelerating desertification, diminishing rain forests and the peril of extinction of certain species, to name a few of the fraying threads in the intertwined layers of the earth's ecosystem. By far the gravest threat, indeed, the foremost offense to life and environment, is war. Nor are the ill-effects to human and natural life limited to cases of outright conflict; these continue long after nuclear explosions, tests or accidents are over, and long after biological and chemical weapons have been manufactured or used. At the same time, communal conflicts over ethnic, cultural, social and religious tensions give way to genocide and other crimes against humanity. Industrial progress and wealth, too, with the toll of worsening poverty and issues of waste disposal, have their problematic linkages to environmental degradation.

As a man of religion, I am compelled to look also inward to the human spirit that is a culpable piece of this mosaic. Here, too, we find evidence of debilitation in our social imperatives. Violence and greed reign over ethical judgment; physical, psychological, mental and substance abuse are increasingly commonplace, in private and in public. The prevalence of drug abuse, violence in the home and in school, and growing numbers of

mental disorders are symptomatic of what can only be termed an enervation of the human spirit. Indeed, violence and greed are at the root of desensitizing society to fundamental human rights and undermine efforts to curtail the exploitation of nature.

Our global experience with these issues urges us to re-examine our ideals of civilization, especially with regard to the course of life and living, to nature, to our system of values, and to life itself. Within this sphere of inquiry, religion that attends to the healing and revitalization of the human spirit points the way to the restoration of peace in society and of the natural ecosystem.

Let me here share my thoughts from a religious view of restoring the global environment.

It is my belief that there is a necessary premise from which to proceed: namely, that humankind is a constituent member of the earth's ecosystem; that there exists an inter-relationship between the inner nature of the human ego, or "lesser self," and the outer nature of the human environment, or "greater self;" and through the interactions between inner and outer nature, they are able to evolve with maximum creativity. From the dynamics of humanity and ecosystem arise all cultures and social environments. Put another way, the ecosystem, comprised of humanity and nature, is recognizably the basis on which develop all language, science, technology, politics, economy, telecommunications and all other systems and organizations.

In accepting this precondition, we are naturally led to the following observation: that humanity and nature are independent on the phenomenal plane, yet mutually sustaining constituents of a living system, or universal life, itself the common denominator and sustaining medium. The interaction internally and externally with this universal life literally enables both humanity and nature to create and to self-develop.

As we broaden our locus of identity and interaction from human society to ecosystem, it becomes clear that all development in human society — culture, science, technology, politics and economy — must be directed to enhance the symbiosis of humanity and nature.

Naturally, the effort to heal activates the restorative power within. Our attention turned "inward" toward healing the natural environment — damaged by abuses justified as a matter of human survival — we must utilize all our available resources to reactivate the inherent power of self-healing. If we are to fully experience renewal, in my opinion, there is a need for a shift in focus from a consumption to a recycling model of economy: whereby science and technology can be utilized in resource conservation, for example, leading to breakthroughs in energy-efficient technologies. This would also have to be supported by reforms in present political and judicial structures.

## **A WORLD WITHOUT WAR MUST BE ROOTED IN RESPECT FOR LIFE**

Moreover, to enhance the symbiosis of humanity and nature, I believe a commonly held system of values to be highly contributive. While the recognition and pursuit of diverse values are vitally important, at the same time, it is necessary to identify those common values that are shared by all, and upon which all other values rest. The values that I think most necessary to human survival all have as their common denominator: respect for the dignity of life, whether on the level of human individual, community, or society. From here issue forth the symbiosis of all life-forms in the ecosystem and, by extension, the creative diversity of ethnicity, culture, gender and religion. If it is to be successful, any movement toward the ideal of a world without war, in my opinion, should be rooted in the primacy

of respect for the dignity of human life.

The subject of self-control, specifically as concerns one's desires, needs introduction here. Postmodern society has freed its citizens to take part in the borderless pursuit of material desires. If there is to be a privilege of contemporary living, its enjoyment exacts self-control. Mahatma Gandhi was insightful in his comment that "Earth has enough to meet everyone's need, but not everyone's greed."

The discipline to control one's desires may be considered prescriptive to save us from our own subjugation to greed. On the opposite end of the spectrum, basic human needs must be met. As we have witnessed in countries unable to provide for these basic needs, citizens suffer from extreme poverty, a condition that can lead directly to further environmental degradation. For this reason, sustainable development rests on two prerequisites, the symbiosis of humanity and nature and the satisfaction of basic human needs.

Greed, the impulsive drive to achieve one's goal even at the cost of harming others or the environment, is not the compulsory outcome of satisfying one's physical and spiritual needs. It can be restrained and sublimated. In this regard, religion can be instrumental in redirecting desire and encouraging its most elevated expressions: the yearning for self-identity, for values, for service to others; the desire for knowledge, for artistic and cultural creativity, and for religiosity.

Nurturing one's moral sense naturally requires an elevation in one's standards as well as an acceptance of a system of values. These two impetuses are an indispensable couple. "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you" and "Do not do to others as you would not have done to you" are perhaps examples of ethical standards shared across civilizations.

Such moral imperatives that speak of service and no harm to others are importantly beneficial when they take root in the depth of one's heart. Therein is to be nurtured the most profound linkage to religious precepts.

### **"WHY DO I LIVE? WHO AM I?"**

Probing further, we arrive at the quintessential quest for life's purpose, fulfillment, and mission. More directly, we ask what every age before us has asked: Why do I live? And who am I? In last year's (1999) proposal for peace, I wrote of spiritual crisis, a deepening of the identity crises that plague contemporary society and threaten our very survival. Overwhelming fear, anxiety, repulsion, isolation and despair characterize the most common of responses to what people perceive as their world crumbling around them. Reviving and restoring the spirit of contemporary humanity and our meaning of existence are perhaps the most urgent roles religion today must fulfill.

