

Feature: The Possibility of Buddhism for the Future of Humankind

From the Second Symposium with the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies

On April 6 and 7, 2016, the Institute of Oriental Philosophy (IOP) held the symposium, “The Possibility of Buddhism for the Future of Humankind” with the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies (OCBS), a Recognized Independent Centre of the University of Oxford that was founded in 2004, which conducts a wide range of research including studies of Early Buddhist Manuscripts as well as Buddhist theories and practices.

IOP and OCBS signed an academic exchange agreement in 2012 and co-organized a symposium entitled, “The Possibility of Buddhism for the Future of Humankind” in March 2014 as part of the IOP’s annual conference in Tokyo.

The second symposium and discussion were held on the aforementioned theme. Two presenters delivered their speeches in each session below:

Session 1 Buddhism and Action—On Violence and Peace

Session 2 Buddhism and Pragmatism—Buddhism’s Impact on Social Change

Session 3 Buddhism and Science—Buddhist Practice and Science-Based Functions that Address Physical and Mental Health

This journal includes the opening address by OCBS Founder-President, Professor Gombrich and six papers presented at the symposium.



Dr. Onish, IOP Research Fellow giving a presentation, “Buddhist Organizations and Their Response to Natural Disasters.” Front left: Prof. Gombrich, Founder-President of OCBS. (At Wolfson College, University of Oxford)

Opening Address

Richard Gombrich

Ladies and Gentlemen,

IT is my honour and privilege to open this symposium. Let me welcome you all. First and foremost I welcome our colleagues from the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, Tokyo, led by the greatly respected and distinguished Dr Kawada. The OCBS, of which I am the Academic Director, is proud and happy to have a Memorandum of Understanding with the IOP. This stems from the previous visit here by Dr Kawada and his colleagues. Under the terms of this document, the IOP and the OCBS pledge to undertake academic collaboration in the study of Buddhism. Not only that: the IOP undertakes to publish some of our work in their journal every year, and to pay us for it. In fact the use to which most of this money is put is to maintain and operate a library of Buddhist books, both primary and secondary sources; this is a lending library, kept in our offices, and anyone may join and borrow books, or read them on our premises.

You all have copies of the academic programme this afternoon and tomorrow morning. So I now turn to my own brief academic address.

The theme on which my colleague Dr Suren Rāghavan and I were invited to speak to the IOP conference in Tokyo almost exactly two years ago was what potential Buddhism held to improve the future of mankind; and the IOP have decided that in this small follow-up symposium the overall theme should remain the same. It certainly is a vast theme, far beyond what even two conferences could hope to do justice to. For my opening address this afternoon I have only a few minutes, certainly not enough even to open up a new avenue for further exploration of this overall theme. I hope that I may therefore be forgiven if I use my time to expand on a couple of the points that I introduced, but could say only a little about, when I spoke in Tokyo.

Greatest Threat comes from War and Violence

The diffusion of power has led to nuclear proliferation, and deadly

weapons have fallen into the hands of leaders whom it has not been easy to deter from using them. For example, it is not sure that such rational considerations as the balance of power will deter North Korea from using nuclear weapons. On the other hand, we have seen Syria using chemical weapons in a civil war, and the Syrian government dropping barrel bombs on schools and hospitals; only the remains of the dual hegemony of Russian and the United States was able to settle the poison gas crisis—and not even to settle it finally. Meanwhile war crimes have been taking place in the Yemen. In fact things are only getting worse, and it is now said, not implausibly, that a war crime is being committed every day. As more countries and even smaller units acquire such terrible weapons, prospects are not reassuring.

Despite the recurrent threats from famine and disease, to which have been added ecological crises which grow more urgent every day, I believe that the greatest threat of all continues to come from war and violence. Two million or more refugees are now flooding out of Asia and Africa into Europe. They are suffering from hunger and disease, but we do nowadays have the capacity to do something—even if not enough—to mitigate those problems. The root cause of the problem, however is simply violence—fear for their lives. This is not wholly true of the African refugees, but it is from war and murderous feuding that almost all the Asian refugees are fleeing.

What part does Buddhism play in all this? As I argued in Tokyo, we must go back to the basic teaching of karma, which is a teaching of individual responsibility. The Buddha taught that all thoughts, words and deeds derive their moral value, positive or negative, from the intention behind them. This does not make the effects of actions irrelevant: Buddhism is no less familiar than is modern law with the idea of negligence. But the basic, invariable criterion for morality is intention. Morality and immorality are mental properties of individuals. They are a central component of every personality. One is the heir to one's own karma—and not to anyone else's!

