

Contemporary Thought on Gandhism and Buddhism

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ALLOW me first to offer my sincere felicitations on the holding of the Indo-Japan Joint Symposium co-organized by the National Gandhi Museum and the Institute of Oriental Philosophy.

Throughout my life, I have embraced the deepest respect for India as a land of profound spirituality, the cradle of Buddhism and birthplace of Mahatma Gandhi. It is thus with a sense of its profound significance that I welcome the holding of this symposium, which brings together intellectual and moral leaders of India who are heir to Gandhi's spiritual legacy along with researchers from the Institute of Oriental Philosophy to offer contemporary perspectives on Gandhism and Buddhism.

I am confident that this undertaking will contribute to putting behind us forever the violence and war that have so long stained human history. And I have further expectations that it will help generate the kind of energy and vision needed to propel us toward the creation of a new global civilization, one embracing the whole of humankind in the spirit of nonviolence and peace.

I wish to take this opportunity to pay my deepest respects to the National Gandhi Museum for their lofty endeavours to preserve the record of Gandhi's life and transmit his undying spirit to the entire world. I would also like to express my profound gratitude to The Nehru Memorial Museum, which honours Jawaharlal Nehru, Gandhi's comrade and successor who implemented the ideal of nonviolence amidst the realities of politics, for so kindly providing the venue for this symposium.

I am extremely pleased that academic exchange agreement has just been concluded between the Institute of Oriental Philosophy and the National Gandhi Museum. It is our hope and expectation that rich and fruitful exchange benefiting all humanity will develop with the important institution.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge and express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Inder Kumar Gujral, Former Prime Minister of India, Dr. B.R. Nanda, Chairman of the National Gandhi Museum, Dr. O.P. Kejriwal,

Director of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, and all our distinguished guests and friends who have made time today to attend this event.

I recall with great fondness my meetings with Dr. Gujral. They unfurl before my mind's eye like bright and vivid tapestries.

The first was in October 1997, when I had the great honour of paying a visit to Dr. Gujral at his official residence in New Delhi. On that occasion, he shared with me that, having become prime minister on the auspicious juncture of the 50th anniversary of India's independence, his determination was to convey Gandhi's legacy throughout the world.

The following year, Dr. Gujral most generously visited Soka University in Tokyo, Japan. During the course of our meeting he expressed his view that the principles of nonviolence advocated by Gandhi were a contemporary application of the Buddha's teachings. In the light of the philosophy of nonviolence, he stated, civilisations are fundamentally interrelated. No civilisation can remain indifferent if the forces of good are defeated and the forces of evil thrive elsewhere. If evil is left unchallenged, it will engulf and undermine all civilisations.

The forces of good are the forces of peace and nonviolence. The forces of evil are those of violence and war. Evil tears apart the bonds linking human beings, destroying people, societies, civilisations and nature. Conversely, good bridges and binds people's hearts; it brings together and unites the human family, enabling humans to live and prosper in harmony with the natural ecosystem.

Thus if one civilisation can successfully negotiate the transition to nonviolence and peace, it will positively impact all civilisations, setting in motion waves of solidarity and strengthening the forces of good. The speed and reach of this positive impact is amplified in today's world by the accelerating processes of economic integration and the global spread of information technologies. The challenges of globalisation, the challenge of creating a truly embracing global civilisation can only be met through a deep commitment to values of peace and nonviolence.

The lineage of nonviolence, fostered over India's millennial history, has been transmitted by an unbroken flow of "great souls," from the ancient philosophers of the Upanishad, Gautama Buddha, and in modern times, by Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru.

In ancient India, the example of Ashoka the Great shines as an outstanding ruler who embodied and applied the spirit of nonviolence to the world of politics, contributing to the flourishing of the civilisation of his times through his enlightened policies.

In the wake of his invasion of the neighbouring state of Kalinga,

Ashoka experienced a painful awakening to the reality of war and, moved by a profound sense of remorse, renounced conquest by force. Awakened to an earnest faith in Buddhism, he saw that the victory of military force in fact signals the defeat of the human spirit. He thus determined that his rule would be in accordance with the Dharma and in this way established a peaceful reign based on the Buddha's teachings.

