
To Care ...

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I'm truly delighted to be here tonight, amongst friends and provided with the opportunity to speak on matters deemed important. I've learnt much from my own encounter with Buddhism and to be given the time to share my ideas with you is a real privilege.

Since retiring from politics I've been teaching at Sydney University and on occasions I've been engaged in the role of political consultant. Indeed, on one occasion I was invited by Ajahn Brahm and his colleagues speak to the Sangha in Canberra on the topic: "What is the political position of Buddhism in Australian culture today?" I concluded that Buddhism had much to offer but was too little listened to. It was seen as inoffensive and perhaps good for individuals but not as a type of attitude and set of beliefs that ought to assist and guide our decision-making at the highest levels. Inasmuch as religions played a role there, it was only the mainstream religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – which are consulted. Much the pity this – as I will endeavour to illustrate in tonight's lecture.

REFLECTING ON A WORD OR PHRASE

When teaching I've found that it's highly beneficial to focus on a word or phrase as the basis for lecturing, discussion and deliberation. Amongst my favourites in this regard are sustainability, balance, compassion and fairness. In fact it's something we can all do as individuals in thought or as groups in dialogue. Do you have a favourite word and, if so, why is that word your favourite? What questions are posed by the use of the word? You might even delve into its origins and seek greater understanding from such an exploration.

This takes me to the great Sanskrit scholar, Sir Harold Bailey. Bailey taught himself languages as a youngster on a farm near Merredin and went on to become a leader in the field. For me he's perhaps the greatest of all graduates from the University of Western Australia, a real inspiration to youngsters with a thirst for knowledge, particularly those living outside the capital cities. He was once asked whether it was true that he devoted an entire lecture to a single word. His response is worth recording:

"As to the anecdote – I in fact talked for ten and a half hours on the Sanskrit word BRUVANO, but only on the form, not on the meaning!"

I promise I won't talk for 10½ hours tonight!

THE STRENGTH OF BUDDHISM

However, before turning to my word for tonight let me share with you my thoughts on Buddhism and why I am attracted to it as a guide to life and learning.

Firstly, I very much like the way it puts the personal search for truth at the centre of things. It obliges us to think and explore; to find out for ourselves what is truth and what is fiction and not to just rely upon convention or the openness of others. It doesn't start with the dogmas that are

then taken to the people from on high; but rather asks of the people that they do the exploring, with all the questioning and investigations which that involves. In other words, Buddhism supports science and the verification principle that underpins its findings. Whereas other religions all too often ask us to agree, Buddhism asks us to think!

Secondly, there is the pragmatic, practical side to Buddhism. Indeed it seeks the truth of things in their practice. Linked to this is its strong focus on finding solutions rather than just analysing problems. All of this is illustrated in the wonderful Parable of the Arrow which, like the Christian Parable of the Good Samaritan, teaches us much about right attitude and action:

“It's just as if a man were wounded with an arrow thickly smeared with poison. His friends & companions, kinsmen & relatives would provide him with a surgeon, and the man would say, 'I won't have this arrow removed until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble warrior, a priest, a merchant, or a worker.' He would say, 'I won't have this arrow removed until I know the given name & clan name of the man who wounded me... until I know whether he was tall, medium, or short... until I know whether he was dark, ruddy-brown, or golden-colored... until I know his home village, town, or city... until I know whether the bow with which I was wounded was a long bow or a crossbow... until I know whether the bowstring with which I was wounded was fiber, bamboo threads, sinew, hemp, or bark... until I know whether the shaft with which I was wounded was wild or cultivated... until I know whether the feathers of the shaft with which I was wounded were those of a vulture, a stork, a hawk, a peacock, or another bird... until I know whether the shaft with which I was wounded was bound with the sinew of an ox, a water buffalo, a langur, or a monkey.' He would say, 'I won't have this arrow removed until I know whether the shaft with which I was wounded was that of a common arrow, a curved arrow, a barbed, a calf-toothed, or an oleander arrow.' The man would die and those things would still remain unknown to him.”

As Thich Nhat Hanh commented on this: “Life is so short. It must not be spent in endless metaphysical speculation that does not bring us any closer to the truth”.

Thirdly, Buddhism reminds us that all is connected; indeed that the world is an inter-connected whole within which all the parts are important. When it comes to caring about things human and natural – a topic I'll be dealing with later – understanding all of these connections really matter. Whatever we say and do has consequences. Whatever we say or do can produce good – or it can add to suffering and produce pain. From this net of accountability none of us can escape, “cause” and “effect” is everywhere. As the Buddha once said:

“Whatever words we utter should be chosen with care for people will hear them and be influenced by them for good or ill”.

Good advice for politicians but all too often ignored!

Finally, I take you to what is perhaps the most important question of all: “How can we – and how should we – live with difference?” There are so many differences that exist within the human family – gender, race, religion, clan, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality ... the list goes on. Each of us has our own community of interest and ideas; we stick together to protect and promote our particular community.