F.S.C. Northrop, writing in 1945, intuited: ". . . when the scientific knowledge of these times has captured a man's mind, so that his intelligence tells him one thing and pushes him one way, and his emotions and habits attached to outmoded, incompatible scientific, philosophical and theological doctrines push him another way, then he is a frustrated man divided against himself. Such a man does not need to wait until after death to know what hell means" [*The Meeting of East and West: An Inquiry Concerning World Understanding* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1946) p. 485]. The requisite task before us is the coordination of cosmologies proffered by religion on the one hand and by science and philosophy on the other. A concerted effort is called for, to modernize the various views on the workings of the universe, in response to contemporary needs. This, I am convinced, is the duty of all those who work toward non-violent, peaceful co-existence, toward

symbiosis of humanity, the great cosmos and Mother Nature. The key, then, to resolving the fundamental issues humanity faces today is clarity and depth of feeling with which people awaken and commit to this mission.

Having shared some general observations on global healing or restoration of the global environment, I would like now to focus on ways Buddhism and Christianity might interface on this issue.

While noting many differences between Buddhism and Christianity, I find also a number of similarities. It is my belief that the object of dialogue — in this case, interreligious dialogue — is not merely to agree on differences but, more importantly, to find commonalities that bridge these traditions. Of course, one important outcome of dialogue may be found in understanding and learning from each other's differences. Equally important is the diligent effort to find as many points of convergence that outline a working partnership in challenging the global problematique, as Aurelio Peccei termed it. In this regard, this conference precisely illustrates the processes of dialogue I have sought here to outline.

Allow me to elaborate on what I see as the converging points that contribute to restoring the global environment.

First, in terms of cosmology, both Buddhism and Christianity have the breadth of scope that can help an individual resolve problems including the identity crisis. The cosmic view of East Asian philosophy, as represented in Buddhism, is grounded in the principle that the microcosm of the human or ego, or “lesser self” mentioned earlier, and the macrocosm, or “greater self,” are fused in a single living entity. Put succinctly, Buddhism postulates the mutual existence of cosmic life and individual self. Christian cosmology conceives world, cosmos and humanity as creations of the Supreme Being, their interactions thus governed by the omnipresence of God.

Second, both religions expound on mission and purpose in life. In Buddhism, compassion is the manifest expression of cosmic life; in Christianity, it is the reverence for God and the resultant love of neighbor. Both aspire, in sum, to relieve humanity of its miseries and lead to a life of fulfillment.

There is an important corollary that should be noted. Despite the many obstacles and persecutions he himself suffered, Shakyamuni Buddha dedicated his life to the salvation of all people. Acceding to his legacy of devotion, disciples took up his work as their own mission, braving adversity as they professed his teachings. Jesus Christ and his apostles also endured persecution and privation as they journeyed to preach and minister to the people.

### **BOTH RELIGIONS PROMOTE NONVIOLENCE, FAIRNESS AND INTEGRITY**

Third, both Buddhism and Christianity teach regard for human life and indeed all forms of life in the belief that life is born from that which is “sacred.” In Buddhism, the dignity of human life derives from the existence of cosmic life within, which is cradle to and essence of the individual self. And since the dynamics of cosmic life play out in all living beings, Buddhism teaches reverence for all life forms. In Christianity, human life's dignity derives from its creation in the image of God. Adoration for the divine in all its forms of expression is then the genesis of love and respect toward all living beings, the products of his creation.

Both religions posit the sanctity of human life, indeed all life. This, I believe, can serve as the bedrock commonality for other diverse values, and can shape a philosophical framework for coexistence and the symbiotic relationship between humanity and nature.

Fourth, both Buddhism and Christianity elevate ethics to a new horizon by opening it to the unbounded dimension of eternity and furthering its application in the sublimation of greed. The wider vista leads us to confront the issue of death and, in turn, stirs our awareness of the individual human being as a finite entity whose preoccupation with material desires leaves us trapped in the dimension of the fleeting and transient.

Buddhism stresses a way of life based on compassion. Mahayana Buddhism, in particular, stresses the Bodhisattva Way which empowers the individual's command over the inner resources to control personal desires and aspire to a higher personal standard of ethics. The Bodhisattva Way holds out the promise not only of a life that is morally fulfilling but also of great personal happiness now and in the future. Along a Christian parallel, eternal happiness is opened to a life of truth, that is, a life lived in accordance with the will of God.

The ethical standards imparted by both religions translate into general precepts such as those toward nonviolence, fairness (as in not stealing from others), and integrity (as in not lying or seeking to deceive).

Fifth, the historical tracts in Buddhism and Christianity give testament to saints and sages who relieved suffering. Through the ages, bodhisattvas possessed of the spirit of compassion extended themselves to humanity and all living beings, and saints like St. Francis of Assisi bestowed their love of God on all living beings as God's creations.

We may consider these numerous saints and sages, who have made invaluable contributions to peace, as progenitors in the healing of the human spirit. What we inherit spiritually and philosophically from these benefactors, Buddhist and Christian alike, has been the wellspring for our contemporary movements to abolish nuclear weapons, to promote human rights, to envision a world without war, and to protect the environment. Similarly, efforts along these aims are burgeoning into activities on private and community levels promoted by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other volunteer movements and associations. One hallmark of these collaborative endeavors is the broadening involvement in and commitment to the Earth Charter.

Let me conclude here by expressing my hopes and expectations for all participants in this year's international conference to be the good teachers of humanity who will be the source of light in the new era — an era emanating the brilliant hues of symbiosis between humanity and nature and of non-violent, peaceful coexistence.

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