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INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AS THE PATHWAY TOWARDS PEACE

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Peace and harmony have been sought by humanity ever since the dawn of civilization. And yet the whole of human history, from the very earliest times, is replete with wars and violent conflicts from the-tribal right up to the international level. All religions preach peace, but in fact religion has been one of the major sources of violent conflict down through the centuries, and remains so even today, despite the worldwide growing Interfaith movement in which I am actively involved. Science was supposed to help establish peace, but it has created increasingly deadly weapons of mass destruction, so that a single nuclear warhead now packs explosive power equal to one thousand of the bombs that obliterated Hiroshima and Nagasaki half a century ago. Communism, socialism, capitalism, democracy - all claimed the desire to establish peace, but all invariably waged war. Even as I speak, dozens of local and regional conflicts are raging around the world, and thousands perish every month as a result.

As against these negative approaches, however, all the great spiritual traditions of the world tell us that there is, deep within our consciousness, a creative power that, if invoked and nurtured, can bring about a benign transformation in our thoughts and behavior. The lives and thoughts of saints and seers from all the great religions of the world bear this out, and though it may be unrealistic to expect such capacities in ordinary people, it does impel us to look deeper into this holistic philosophy of peace in its varied dimensions. I have identified five dimensions of peace which need our consideration, looked upon not as parallel lines but as concentric circles, beginning and ending with the only two irreducible and indivisible units - the individual at the one end and Planet Earth that we inhabit at the other. Let me start with the entity with which we are expected to be most familiar, ourselves. It is a common misconception that just because we are aware of our outer existence, we really know the depths of our own psyche. In the East it has been accepted for thousands of years that the outer personality is simply an ever-changing and temporary habitation for an inner, immortal spark - call it the soul, the Atman or whatever. In India there has developed over the last thirty centuries an entire science of introspection and inner development known by the generic term Yoga, a psycho-spiritual discipline designed to unite the divinity immanent and the divinity transcendent, of which the outer physical exercises known by that name in the West are merely a small part. With the development of depth psychology in the West, particularly with C.G. Jung who must be ranked as one of the most creative thinkers of the 20th century, and with the unique heritage of Zen masters in Japan, modern psychology has at last realized that our conscious minds are simply like the surface of an ocean, constantly buffeted by waves and typhoons, harboring in its depths numerous creatures, friendly as well as hostile. The spiritual and mystic traditions of humanity are informed by the belief that there resides deep within us a divine spark which is capable of being fanned into the blazing fire of spiritual realization. As the seer of the Upanishad proclaims "I have seen that great Being shining like a thousand suns beyond the darkness. It is only by knowing this that we can cross the ocean of darkness and death". This quest constitutes our spiritual challenge as human beings endowed with an unquenchable thirst for the greater reality pervading our everyday consciousness.

This inner spiritual link is the true foundation of the Interfaith movement. It binds the entire human race into a single family, cutting across all barriers of nationality and religion, caste and creed, sex and social status. What the Hindus call *ântarik shânti*, Buddhists the *Bodhi Chitta*, Chinese the *Tao*, and Christians 'the peace that passeth understanding' is, therefore, the first pre-requisite in our quest for peace. How we achieve this, whether through *Jnâna*

Yoga, the way of study and contemplation, *Bhakti* Yoga, the way of emotional outpouring towards a personalized manifestation of the divine; Karma Yoga, the way of dedicated works and good deeds; *Rāja* Yoga, the way of internal spiritual practices, meditation and ecstatic gnosis; or a combination of these various paths, will depend on the inner and outer configuration of each individual's life situation. But the point is that the effort has consciously to be made; spiritual progress does not occur automatically without strenuous inner effort, any more than training for the Olympics can be achieved without prolonged and vigorous physical disciplines.

The second circle in which all of us move is the family, which is the most fundamental social grouping and, despite its widespread erosion in the West, remains the bedrock of society. If our family relationships are full of conflict and struggle, we are unlikely to be able to find inner peace or make any meaningful contribution towards establishing it in society. Family relationships have two basic dimensions, the husband-wife relationship and the parent-children relationship, in both of which tension and strife are becoming increasingly widespread. An important point here revolves around the status of women. In many contemporary societies this status is still far from satisfactory, and women tend to be relegated to an inferior position. In the West one sometimes gets the impression that the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction, perhaps to compensate for past injustices. What is needed is a harmonious balance between the two. In the Hindu tradition, we have the remarkable concept of *Ardhanārīshwara*, Lord Shiva as half male and half female. This creative fusion is ideally reflected on the social plane in the concept of the wife as *ardhāngini*, equal sharer and partner in the adventure of life. Thus, neither the traditional Eastern custom of the woman, walking three paces behind her husband, nor the curious Western practice of their walking three paces ahead, is satisfactory. Walking side by side is symbolically the ideal arrangement.