Since karma is a matter of individual responsibility, being born into a family or being a member of any social group which one has not joined voluntarily does not entail any karmic result. On the other hand, one's karma cannot be decided for one by a greater power, whether divine or human. I cannot lay the blame for my own intentions on a god, on my father, on a teacher, on a politician—in fact, on anyone.

What are the implications of these facts?

There are still plenty of societies on this earth which believe in vengeance, the principle referred to in the Bible's Old Testament as “an eye

for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” If you have insulted me, I have the right to insult you; if you have given me a bloody nose, I have a right to bloody yours. Well, the *Dhammapada* says that hatred never ceases through hatred, so it seems elementary that we cannot accept the “eye for an eye” principle. But wait a minute! If you have insulted my mother, do I not have the right, or even the duty, to insult yours? Or, if she is not available, perhaps your sister or your wife? But then, why stop at insults? If a principle applies to insults, should it not apply in the same way to more serious forms of aggression? If your grandfather killed my father, is it not right for me to try to kill your father, or perhaps you? Once we get into this territory, we see how morally problematic are the concepts of family honour and of loyalty to a family or other group.

Stop Hating Enemies, but you need not Love them

When a serious wrong has been done to someone, it is no easy thing for the victim, or those close to the victim, to forgive it. Jesus exhorted his followers not just to forgive but even to love those who harmed them, and that is the standard prescribed for all Christians to follow. In my view, this is unreasonable and therefore impractical. Notice that the *Dhammapada* verse recommends that you should not hate those who hate you; it does not say that you must go so far as to love them. I think that if only we could not attempt heroism but simply brood less on the past and stop hating, a huge amount of the wars and violence which are so prevalent that they endanger the very survival of humankind would melt away.

But can we get to the roots? If we are aiming to diminish hatred and violence, should we not ask how they arise in the first place? This may seem to be a question so vast that it is silly even to raise it. Nevertheless, I still wish to offer a suggestion.

My suggestion can be summarised in one word: paranoia.

What, in brief, is paranoia? It is the sincere belief that other people are out to harm you. Mental hospitals are full of people who suffer from this tragic condition. It is tragic because—naturally—sufferers are frightened and miserable. But what is most relevant for us is that they also tend to be aggressive. Believing that other people are their enemies, they are angry, and hope to forestall the anticipated aggression of others by striking first.

This initiates a spiral of negative feedback. Those whom the paranoid suspects of malign intentions naturally do not like it, and this dislike can soon grow into hostility. This hostility shows the paranoid that his/her

suspicious are justified, which reinforces his/her aggression. The paranoid may then insult or even strike the suspected enemy—who will then tend to insult or strike back. Relations quickly get worse and worse, and third parties, such as hospital staff, may need to intervene to prevent serious injury.

Now apply this to a society in which there are two clearly differentiated groups, such as Protestants and Catholics, or Sinhalese and Tamils, or Serbs and Croats, or Shia and Sunni. These groups may have managed to get on and tolerate each other for centuries. But one day news, maybe just a rumour, arrives that somewhere, maybe far away, group A has begun to attack group B. Next day some members of group B have business in a neighbourhood dominated by group A. They feel frightened and suspicious, and in their dealings with group A people are unfriendly and impolite, being in a hurry to get away. Probably the group A people react badly to the changed atmosphere; they too begin to be brusque and even to scowl. The unfriendliness soon spreads and escalates, until there is a case of serious insult or physical violence. Need I go on?

The opposite of paranoia is trust. Again, it seems to me to ask too much to say that people should all fully trust their neighbours. But at least they should always be ready to give them the benefit of the doubt.

What is needed is not that people should learn to love their enemies, only that they should stop hating them. Buddhism does have potential for helping mankind to survive if it can persuade people to abandon their obsession with righting past wrongs, and instead for each individual to concentrate on purifying their own mind and conduct.

Author Biography

Richard F. Gombrich founded the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies in 2004, and has been its Academic Director since then. He has also been Chief Editor of its Journal since it began in 2011. Before his retirement in 2004, he held the Boden Chair of Sanskrit at Oxford University and a Professorial Fellowship at Balliol College for 28 years. He supervised 50 graduate theses at Oxford University, most of them doctorates and almost all of them on Buddhism. He was Chairman of the UK Association for Buddhist Studies 2006–2014. He was made an Honorary Life Member of the International Association of Buddhist Studies in 2008. He was President and Treasurer of the Pali Text Society 1994–2002, and Co-Editor of its Journal 1996–2002. He is the author of over 200 publications. He continues to lecture and teach at universities round the world. His academic interests are Pali, early Buddhism, Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and the anthropology and sociology of religion. His latest book is *What the Buddha Thought*, published by Equinox, UK, in 2009.