
On Buddhism as attitude

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To all of our visitors, welcome to Western Australia.

Back in the 1860's, Irish convict John Boyle O'Reilly wrote of Western Australia:

Nation of sun and sin,

Thy flowers and crimes are red, And thy heart is sore within While the glory crowns thy head.
Land of the songless birds,

What was thine ancient crime, Burning through lapse of time

Like a prophet's cursing words? ¹

"What was thine ancient crime?" Do we have a case of the law of Karma and rebirth?

Certainly, I can report to you that Buddhism is alive and well in Western Australia and making a contribution to the welfare of our community in many ways and in many forms.

In my own case I regard one of the founders of the Buddhist Society in Western Australia Professor Laki Jayasuriya as amongst my most treasured intellectual and political mentors with his insights into Australian society and multiculturalism.

In more recent years I have learnt much about human nature and human psychology from Ajahn Brahm whose book *Opening the Door of Your Heart*² I am continually re-opening for encouragement and enlightenment.

It was with enormous pleasure, then, that I agreed to participate in the 4th Global Conference on Buddhism.

The challenges we face today are truly global - international terrorism, global warming, nuclear proliferation, world poverty and international crime just to name a few - and will need a global response that is creative and comprehensive as well as being personal and political.

At a local level we have the challenges posed by the ageing of our population, continuing indigenous poverty, significant levels of stress and mental illness as well as drug and alcohol abuse.

All too often, however, our responses are limited in imagination and ineffective in practice.

Isn't it interesting that when we contemplate many of the problems we face (and the dangers inherent within each of them) the gap between human capacity and human nature is continually revealed.

Our intellect and knowledge expand but our natures remain limited and constrained.

In approaching this contradiction, the idealists say we must tame and re-define the human desires and the realists say we must create systems with appropriate checks and balances between nations and within nations.

In recent years we have also seen the re-emergence of fundamentalist religion as a political and social force. These new fundamentalists stress absolutism and inerrancy with respect to their sources of revelation and attack the liberalising tendencies of modern life.

Indeed, liberalism has been put on the defensive with fundamentalist attacks on science, the separation of Church and State, the rights of women and gays and lesbians, and even on multiculturalism and inter-faith dialogue.

Fear and uncertainty, not seen since the darkest days of the Cold War, have re-emerged in the Western psyche.

These are ongoing debates within which Buddhists have and will continue to make a significant contribution.

There are a number of features of my understanding of Buddhism that I hope will inform your deliberations.

Firstly, an open and inquiring mind. The Buddha's advice that we should all think for ourselves and analyse information before accepting it as truth is timeless. He exhorted his followers to take nothing on blind faith, not even his own teachings.

Secondly, an approach that goes to the heart of an issue and avoids that which is unnecessary and diverting. The Buddha referred to the man who would seek answers to metaphysical questions before he sought enlightenment as like the man wounded by a poisoned arrow who would not let a surgeon remove the arrow until he found out who shot the arrow, what his name was and so on.³

Thirdly, a call to take up the Noble Eightfold Path - Right View, Right Resolve, Right Speak, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Meditation - which involves both personal development and engagement with the world, each being dependent on the other.

It is an approach that can be tested in practice and, as such, investigated through science and experience.

Fourthly, the strong emphasis on compassion and concern for "the other" in our thinking and practice.

"The Other" may be the person next to you, others in the neighbourhood, people of a different background, politics or religion, people of a different region or nation, people close by or far away. The Japanese Buddhist Daisaku Ikeda puts it this way:

. . . real happiness - joy that springs from the very depths of life - can be experienced only when we resist the impulse to turn away from the suffering of others and instead challenge it as our own.⁴

Fifthly, is the Buddhist belief that everything exists because of its relationship with other beings or phenomena. Nothing exists in isolation, independent of another life.

It also means that when we focus on politics, the economy, society and the environment we cannot abstract one element out and consider it in isolation. Intellectual inquiry needs to be interdisciplinary and practical solutions multidimensional if they are to be effective.

Sixthly, and finally for today's purposes, is the Buddhist respect for other religions and belief in dialogue between them. As the Buddhist Emperor Asoka said in the third century B.C.:

The faiths of others all deserve to be honoured for one reason or another. By honouring them, one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others ... King Priyadarsi desires men of all faiths to know each other's doctrines and to acquire sound doctrines.⁵

In more recent years the Venerable Havanpola Ratanosara put it this way:

Religious differences have often been the most deeply rooted and destructive of all. If we, as representatives of the world's major religions, can show the rest of the world that we can communicate with each other, they just might come to realize that there is no reason why they cannot do the same.⁶

May each of these beliefs and principles - an open mind, a search for practical solutions through the Noble Eightfold Path, compassion, an understanding of the relational nature of existence, and genuine dialogue - inform and enrich your proceedings over the next few days.

And, as the Irish would say:

"May the roof above you never fall in,

And those gathered beneath it never fall out"

REFERENCES

1. Quoted in A.G. Evans, *Fanatic Heart A Life of John Boyle O'Reilly 1844-1890* (1997), p. 108.

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2. Opening the Door of Your Heart And other Buddhist tales of Happiness (2004).
 3. Venerable Dr. W. Rahula, What the Buddha Taught (2002), p.14.
 4. Daisaku Ikeda, Inner Transformation : Creating a Global Groundswell for Peace (26 January 2004), p.28.
 5. Quoted in Robert Thurman, "Edicts of Asoka", in Fred Eppsteiner (ed.), The Path of Compassion : Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism (1988), p.115.
 6. Venerable Havanpola Ratanasara "The Importance of Interfaith dialogue : A Buddhist Perspective". <http://www.urbandharma.org/bcdialog/bcd2/interfaith.html>.