Given this reality of difference conflict is an ever-present possibility. It may reveal itself as constructive dialogue in which each listens to and learns from the other OR it may reveal itself as discord, hatred ...even war. We need a philosophy that seeks a solution to the issues that emerge from living with difference. In Buddhism I see this more than I do in other religions where there is a tendency to defend at all costs.

I don't pretend that the Buddhist way has all the answers here. Indeed, promoting the peaceful resolution of conflict when one or both of the sides may be fundamentalist, uncompromising and fanatical in their attitudes is often a bridge too far. However, it does provide us with a first step – listening to what others say, looking for common ground and making peace a priority are all important. All too often we start out with conflict and too little with politics (“the art of the possible”). Remember what analysts have called “soft” skills as opposed to “hard” skills can be just as effective and more often than not more effective!

TO CARE – WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Now to my word for the day – it's care, or more precisely, I'm interested in what it means to care. I arrive at this via Ajahn Brahm's story of “the three questions”.

What is the important time? Now, because there is no other, the past is gone and the future yet to be.

Who is the most important person? The person you are with and it would be you when you are alone.

What is the most important thing to do? It is to care.

I would argue that there are three dimensions of caring:

- Caring for Oneself
- Caring for others both individually and collectively
- Caring for the environment

Let's start with caring for oneself. It's basic and all-important if we are to be in a position to care for others. My friend the late Laki Jayasuriya used to use the following saying to illustrate the point:

“It is not possible for one who is stuck in the mud to help out another but it is possible for one who is not stuck in the mud to help another who is stuck in the mud. It is not possible that a man who has not saved himself to save another”.

Caring for yourself is never an easy business. There being so many things that can lead us up the garden path to self-destruction. As the great management guru, Peter Drucker, put it, we need some self-awareness, some knowledge of our strengths and weaknesses and our likes and dislikes. We need to know whether we are in the right line of work, are mixing with the right sort of people, and possessed of good friends and mentors.

All of this is important too well-being but so too does the way we treat others. Heartlessness can be as damaging to the perpetrator as it is to the victim. Our conscience can help us or, in its suppression, hold us down.

Caring for others has two dimensions. Firstly there are the people you are with, in family, community and work. Going beyond what we might call a simple transactional, or contractual, approach to relationships is part of what it means to be human. It's the care that comes from compassion that has the real impact and it is most challenging. We can't escape from our obligation to others and to care is to understand this and search for the way to practice it. Simple acts of kindness are a good starting point.

Secondly, there is the society in which we live, attached to which will be laws, regulations and social mores. They are important and it is up to us as citizens to see to it that they work in the interests of all – and not just some of us. We need that much sought after “middle-way” that reflects a constructive mix of freedom and equality. Yes, Buddhism is “political” in the sense that it seeks after a government accountable to the people and reflective of universal values like liberty and equality – and as I indicated earlier in my talk it advocates a constructive approach to politics. A search for peace. A search for solutions.

Finally, there is our obligation to care for the environment. A healthy environment is good for us all. Nature unaffected by human contact can enrich us through the wonders it reveals. Nature abused and damaged by human impact can disrupt and destroy as we are seeing with climate change. Our natural environment underpins all life and respecting it is most important.

To care then, is to understand self, go beyond self to the other and to understand and respect nature and the environment in which we live. It means keeping ourselves healthy, supporting others and respecting the environment. It obliges us to be “truly human” and “passionately environmentalist” because it is that which produces community well-being. Just go to history and check the evidence – it's all there!

RIGHT SPEECH

Let me conclude by focussing on the question of “right speech”. It's become a most important issue in this era of “post-truth politics” we now witness on the public stage where interests and ideas contend. There are those who say evidence doesn't matter and it's my opinion versus yours. It's an active force in politics. So too are there those who say we are self-censoring ourselves from speaking freely about the thoughts we have, even if they are prejudices that feed off hatred. The claim is as simple as it is dangerous – free speech is right speech whatever is said and wherever it is said. No, right speech is the obligation we have to care about the way we speak. This means to abstain from telling lies or deceiving people, refusing to speak such that disharmony is the result, abstaining from abuse and not indulging in idle chatter or gossip.

Again, none of this is easy and I'm sure we can conjure up circumstances where compromise or indeed the opposite is justified. Here I have in mind the lies one would tell when the Gestapo came knocking at the door and asking of the whereabouts of the Jewish family being hidden within. Nor should we see the case for right speech as an excuse to avoid the telling of “truth to power”. What I'm interested in is the tendency today to justify lying, slander, abuse, and rumour-mongering, as legitimate factors, indeed tactics, in a world where opinions are facts and those who win are those who can control and manipulate the best.

Part of the problem is the view that there is nothing we can learn from “the other” – it's our view versus theirs. It's the view that we can't take ourselves beyond self but rather that we are all

imprisoned in our own prejudices and self-interest. No, says the great Mahatma Gandhi, we can and should go beyond self in the search for wisdom and true community. He put it this way:

“I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any”.

He puts it so well – we all have our home, our own ideas and our own identity but we can always find out about and learn more about what it means to be truly human. Let’s keep those windows open.