A passage from the Edicts of King Asoka reads: "Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi [King Ashoka], conquered the Kalingas eight years after his coronation. 150,000 were deported, 100,000 were killed and many more died [from other causes]. After the Kalingas had been conquered, Beloved-of-the-Gods came to feel a strong inclination towards the Dharma, a love for the Dharma and for instruction in Dharma."

Although himself a devout Buddhist, Ashoka embraced the spirit of tolerance and carefully guarded the religious freedom of others. Moreover, he believed the essence of politics is to return that which is owed to others, in other words, to serve the interests of the people with a sense of gratitude and appreciation.

In order to spread the spirit of the Dharma beyond his domain, he sent envoys and emissaries as far as the western realms of Asia Minor, Syria, Persia, Egypt, and Macedonia. He also sent his son Mahendra to Ceylon. In this way, he conducted a peace diplomacy that transcended differences of language and custom.

In his great work *The Discovery of India*, Jawaharlal Nehru speaks highly of Ashoka's reign, stating, "The astonishing ruler, beloved still in India and in many other parts of Asia, devoted himself to the spread of Buddha's teaching, to righteousness and goodwill, and to public works for the good of the people."

Nehru also described Mahatma Gandhi, stating that his advent was "like a beam of light that pierced the darkness and removed the scales from our eyes; like a whirlwind that upset many things, but most of all the working of people's minds." And also that, "Gandhi has straightened our backs and stiffened our spines." Gandhi said his ambition was "to wipe every tear from every eye." True to his words, his actions constantly stemmed from his overflowing love and affection for the people.

The spirit of nonviolent struggle was inherited and embodied by Gandhiji's young disciples, including Nehru, Dr. G. Ramachandran and Dr. Bishambhar Nath Pande. And further, the influence of the "great soul" extended beyond the borders of India, inspiring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the United States, providing the spiritual direction for nonviolent revolution in Eastern Europe, and courageously practiced by Nelson Mandela in South Africa.

Over the centuries, the Buddhist teachings of nonviolence and compassion first expounded by Gautama have enriched the spiritual lives of the people of Asia. In Japan, this spirit has been succeeded by Prince Shotoku, the Great Teacher Dengyo, and in the 13th century, Nichiren.

Moreover, in the 20th century, this spirit was embodied by Soka Gakkai founding President Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and second President Josei Toda. Inspired by the teachings of Buddhism, they opposed Japanese militarism, never compromising the spirit of nonviolence and compassion for the people. This was at just the same time when Gandhi, Dr. Raghu Vira, the esteemed father of Dr. Lokesh Chandra who is present today, and Jawaharlal Nehru were waging their nonviolent struggle in India.

In 1997, I had the privilege of speaking at the Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies. On that occasion, I expressed my sense of the importance of India's role in world history.

I stated my belief that China, the United States and India will emerge as three pivotal countries in the world of the 21st century. I expressed my conviction that India's continued flourishing and development is of vital importance to world stability; that there is a powerful sense of expectation for a brilliant new "Indian Renaissance"; and, most crucially, that India's message of nonviolence is of paramount significance to humanity now and in the future.

Our world continues to be threatened by savage torrents of violence, stemming from parochial nationalism, terrorist ideologies, hegemonic ambitions and unbridled materialism.

It is only by fundamentally strengthening the power of the spirit that our world will at last triumph over violence. I believe that the examples of India's spiritual giants—Gautama Buddha, King Ashoka, and Mahatma Gandhi—illuminate the path and show clearly the direction in which humanity should advance in this new era.

In closing, I would like to offer these lines by Rabindranath Tagore, the great sage-poet whose words have been my soul's companion since my youth.

Our voyage is begun, Captain, we bow to thee!
The storm howls and the waves are wicked and wild, but we sail on.
The menace of danger waits in the way to yield to thee its offering of pain,
and a voice in the heart of the tempest cries: "Com to conquer fear!"

Lastly, I wish to extend my heartfelt wishes for the good health and well-being of all the distinguished participants today, and for the further

flourishing of the esteemed National Gandhi Museum and the Nehru Memorial Museum.

Thank you very much.