

THE HIGHER HUMANISM: THE PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT

Nur Yalman

President Baba, President Harada, Faculty and Students of Soka University, Ladies and Gentlemen, what a joy to be here.

It is a great pleasure to be here with you on this wonderful occasion.

I recall President Ikeda's memorable visit to Harvard University in September 1993 when he spoke on "Mahayana Buddhism and Twenty-First-Century Civilization."

Since then nearly a quarter of a century has passed. The high ideals of President Ikeda have been widely disseminated and much better understood. And the need for dialogue, for a higher humanism, and for non-violence have become much more urgent.

I will talk to you about Philosophy and Anthropology for our common future.

I also want to say something as an anthropologist with many years of field work: I am deeply attached to dear friends in the many cultures and peoples among whom I have lived and have known: Buddhists and Hindus, Muslims and Christians in Sri Lanka and Thailand, Hindu's and Muslims among Tamils and others in India, Muslims and others in Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Indonesia, Turkey. where I come from - and elsewhere. I have had intimate and precious friends among Christians and Jews in England, in Germany, in Holland and Norway, in France and the US, and Canada, also Israel. To this long list I would certainly add the rich traditions greatly admired by me and the many friends I have here whom I so admire.

To begin with anthropology, the study of human kind: the essence of anthropology is "empathy." The great French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss noted this with precision. Without "empathy" it is impossible to understand the mentality of "other" cultures and civilizations. We have to be able to think ourselves into their states of mind. Only then is "dialogue" between two minds possible and productive. Levi-Strauss was not alone; he was referring directly to the work of the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau whom he regarded as the key figure in French humanist thought.

The concern for "empathy" is directly related to the quest for the "enlightenment," the "higher humanism" and the "Rights of Man" as they came to be formulated in those heady and exciting

years of the French Revolution that transformed Europe. The interest in “empathy” and “dialogue” was not only a French preoccupation. We meet it also in the rich German tradition when Max Weber writes of the “*verstehende sociologie*,” the sociology of “understanding,” the need to enter into “subjectivities,” to understand “other” minds and other “cultures” on their own terms.

I am happy to mention these matters of philosophy and anthropology here to-day since President Ikeda has written this so eloquently in his 2011 Peace proposal:

“Determined to walk the authentic path of justice mapped out by the world’s great philosophers and thinkers, we of the SGI have made constant efforts to build a movement of humanism on a global scale. This is an achievement without parallel in the history of Buddhism. I am confident that our movement will continue to develop, shining with ever greater brilliance and drawing support from people of good will, as we together work to change the course of civilization.”

I think these are the right ideas for searching beyond the particularities of a single enclosed venerated tradition.

What is desperately needed in our world to-day is indeed a Higher Humanism: a humanism, a sense of recognition and respect that can resonate with all world religions; a humanism which goes beyond everyday religious “tribalism”; a humanism grounded firstly in the “respect for the views of other people,” secondly in the “respect” for the individual. what Andre Gide a greate French writer called “the most irreplaceable of beings.” Anyone who has lost a loved one will immediately recognize that the particular person lost, a mother, a sister, a son, a daughter, a father, a grandchild, a dearest one is, of course, “irreplaceable.” There will never be another “being” just like the one we have lost despite all those cleverly promising Indian speculations on “reincarnation.” Both these concerns go to the heart of a fundamental concern with “universal human rights.” So, the concerns of Jean Jacques Rousseau and Claude Levi-Strauss are our concerns at this time.

Why is it necessary to speak of a “higher humanism” now? Is Christianity with Jesus and Mary and the Saints not good enough for everyone? Or, for the Muslims, are Muhammad and Ali, the divine poets, Rumi, Hayyam, Hafiz, the great thinkers, Avicenna and Averoes not sufficient for all? Or, for the Jews, Moses and Maimonides? What about Shiva and Parvati, Vishnu and Ganesh and Murugan or Minakshi and all those wonderful myths and rituals of India? And what about the Prince Siddharta, Ananda and the Bodhisatvas?

It is awfully tempting to form a closed and familiar community around any one of these venerated figures. Thus we can define those who are “our people.” And all the others are not of “us.” That is precisely a form of barbarism and tribal thinking that we must reject.

