

# Globalising Spiritual Values

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Delivered by dr rewata dhamma at the millennium summit of world religious leaders, august 2000, united nations headquarters, new york. 2005

We meet at the end of a century of unending violence. Despite an increased sense of our mutual interdependence, despite the improvements in communications and means of transport that have shrunk the globe, despite the best efforts of individual religious and political leaders, we are still unable to lessen violence, let alone prevent the horrible act of war. The United Nations itself, set up at the end of a world conflict in order to decrease such disasters and the conditions that contribute to them, can hardly be said to have achieved the best of success in that aim so far.

One reason for this state of affairs must be that statesmen too often pay only lip service to the humanistic values of the U.N. Charter. Their actions show them far more concerned with the pragmatism of power. They speak of and champion Democracy and Human Rights without ethical values. Political gain and economic profit are their main priorities. But it is a condemnation of us as effective religious leaders that politicians are so often able to profit by stirring up religious hatred and strife. If we conferred together more often, if we were truly united in respect for each other's faith and teachings, we should be a little nearer to a solution to some of the problems now facing the world.

The Buddha's insight into the origin of suffering was that its main cause arises from attachment. This is a manifestation of our preoccupation with ourselves to the virtual exclusion of the good of others. We are slaves to self-gratification through our attachment to sense pleasures. We define ourselves through the views and opinions we hold (including religious doctrines) and are exposed to the temptation of intolerance. Substituting rites and ritual for true spiritual discipline, we become self-righteous. Finally, our insistence on the autonomy of the self makes us lose sight of our duty even to those closest and dearest to us, let alone to our neighbours, humanity or the globe.

It is attachment that blinds us to our real nature and to the effective solution to our ills. According to the Buddha, the causes of suffering are inescapable, they form the basis of all we experience, but there is a way of going beyond it. The words in the books for this three-fold way translate as Morality, Meditation and Wisdom. In practice this means self-control, mental discipline and the ability to see all sides of a problem or situation. In this way attachment is weakened and finally overcome. As important, however, is that this way of

restraint and insight is the necessary training for attempting to put into practice whatever proposals come out of our meeting here.

There is a story about Gandhi that he delayed advising a child not to over-indulge a liking for palm sugar until he had mastered that liking in himself. In the same spirit, we too must learn to govern ourselves before we lay down solutions for others! And even then there is a further cultivation for the mind. Buddhists call this set of meditations the Four Sublime States. They consist of ceasing to discriminate between any forms of being and of sharing in their experience. The first stage is to cultivate unlimited well-wishing towards all beings; then compassionately sharing in their suffering and standing ready to alleviate it; next unreservedly rejoicing in the happiness of others; finally, developing a non-judgmental acceptance of each individual, recognising our essential oneness of experience.

Wisdom and insight are not enough. There must also be a sense of involvement before harmony in society can truly be promoted

We can probably agree that all faiths share common moral values and that in general their aim is to diminish self-centredness. Interfaith activities such as that in which we are presently engaged are also necessary if the changes we propose for the common good are to be at all effective. In putting forward the suggestions that have been invited from us, it should also be borne in mind that the qualities I have already mentioned are the foundation on which they must be based.

I therefore endorse the second of the purposes given for calling this meeting, namely the formation of an International Advisory Council of Religious Globalising Spiritual Values and Spiritual Leaders for the United Nations. But I would go further and say that the calling of interfaith councils to advise those in government is necessary at a national as well as at the international level. Until there is a readiness to listen to such advice at the national level, we can hardly expect such advice to make an impact on those who serve their national governments in this place. Until there is a general acceptance of the implications of that ethnic, cultural and religious pluralism that the United Nations has championed from its beginning, we shall get nowhere.

Setting an example to others by adopting this proposal, then, is only a beginning. Indeed, it will generally be regarded as simply a cosmetic gesture, a mere gimmick, unless the extension of this idea to national and regional spheres of government is also encouraged as part of the U.N.'s work in keeping world peace. It is there, after all, that action is taken for social improvement, diminishing conflict and encouraging harmony. It is there that the example should most importantly be set.

Changing human nature takes time and in any case is best pursued at the personal level, as the example of Gandhi indicates. But the encouragement of insight into human nature and of the resolution to transcend it is most effective when one is young. For this reason, education is of vital importance in achieving a viable platform for giving peace a better chance in future generations. Kurt Hahn recognised this when, inspired by the work of the U.N., he set up the first of what were to become the United World Colleges to promote international understanding and a listening attitude among students from all nations.

More of such institutions should be encouraged and given the financial support to make them viable. Students should be exposed there, as part of the curriculum, to the spiritual values of all the faiths. But, equally important, it should be part of the vision of such establishments to encourage scrutiny of the very act of teaching, to test whether the teachers, lay or religious, practise what they teach. From the Buddhist perspective, we would like to see emphasised also that, while ceremony has a part to play in religion, putting what is taught into practice in daily life is even more important.

With regard to the declaration for peace which is the primary purpose of our gathering, I would wish to see as part of its text the plea that a less one-sided political and economic view is taken of human suffering. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that we should declare ourselves as opposed to the naked materialism and greed that lies at the heart of the false religion of politics and economics and, indeed, of so-called globalisation. Then, in addressing ourselves to individual governments, we should make clear that suffering and need should be recognised wherever it occurs and aid be offered to all, rather than simply to the friends of whatever regime is in power.

Let me sum up by saying that we need to take religion out of the holy buildings and shrines and into the streets. It is only in this way that we can hope to change the present political and economic priorities and open up hearts to the spiritual dimension. The United Nations needs the kind of consultation with religious and spiritual leaders that is envisaged. But not until these leaders and their disciples are seen to be living up to the ideals they teach will their message be heeded.

NOTE: The formation of a World Council of Religious Leaders was one of the stated goals of the Millennium World Peace Summit. The objective of this Council was to serve as a resource to the United Nations and its agencies around the world, to nation states and other international organisations, offering the collective wisdom and resources of the faith traditions toward the resolution of critical global problems.

The launching of this World Council took place in Bangkok on June 12th-14th, 2002, at Buddhamonthon and at UNESCAP. Participants adopted a Charter that outlines key areas in which religious leaders can play an active role in reducing conflict and addressing the critical needs of humankind. Its mission statement reads:

*The World Council of Religious Leaders aims to serve as a model and guide for the creation of a community of world religions. In the spirit of service and humility, it seeks to inspire women and men of all faiths in the pursuit of peace, justice and mutual understanding. It will undertake initiatives to provide the spiritual resources of the world's religious traditions to assist the United Nations and its agencies in the prevention, resolution and healing of conflicts and in the eradication of their causes and in addressing social and environmental problems. By promoting the practice of the spiritual values shared by all religious traditions, and by uniting the human community for times of world prayer and meditation, the World Council seeks to aid in developing the inner qualities and external conditions needed for the creation of a more peaceful, just and sustainable world society. ❖*