

Gandhism and Buddhism: A Modern Perspective

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I would first like to offer my heartfelt appreciation to Dr. Gujral and everyone else present for taking time out of your busy schedules to attend this symposium.

Next, I would like to announce that The National Gandhi Museum and the Institute of Oriental Philosophy have just signed an agreement to have formal exchanges, and today's symposium is the first academic exchange in our newly established relationship.

The theme for this symposium, "Gandhism and Buddhism," could not be more appropriate as the history of human civilization now faces a great turning point. Through our exchange, I hope that our two institutions representing India and Japan can deepen their knowledge and understanding of our respective views, and create a "spiritual guidepost" for future generations to follow.

Both Gandhi and the founder of Buddhism, Shakyamuni, were great leaders of the world firmly rooted in the rich spiritual and cultural traditions of the eternal "Great Land of the Spirit"—India. Even now, their teachings for all humanity attempt to steer this struggling world from the "Century of War and Violence" to a new "Century of Peace and Nonviolence."

In 1961 at Buddhagaya, India, SGI President Ikeda stood at the place where Shakyamuni attained his enlightenment and envisioned creating a center from which the philosophy of Buddhist compassion and wisdom could radiate from the Eastern hemisphere to the rest of the world. His wish was to break the karmic chains of violence and hate that have dominated the history of mankind for thousands of years. To accomplish this mission, he established the Institute of Oriental Philosophy the following year in 1962.

As it is widely known, Shakyamuni, after attaining enlightenment, headed toward Varanasi, and gave his first sermon to his former fellow ascetic practitioners, and recruited 60 youth as his disciples before setting out in earnest to share his teachings. Then, he went to Uruvilva, and instructed and converted three Brahman brothers and their 1,000 disci-

ples. On his way to Rajagriha, the capital of the great ancient kingdom of Magadha, he stopped to climb Mount Gayashirsha and delivered a famous sermon.

After climbing to the top of the hill, he gazed down upon the lights of the city below, and began preaching with the words, “My disciples, everything burns.”

“What kinds of fires consume us? The fires of greed, anger and stupidity consume us. We are also consumed by the flames of birth and aging and sickness and death, depression, sadness, suffering, anxiety, and agony.”

The flames of earthly desires abound in the world around us—the fires of the three poisons of greed, anger and stupidity rage on, causing the four sufferings and other woes. He explains that these fires are the underlying reasons for man’s suffering.

This sermon was later crystallized by the compilers of the Lotus Sutra as “the parable of the three carts and the burning house.” In the “Simile and Parable” chapter of the Lotus Sutra, it is stated, “... these living beings have not yet escaped from birth, old age, sickness, death, care and suffering, but are consumed by the flames in the burning house that is the threefold world.” (—from *Lotus Sutra*, p.60)

Fueled by the three poisons, the flames of earthly desires surge from the depths of an individual’s life, and embroil family, race, country, and eventually all of mankind as well as the environment and all of its living beings. With piercing insight, Shakyamuni observed this reality of life.

The terrorist attacks on September 11th in the United States at the beginning of the 21st century came at a time when our modern materialistic civilization had made great strides. It was a tragedy that forced us to confront the consequences of all the violence and greed that drove our materialistic society—a modern metaphor for the “threefold world and the burning house.” The “burning house” now includes Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine. The flames of earthly desires are erupting in the form of war and terrorist attacks in locations throughout the world.

Immediately following September 11th, SGI President Ikeda wrote an essay entitled, “The Evil over which We Must Triumph,” and in this essay, he urges us to take this opportunity to stand back and re-evaluate the nature of our current civilization.

For much of our history, humanity has been trapped in vicious cycles of hatred and reprisal... It is the function of evil to divide; to alienate people from each other and to divide one country from another. The universe, this world, and our own lives are the stage for a ceaseless

struggle between hatred and compassion, the destructive and constructive aspects of life.

... Unless we can achieve a fundamental transformation within our own lives, so that we are able to perceive our intimate connection with all our fellow human beings and feel their sufferings as our own, we will never be free of conflict and war. In this sense, I feel that a “hard power” approach, one that relies on military might, will not lead to a long-term, fundamental resolution. (—from *From the Ashes*, p. 106)

He states that in order to overcome the forces of hatred, violence and greed that currently persist, we need to shift society’s focus to develop the qualities of compassion, nonviolence and self-control. This is the same path of empowerment that has been shown to us by Shakyamuni and Gandhi.

Early in the 20th century, Gandhi has eloquently demonstrated the spiritual power of nonviolence as a force to overcome the power of the sword.

I am not a dreamer. I consider myself a pragmatic idealist... Just as violence is the law of the jungle, nonviolence is the law of humanity. The spiritual mind is dormant in animals, and therefore, they know no other law than that of the flesh. The dignity of man comes from having a higher spirituality. Based on this, we can say that man is under obligation to yield to spiritual power. (—from *Young India*, August 11, 1920)

The 21st century marks the beginning of the third millennium. Humanity faces a host of global issues including nuclear weapons, terrorism, war, extreme poverty, disregard of human rights, discrimination based on sex, religion and race, and the destruction of ecosystems and environments around the world. These larger issues directly manifest on the individual level, as blatant self-centeredness, violence, and greed and a general weakening and division of the spirit of humanity within people.

Therefore, it may be said that the violence that exists today, can be felt not only as direct violence, but also on deeper levels as structural violence and cultural violence, as categorized by Dr. Johan Galtung. Also, not only is the scope of this violence and delusion limited to the individual mind, it affects society on the family, race and state level, as well as humanity as a whole.

In order to change humanity’s direction from that of violence and war to nonviolence and peace, and from that of stimulation of evil to the expansion of good, unceasing efforts must be made on all levels and in all areas over a long period of time.

Not only for a select few, but all of mankind must find a way to live in harmony with nature, and in order to have sustainable development into the future, we must follow the path of nonviolence and symbiosis shown to us by Shakyamuni and Gandhi. My sincere wish is that through this symposium we will be able to inspire each other to develop a deeper insight into wisdom and action that will help us transform violence and delusions into nonviolence and well-being for all.