How do we achieve the higher humanism that most anthropologists and I have in mind. I am thinking of a higher humanism that understands and accepts the need of people for faith and some deeply venerated “truth” to believe in, for collective public and private rituals, for temples, and

places of worship, for sacred objects and sacred stories, and collective shared emotions. These are our vibrant world religions as we know and live with them day by day. And we do know how powerful they can be in collective action from experience. But we must be able to use our great human faculty for dialogue to draw out those common human concerns that do exist in each and every one of them. We must then go beyond them to a “Higher Humanism.” This is not the denial of religion or of peoples own belief systems; this is simply the demand for greater openness, understanding, for reason and rationality in a world threatened by dissention, xenophobia, fear, extremism and organized violence.

Moreover these thoughts are entirely in line with the noteworthy work of Ikeda Daisaku for a more “modern” interpretation of the Buddhist canon that goes beyond the traditional Sangha and arises from intimate discussion groups. Such local community centers can, it is said, best define their needs and priorities. They can even be considered as “temples of the present era.”

His efforts to establish an open dialogue concerning the future of humankind with historians, scientists, philosophers, world movers and shakers have been most creative. In his far ranging dialogues, starting with Arnold Toynbee and the great Linus Pauling, Joseph Rotblatt, and going on to Mihail Gorbachev and Andre Malraux and many significant thinkers, he has brought out the concerns of persons of very diverse positions.

Recent terrible events in Paris have made it clear that “intolerance” to other people and what they hold dear has the potential to destroy us all.

The war between the “weapons of the weak” and the “weapons of the strong” will not end well. It has already shown its murderous potential in the devastating violence we are witnessing daily in Syria and Iraq, in Libya and Yemen, in the Ukraine, and elsewhere. Given all this violence it is no surprise that there is certainly great disappointment with state of the nations around the world.

Vast and unimaginable sums are being spent by many nations on the so-called “defense industries.” Symmetrical and asymmetrical warfare is the order of the day in many places. We learn that the US has 16 nuclear submarines constantly patrolling the oceans. Each one has enough nuclear missiles to destroy an entire continent. But there are only five continents! The numbers killed in this century. and we are still on early days. are a nightmare beyond imagination. How do we stop this awful “juggernaut” of war and killing except by a constant and conscious collective effort to work for peace.

Let me recall the far sighted statement of Mahatma Gandhi on this critical subject:

“The ends do not justify the means; it is the nature of the means used that determine the character of the ends achieved.”

Can there be a better invitation for dialogue and peace than the words of that great spirit.

We are now witnessing a disastrous refugee crisis. It can only be solved by “empathy”: recall

the body of the little boy, limp in the arms of a coast guard officer, drowned along with his mother and sister in trying to get to the island of Kos in Greece from Bodrum in Turkey in a fragile little boat. This tragedy took place on the magnificent coast usually full of tourists basking in the sunshine by the translucent waters of the Mediterranean. The tragedy of the fate of the refugees as represented by that little boy is surely a grave burden of guilt for all humanity.

The Pope Francis said as much to the Americans in his historic speech to them in Congress, a few weeks ago on Sept 24? Do not be obsessed by the numbers, he said. Think of each one of them as individuals. Look into their eyes, look at their faces. They are humans. and deserve humane attention. After all, he said remember that most of the peoples both in North and South America were once “foreigners” and “immigrants.”

The demand for the abolishing of nuclear weapons, the effort to protect the environment and develop the sense of respect for nature, human rights for the individual all become part of a universal message accessible and acceptable by people in religious traditions deeply suspicious of each other in ordinary circumstances.

Ahimsa, “pity for living beings,” is the central tenet in Buddhism and Jainism shared in spirit by Islam. Christianity and Judaism. This, of course, is perfectly aligned with our preoccupation with human rights. What are human rights after all except a concern for the fates of human beings? It is about empathy for human beings and their rights, which are being trampled upon by nasty regimes of various kinds all over the world. So, in that sense Ikeda Daisaku has once again put his finger on one of the burning issues of our time.

But let me add, of course, that this, “pity for living beings,” is a point that is shared to some extent by all the great religious traditions. They are all preoccupied with the question of the sacredness of the inner life of the individual, the preciousness of the particular person, and the precariousness of life. These fundamental matters are universal concerns that we cannot and must never forget.

It has been a great pleasure for me to address you on these very important matters and I am grateful to you for listening to my thoughts. Thank you.