With regard to the tension between the generations, one reason it is getting more pronounced is that the pace of change has accelerated, and as a result there is increasing psychological gulf between children and their parents. Here again, the interests of harmony are best served by steering a middle course between the parental domination of traditional societies and the virtual alienation of children in Western society. Young people today are imbued with great talent, and there needs to be a continuous inter-generational dialogue so, that the creative energies of youth can be harnessed to the quest for a sane and harmonious global society. In this context Peace Education must find a place in the curricula of schools and colleges around the world. In our quest for peace we have to begin with our immediate family, as that is the experimental workshop in which we can learn the virtues of understanding and love, compassion and co-ordination. It is a microcosm of the larger global society defined in Hindu scriptures as *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, the world as a family.

As we move beyond the family circle, we come to the third dimension in our quest for peace, which involves the wider society in which we live. There are many areas here including religious communities, caste affiliations, linguistic groupings, professional associations, political bodies and so on. In the present age we necessarily interact with a wide spectrum of such social groupings, and in our interface with each one of them we have to work towards a peaceful settlement of disputes and a creative interaction of different visions and opposing viewpoints to prevent conflicts -from erupting. Each of these areas can contribute to the growth of social cohesion, but are also potentially a source of acute conflict as we see from our own experience in India and other countries. A purposeful movement towards a more equitable economic order is also essential if the social tensions are not to overwhelm large portions of the planet. Ultimately a world in which the top 10% appropriate 90% of the world's wealth is not a sustainable paradigm.

The rapid changes in technology have brought about a major change in the texture of social intercourse. Gone are the virtually self-sufficient villages or the professional guilds of artisans and craftsmen bound together by their commitment to a common undertaking. Much of modern production tends to be impersonal, and the growth of industrial slums in many parts

of the world represents a potent source of social tension and conflict. The growing spectre of the malign underworld of drugs and drug-related violence, and the shameful trafficking in human beings, represent a grave hurdle in our quest for social peace and harmony. Unless there is a concerted drive to eradicate poverty around the world, these tensions will surely erupt into deadly conflicts that will engulf even the affluent nations.

We come fourthly to the political structure that has played such a predominant role in human history over the last few centuries – the nation state. Although its claim to total sovereignty has become increasingly untenable, the nation state is still the most powerful form of social organization in our present civilization. Here again, its record has been mixed. While it has certainly led to great progress and cohesion, it has also resulted in endless conflicts between nations and between various ethnic, linguistic and political groups within nations. Today we have, on the one hand, the extraordinary spectacle of nationalism being transcended in the development of the European community, a truly historic event in human history, where nations which were at war with each other for centuries and through their colonial rivalries kept the whole world in a state of turmoil, have at last overcome their animosities and are moving rapidly towards a common market, free travel, a common currency and a common parliament. On the other hand, we have witnessed the disintegration first of the Soviet Empire, and then of Yugoslavia, both of which broke up into their often mutually antagonistic constituent ethnic units, while secessionist movements are creating zones of tension and strife around the world.

This dual process of the reassertion of sub-nationalism and the transcending of nationalism is one that is likely to continue through the 21st century. While the larger threat of the Cold War erupting into a nuclear holocaust has receded, there is enough inflammable material and modern weaponry in Europe and Asia to keep the fires of conflict burning for several decades. Somehow the whole process has to be contained within a larger framework, whether of regional groupings like the European Community, ASEAN, SAARC or the United Nations itself, which is in urgent need of updating and democratization.

This brings me to the fifth dimension, the quest for world peace. This is now no longer merely a mystical vision or an idealist utopia, it has become an imperative for the very survival of the human race. The growth of weapons technology has been so awesome that with nuclear weapons we can destroy not only the human race but all life forms on this planet. Even non-nuclear conflicts like the Gulf Wars have caused massive casualties and appalling damage to the biosphere and the environment of our planet. It is, therefore, essential for us to find mechanisms for a peaceful resolution of disputes between nation states.

