

# A CIVILISATION PREDICATED ON DIALOGUE

By Daisaku Ikeda

**TOKYO, Aug 4 2008 (IPS)** - There has never been a time when it was more important for us to inspire each other by learning from our differences or holding a creative dialogue of the wise, writes Daisaku Ikeda, a Japanese Buddhist philosopher and peace-builder and president of the Soka Gakkai International (SGI) grassroots Buddhist movement. Common to all of the thinkers and leaders from various fields and nationalities with whom I have engaged in dialogue over the years is an earnest prayer and deep determination to see the 21st century become a century of peace and dialogue, in contrast to the century of war and violence that was the 20th. There is absolutely no reason why we cannot rise above the divisive crises that confront our contemporary world. Dialogue is the surest path to peace. And it is a path open to all of us, starting from wherever we are, starting now. Dialogue is an adventure, a means of discovering the uniqueness, mystery, and familiarity of humanity. It is the wellspring of ceaseless and unimpeded value creation.

More than 2,000 years ago, an Indian Buddhist named Nagasena was summoned to engage in a dialogue with King Milinda, the Hellenic monarch of a kingdom in Northwest India. At the outset, Nagasena faced the king and asked: Highness, when you conduct dialogue, do you speak as a wise man, or do you speak as a monarch?

Nagasena's words cut to the heart of the king's dogmatic arrogance as a supreme ruler. His question was a way of insisting that they explore the truth together on an equal basis, as two human beings who would learn from each other in a dialogue of the wise.

This encounter opened King Milinda's eyes, prompting him to set aside his pride and dedicate himself instead to the development of human wisdom. The frank exchange of ideas between these two resulted in a meeting of East and West, a merging of the finest points of classical Hellenic thought and Indian philosophy, with an enduring impact on the spiritual history of humankind.

This dramatic example of dialogue contains lessons that should be heeded by the leaders of the world today. There has never been a time when it was more important for us to inspire each other by learning from our differences, or when we have had such need for a creative dialogue of the wise.

The G8 Hokkaido Toyako Summit held in Japan this July saw a record number of participating countries – twenty-two. The heads of government of the eight original nations were joined at the negotiating table for expanded meetings on climate change and development issues by the heads of government of some of the

other countries on the front lines of these issues.

Setting aside the concrete outcome of these meetings, I feel this expansion of the summit process is of great significance. Indeed, I have long called for wider participation in these summits as I believe this is a crucial element in the creation of a civilisation predicated on dialogue. The surest way to benefit humanity – and the entire planet – is to expand a network of dialogue grounded in a wider sense of community and a shared responsibility for the future.

The mark of wisdom lies, more than anything else, in the ability to listen. Specifically, faced as we are with a multitude of pressing global issues, it is essential to make every effort to listen to the opinions of people whose position is different from our own, especially the more vulnerable, the so-called voiceless: to corral the wisdom of all people.

At the same time, it is the mark of the wise to exercise great perseverance. Where progress is not smooth, we need the wisdom to seek out realistic common ground and the determination to continue dialogue, come what may.

I am reminded of the Reykjavik Summit between Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan in 1986. Effectively, their negotiations ended in stalemate. But at the press conference following the summit, Gorbachev refused to concede that the talks had broken down, stating they had been a first step toward further negotiations. This influenced the Americans to adopt a similar stance, prompting a reappraisal and a more positive, forward-looking approach. History shows that this strong determination to engage in dialogue contributed, in a quiet yet profound way, to the process that ultimately brought the Cold War to an end.

When, some years later, I met with Gorbachev, there were many who questioned whether a meeting between a Buddhist and the leader of a communist superpower could generate any meaningful outcome.

During our meeting, we discussed the memories we both shared of the misery and cruelty of war that we had experienced when young, agreeing that our generation could be defined as the children of war. Having located this common ground, we talked about our shared determination to extract meaningful lessons for the future.

Whatever our ethnicity, whatever our religion, we all have families we love, and there is a future we all want to protect. And no human being can escape the eternal rhythms of life: birth, aging, sickness, death. When we are grounded in this most fundamental perspective of the commonality of our lives, we can rise above any differences and without fail achieve empathy and dialogue.

Common to all of the thinkers and leaders from various fields and nationalities with whom I have engaged in dialogue over the years is an earnest prayer and deep determination to see the 21st century become a century of peace and dialogue, in contrast to the century of war and violence that was the 20th.

Dialogue is not a simplistic assertion of one's own position, nor is it necessarily about bringing others to one's point of view. Dialogue succeeds when it is grounded in respect for the other's life, when it's propelled by a determination to learn when confronted with differences in personality and perspective.

In the Buddhist scriptures there is a beautiful passage that reads: When we bow to a mirror, the figure in the mirror bows back to us in reverence.

Whether it is between individuals or between civilisations, if one is too proud and begrudges the act of dialogue, if one ceases to learn, there can be no growth, no progress. A civilisation predicated on dialogue is a civilisation predicated on learning, on growth.

In stark contrast, the failure of dialogue promises only the division of humanity by egoism and mistrust, and an ever-deepening cycle of hatred and violence.

The British historian Arnold Toynbee was convinced that dialogue was the key to finding human responses to the challenges of history. He once declared: Of all human phenomena, the one for which no set pattern in fact exists is the field of encounter and contact between one personality and another. It is from such encounter and contact that truly new creativity arises.

There is absolutely no reason why we cannot rise above the divisive crises that confront our contemporary world. Dialogue is the surest path to peace. And it is a path open to all of us, starting from wherever we are, starting now. Dialogue is an adventure, a means of discovering the uniqueness, mystery, and familiarity of humanity. It is the wellspring of ceaseless and unimpeded value creation. (END/COPYRIGHT IPS)