

From the Symposium “Modern Civilization and Philosophy” in Brazil

Message

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PLEASE allow me to offer heartfelt congratulations to this symposium conducted jointly by the Brazilian Academy of Philosophy (*Academia Brasileira de Filosofia*) and the Institute of Oriental Philosophy and to thank my friend academy president João Ricardo Carneiro Moderno and all the other distinguished participants for taking time from their busy schedules to attend. In April, 2007, the Brazilian Academy of Philosophy conferred its first honorary doctorate on me. I consider this a very high honor indeed.

It is significant that representatives from numerous fields join members of our research staff to discuss the theme “Modern Civilization and Philosophy” from many viewpoints. The symposium has announced three topics of discussion: “A Vision of the Cosmos, Nature, and the Environment”, “A Vision of Life and Human Rights”, and “Women in Modern Civilization”. All three very important themes are relevant to determining the nature of the future.

A lack of philosophy can be called a fundamental cause of the impasse in which the world finds itself today. A society without philosophy is like a building without pillars. It may look splendid from the outside, but a strong wind or earthquake can easily topple it.

The Lotus Sutra, the quintessence of Mahayana Buddhism, contains many parables embodying wisdom that can help save suffering humanity. One of them is the Parable of the Three Carts and the Burning House (Chapter Three). According to it, one day, the mansion of a certain rich old man caught fire while his numerous children were still absorbed in play inside. To lure them out, the old man devised a plan. He called to them, “They [goat-carts, deer-carts, and ox-carts] are outside the gate now where you can play with them. So you must come out of this burning house at once.”¹ Delighted, the children ran out. Their father led them to a safe place where he showed them a cart pulled by pure white oxen and much more wonderful than the three he had mentioned.

The children in the story represent all sentient beings. The rich old man represents the Buddha. The children playing in the burning house are like sentient beings living in a world of suffering of which they are unaware. The three carts stand for the three teachings expounded for voice-hearers, for cause-awakened ones, and for bodhisattvas whereas the great white ox cart is the Great Vehicle, the One Great Teaching, or the Lotus Sutra itself.

The parable sets forth in concrete terms the compassionate action taken to lead people surrounded by the flames of delusion, greed for material things, anger manifest in violence and aggression, and foolishness, or the folly of basic egoism, from the conflagration (the world of suffering) into a realm of tranquility and peace. Humanity today is exactly like the children eagerly enjoying themselves in play and unaware of the fearsome burning house of suffering they occupy.

The present world confronts an array of global problems like raging conflicts; extreme inequality of wealth distribution; ethnic, racial, and gender prejudices; discrimination; suppression of human rights; environmental destruction; global warming; and loss of biodiversity. Surely a wise, philanthropic philosophy consistently devoted to the dignity of life and respect for humanity is the spiritual mainstay whereby we can overcome these difficulties and build lasting peace enabling humanity to live in a harmoniously symbiotic relation within the natural ecology. As President Moderno has said, if dialogue starts with respect for the dignity of life and human rights, individuals and nations alike should be able to protect universal values. Conversely, there can be no dialogue where the dignity of life is not respected. Under such conditions, lasting peace cannot be realized.

In our *A Dialogue on Astronomy and Buddhism*, Director Ronaldo Mourão explained his own guiding philosophy. He criticized modern society for undervaluing human life and argued that human beings alone are capable of starting from their inner selves, changing the world, and discovering their own possibilities for peace.

The great Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1921–97) explained the importance of dialogue in this way: “The thinking subject cannot think alone; he or she cannot think without the co-participation of other subjects in the act of thinking about the object. There is no ‘I think’, there is ‘we think’...”

Transcending their merely educational application, these words clearly identify the human being as a dialogue-being. Dialogue discloses human nature as depending on others; that is, the self does not exist by and for itself alone but only in relation to others.

The present symposium embodies mutual learning and cooperation between the occidental philosophical current as represented by Brazilian thought and Buddhism-centered oriental philosophy. It can make contributions to humanity as a venue of East-West philosophical dialogue that, proclaiming the dignity of life, points the way to developing the good inherent in human beings and eliminating evils like delusion. Repeated over and over, such dialogue can transmit the high morality of philanthropy, compassion, nonviolence, wisdom, equality, trust, courage, and hope from one individual to another and thence to humankind as a whole. In a fine solidarity of respect for the dignity of life and maximum protection for human rights, there can be no obstructing racial, cultural, or ideological barriers. I wholeheartedly expect this symposium to point the way to a global civilization radiant with the best of humanity by shining the wise light emanating from profound philosophical theories of the cosmos, humanity, and life.

I should like to conclude my message with prayers for the continued and amplified good health and vitality of all the guests who have assembled for this symposium.

Note

¹ *The Lotus Sutra*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 57.