This links directly with the Interfaith movement which can be said to have begun in 1893 when the first Parliament of World's Religions convened in Chicago, where Swami Vivekananda made such an abiding impact. There were 6000 delegates there in 1893, at the end of the 19th century. During the 20th century several Interfaith organizations developed including the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), the World Council of Religions for Peace (WCRP), the Temple of Understanding (ToU) of which I am Chairman worldwide, the United Religions Initiative (URI) and the Chicago Group. There were a whole series of Interfaith meetings around the world in the last century. In 1993, the Second Parliament of the World's Religions met again in Chicago, exactly a hundred years after the first one. In 1999, the Third Parliament was held in Cape Town, South Africa. A remarkable event took place in 2000; the United Nations held the Millennium World Peace Summit for Spiritual and Religious Leaders in New York in the main hall of the United Nations building. I had the privilege of presiding over its First Plenary Session. The Fourth Parliament is scheduled to be held in Barcelona, Spain, in July 2004.

The Interfaith dialogue includes Interfaith prayers, roundtables, ~ seminars and symposia, and interaction at many levels. It is particularly important that Interfaith values are reflected in educational curricula around the world. Exclusionist and monopolistic claims to religious

truths must give place to a more balanced and inclusivist approach.. While in the 20th century the Interfaith movement did grow, it is not yet a central movement. My hope is that in the same way as the Environmental movement moved quite recently from the periphery to the centre of human concerns, the Interfaith movement too will become central in the years to come. A great deal of work is being done in the various faiths. Beautiful temples, mosques, gurudwaras, churches, and other places of worship are being built, but the Interfaith movement, as such, is yet nobody's baby. Unless the Interfaith movement comes centre stage, things are not going to fall into place in the global society emerging before our very eyes.

The question is not whether we are going to have global society, but what sort of global society we are going to have. Will it be based upon exploitation, negativities, crime, hatred and fanaticism, or are we going to have a sane and harmonious global society based on Interfaith understanding and peaceful conflict resolution? Like the roads in Robert Frost's poem, or indeed in the Katha Upanishad thousands of years earlier, two paths now lie before us. One could lead through a concerted and multi-dimensional quest for peace and continuing Interfaith dialogue, towards a sane and equitable world civilization, in which the scarce resources of Planet Earth are used to provide the necessary material, intellectual and spiritual inputs for a decent civilized life to all human beings. The other is the path of conflict and disharmony, fundamentalism and fanaticism, which will inevitably result in the destruction of human civilization as we now know it.

As the great seer and evolutionary thinker Sri Aurobindo stressed so eloquently in his monumental works, what is needed at this stage of human destiny is neither a philosophy of total transcendence which would leave human beings essentially powerless, nor a philosophy of immanence alone which leaves the world at the mercy of the hostile powers. Rather, the contemporary discussion has to revolve around an integrated, holistic philosophy in which human existence is looked upon as a rare gift to be utilized both for inner development and for the welfare of society and the world. This, in turn, postulates the urgent need for a worldwide, multidimensional Interfaith dialogue. The International Peace Foundation deserves kudos for its initiative in promoting a wide-ranging series of Dialogues Towards a Culture of Peace here in this beautiful and ancient Kingdom of Thailand.

Religion has been one of the major civilizational forces in human history. Much that is great and noble - art and architecture, dance and music, literature and moral codes, law and legal structures - can be traced back to one or other of the great religions of the world. At the same time it is a tragic fact that more people have been killed and tortured, burnt and persecuted in the name of religion than on any other account, and the supreme irony is that each religion looks upon the Divine as being compassionate and merciful. This essentially contradictory situation must not be allowed to continue into the nuclear age. It has now to be recognized that all the great religions of the world represent so many different strivings towards the divine and that, in the final analysis, they all represent what the Veda postulates as *Ekam sad viprâh bahudhâ vadanti* - the Truth is One, the wise call it by many names.

We may certainly believe and claim that our own path is the most appropriate, but that does not justify our condemning or persecuting those who follow other paths. Let us accept with grace that for every religious belief there is a majority of humankind which does not accept it. Therefore, discarding fanaticism and fundamentalism that represent obnoxious aberrations of the noble paths of religion, let us adopt a philosophy that accepts multiple paths to the divine that not only tolerates other religions but welcomes the plurality of human striving for the divine. Unless we move conceptually onto a new dimension of Interfaith dialogue and harmony, any hope of an integrated human being living in a sane and peaceful global society will remain an evanescent dream.

Let me close with one of the most ancient prayers for peace known to humanity, one that has echoed and re-echoed for millennia down the corridors of time from the dawn of Vedic

civilization, and is chanted in India even today as it was thousands of years ago in the incomparable glory of the great Himalayas:

Peaceful be heaven, peaceful the earth,
Peaceful the broad space between
Peaceful be for us the running waters,
Peaceful the plants and herbs!
Peaceful be all the Devas,
Peaceful be the Brahman,
Peaceful be the entire universe,
May peace and only peace prevail
And may that peace come unto me.
Aum Peace, Peace, Peace.