
Why is there an increasing interest in Buddhism?

The Hon. Dr. Geoff Gallop

Speech

Soka Gakkai International Australia for the unveiling of a new centre

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It gives me a great deal of pleasure today to participate in the unveiling of the building signage at Soka Gakkai's new Western Australian Centre.

Soka Gakkai is one of a number of Buddhist societies operating in WA. According to the 2001 Census Buddhists account for 1.6 per cent of the WA population, an increase of 62 per cent since 1996.

Buddhism is the largest non-Christian religion in WA, with nearly 30,000 followers.

The Perth branch of SGI was established in 1973 and has been active in promoting peace, multiculturalism and education in our State.

I was interested to find that Soka Gakkai has emerged from within the Mahayana tradition of Buddhist teachings.

Mahayana, "Great Vehicle", refers to a socially oriented attitude. Followers of the Mahayana tradition strive to become bodhisattvas. This means a living being who aspires to enlightenment by carrying out altruistic practices.

Soka Gakkai embraces the philosophy and teachings of Nichiren, a thirteenth-century Buddhist sage and scholar.

Soka means "value creation" and Gakkai means "society".

Followers are challenged to advance in their own circumstances and work for the welfare of others. It is believed that self-actualisation comes from real effort and constructive engagement.

Nichiren believed he had discovered the "ultimate truth" in the Lotus Sutra which outlined that all individuals are manifestations of Buddha nature and he or she can achieve Buddhahood at any time.

There is clearly a growth in interest in Buddhism throughout the Western World today.

I share this interest and believe that it is the result of a number of factors.

First, and importantly, Buddhism offers a non-dogmatic approach to the major questions that have always puzzled human beings. Not only did the Buddha insist that human beings keep an open mind and not rely on hearsay, tradition, or the authority of ancient scriptures without reference to their own experiences for their beliefs, his approach is totally consistent with "the rational empiricism of the Western scientific tradition. (Laki Jayasuriya, "An Engaged Buddhism: The Essentials of a Buddhist Social Philosophy").

Indeed, one Buddhist writer and scholar Stephen Batchelor has gone so far as to compare Buddhism with agnosticism as defined by Thomas Huxley in the 1880s. Speaking of Huxley he wrote:

"But instead of a creed, he saw it as a method realized through the vigorous application of a single principle, positively expressed as: 'follow your reason as far as it will take you,' and negatively as: 'do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable'. He called it the agnostic faith"

(Stephen Batchelor "The Other Enlightenment Project")

None of this means that Buddhism is without any truths at all; it simply means that we must find them ourselves and that we should be open to what is revealed by the continuing advance of human inquiry and scientific investigation.

Secondly, the Buddha was a humanist who sought practical solutions which would bring real rather than imaginary peace and happiness to human beings. His questioning and insights related to birth, old age, decay, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain and grief. He was not interested in unnecessary metaphysical questions such as: "Is the world eternal or non-eternal?"

He drew an analogy with a man wounded by a poisoned arrow who would not let the surgeon remove the arrow until he found out who shot it, what his name was and what type of arrow it was. Much better, he believed, to go straight to the problem and seek to fix it.

Indeed he did not claim divine authority and "attributed all his realisation, attainments, and achievements to human endeavour and intelligence" (Narayan Champawat, "Buddha" in Great Thinkers of the Eastern World. 1995.)

The Buddha's reasoning and experience led him to an approach to life which he called the Noble Eightfold Path: Right View, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Meditation.

This mix of morality, meditation and wisdom involves both engagement with the world and personal development - each being reliant on the other.

As Nichiren wrote:

"That which you give to another will become your own sustenance; if you light a lamp for another, your own way will be lit."

(Soka Gakkai Website, "Dependent Origination")

Thirdly, and more specifically, the various Buddhist techniques of meditation have become part and parcel of modern psychology. They are proven as assisting both mental and physical well-being. As one of our local Buddhist monks have put it:

"When stress is shown to be such a major cause of human suffering, the quieting practice of meditation becomes even more valued." (Ajahn Brahmavasco, What is Buddhism, 2001)

There is also much evidence for the role meditation can play in tackling a range of problems including depression, hypertension, migraines, fatigue, pain, digestive problems and chronic illness.

Fourthly, Buddhism offers an approach that is peaceful, compassionate and responsible in a world troubled by conflict, commercialisation and consumerism.

Soka Gakkai's efforts to promote peace and nuclear disarmament with practical and educational initiatives marks it out as a positive force in the modern world.

When Buddhists make a contribution to political debates they inevitably look to solutions based on non-violence and dialogue rather than solutions based on violence and military force.

They stress concern for "the other" in all our thinking and practice. In his pamphlet *Inner Transformation: Creating a Global Groundswell for Peace* (2004) Daisaku Ikeda wrote of the de-sensitising influences associated with globalisation and virtualisation. Happiness is not something we can keep to ourselves; it must be placed in all the contexts in which we live - family, community, workplace, school, state, etc. Only then can we seek to find its true meaning in the application of the principles of compassion.

The same principle holds for nation states within the global economy.

Finally, we see in Buddhism a philosophy that is highly appropriate in a world concerned with the environment and committed to ecological sustainability.

Buddhism teaches that all life is interrelated; that nothing exists in isolation, independent of another life. Indeed, it is believed that "all beings and phenomena exist or occur only because of their relationship with other beings or phenomena" (Soka Gakkai website "Dependent Origination").

The implication of this is outlined by Daisaku Ikeda as follows:

"Thus we are urged to respect the uniqueness of each existence which supports and nourishes all within the larger, living whole"

(*Peace and Human Security: A Buddhist Perspective for the Twenty- First Century*, 1995)

I believe it is Buddhism's scientific approach, its belief in the inter related nature of all things, its commitment to a life based on the middle way involving morality, wisdom and meditation and its genuine support for peace and dialogue between the peoples and religions of the world that make it such an attractive tradition for many in the West.

I would like to conclude my remarks today with reference to this issue of "dialogue".

It is my view that the true essence of a multi-faith and multi-cultural society is found when we seek to understand and learn from each other within the context of a genuinely democratic and free society.

As the Buddha put it so well:

"To be attached to one thing (to a certain view) and to look down upon other things (views) as inferior - this the wise men call a fetter".

(W. Rahula, What the Buddha Taught, 2002)

Yes, we are born free, but to live and to learn, from others as well as ourselves. Communities that encourage and can manage this process well will be those that succeed in the 21st Century.

I wish all involved with the Soka Gakkai here in WA all the best as they contribute to that genuine process of human liberation.