



Bushfires, Floods and Love of the Good, Love of the Neighbour

World Interfaith Harmony Week

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I'd very much like to thank the Rev. Helen Summers of the Interfaith Centre of Melbourne and the organisers for inviting me today to this very honourable and auspicious gathering, and I thank Bishop John Bayton for that most insightful and inspiring talk.

When Rev. Helen Summers contacted me and offered me an opportunity to address this gathering on this auspicious occasion and to think of a topic which would reflect -- touch the non-Christian, those who may call themselves "other", as many of you know, Buddhists are often asked if they believe in God.

And it's one of those topics which the Buddha himself remained silent on when he was asked this very question. And I think the best reply we can have on this is it is such a very large "view" to discuss where words may not quite touch on the depths of that meaning. For myself this has been an ongoing inquiry for most of my life, having come out of a Christian childhood and upbringing.

But for today, I would rather talk on the "Love of Good", and in relation to the "Love of Neighbour"; both the greater concept surrounding what is person and good, and again, what is one's neighbour. In another quote that has come out of the Buddhism, "*What does Buddhism essentially base itself upon?*" and The Buddha has been referenced to have said, "To be good and not do anything that is causing suffering and pain to others". The answer to this, is of course, even a five-year-old child can understand that. But the reflection has been said that an eighty-year-old cannot practice that. Even one who has lived their whole life in sincere search of this means, cannot practice this.

But, to love so completely, with our whole hearts and minds, with all our strength, and the goodness that comes out of this, is to love without discrimination of self and other. And the Buddhist tradition puts a strong emphasis on this non-dual perception between self and the other. Other as self, self as other.

And I noticed the greatest suffering that came out of the bushfires -- having reflected on this in other discussions -- there is an interesting thing that happens with humans that comes out of bushfires. This is that the superficial surface - the superficial face of who we think we are and what it is we hold so precious and dear, can so quickly be dissolved and lost through such disaster. And in the rawness and tenderness, in that vulnerability, I found self and other merged; came very close. People didn't really notice I had no hair and wore funny clothes and were very willing to embrace another human

being with a smile and an openness and a willingness to be there with them, with their pain, their suffering, their anxiety, their fears.

To just be there, with them.

And I have reflected on this as years have gone by. Even though people innately come back to a lot of their human needs, loves and hates and so forth, this very genuine quality is there. We sometimes call it "Buddha nature", selfless nature, the highest human ideals, some may reflect it through "image of God". It's there. In all of us. When we are willing to just put "it" down; put anything other, anything extra, anything more, we put that down for a short while. Usually it means we have to practice many - lifetimes - as we would say in Buddhism; but a long time, in some form of deep and integrating ritual or meditation, or in prayer, or at times when things are wiped away such as through disaster, near death experience, we are forced, then, to put "it" down.

In the first century a very great reformer of Buddhism, a great teacher called Atisha, spoke about these great qualities that come to humans - they have a capacity to let go and relinquish. And I think all my years in meditating and studying of the Buddhist tradition and the sutras, looking for Masters throughout the world who would take me one step closer, it was to find **that. That**, beyond anything that I would call mind, a self-identifying view.

He spoke about the greatest quality is to seek and serve others; the greatest quality that a human can have, is to serve, is that of giving. The first *paramita* is that one of giving, relinquishing.

So to serve our neighbour. What do we ask? Even to serve something we see as separate from ourselves - what are we able to do and give here? Often we have a view of it, we have an intention; good intentions, many good intentions—but the actions don't necessarily follow.

We have academia, we have all our traditions, have texts, have those who have practised and shown us the way, but it does not mean we actually do it.

I do see that monks, the Venerables, who are coming from all cultures now to Australia to serve here, in small communities and large communities of Buddhists, they find a great difficulty to just meet their neighbours. Language is one factor. However, this is not a reason.

I understand to a degree that words are just limiting. One great teacher said to me at a conference - we sat for day after day, hours and hours of English lectures - said to me that what comes out of their mouths is a tiny fraction of what I gather from this person sharing of their own depths of wisdom and compassion.

What comes from being with our neighbours is far more than whether we can speak the same language. Our neighbour is always there and there is always something we can offer - if only - to offer some space. A word, or even silence in many cases.

I found by sitting with people in bushfires even to just sit, or to listen - I still listen to people for hours on the telephone - same records going around and round, but I do see a change in their habits, in their lives moving forward.

So space, a word, or silence, is often a great teacher. The greatest precept, the greatest way to conduct our lives is to be continually aware, continually present, open, attentive.

Just to be there with our full mindful attention requires a very still mind, a stillness so deep that its silence reverberates ... beyond space and time.

There is a great bodhisattva in Buddhism; you may call it an Avatar, Quan Yin, who is the one who hears the cries. In my home I have this particular deity that I make offerings to; because it is one that is helping to instill a compassionate kindness, a giving - a forgiving - within myself that allows me to hear everybody's cries. And everyone is always crying. And I found that sitting in the mountains in Korea - sometimes it might have been an isolated, lonely life. Actually there was an enormous amount going on all the time, most of it course in my own mind. But actually, it was a deep inner stillness, a deepening of awareness, deepening of mind. The world is a very alive, interconnected place. The neighbours were very close - the monastics were twenty minutes, an hour, five hours, ten hours away. Virtually, I knew those that I didn't know who were right there, as I still feel in meditation.

And those in the bushfires were not alone, those in the floods at this very moment, are not alone - we are there with them and they with us. I found an interesting thing in Kinglake after the fires. People I know don't come up to visit very often. Families haven't been since shortly after the bushfires. Somehow they feel uncomfortable. Unable to be with us, to be with the memory, to be with the story, to be with the change. And there are great changes. Extraordinary changes.

The greatest action is not to be lost in self-centred worldly ways. Not to be lost in selfishness that separates the neighbour and isolates us. Sometimes the neighbour is perhaps, seemingly too other, too different, too ordinary, too close, or culturally too diverse.

The greatest generosity is that of non-attachment. I was asked by many Asian Buddhists after the bushfires to bring all their offerings to all the various fire affected communities. It took a lot of organisation to bring up truckload of things. But still, when we delivered the various items, we found that what people were asking us for was our time to be with their story; to reflect and be with their fears.

The actual materiality seemed to be palliative ordered at that time. Which was a daily matter, a sense of when you are closer to death, when you are closer to a demise, when you are closer to letting go of who I think I am - then what springs forth is something that is very relevant, very present to us all.

And I usually find that when people actually do communicate, what they communicate is not just about themselves but something that I need to also reflect on within myself. There is never an individual; there are always two people that are communicating. Or three people or whatever number. There is always a connection.

The greatest patience is humility. We are always in the face of being, suffering, endurance, patience. It is the centre of paramitas between that and skilfully developing or cultivating one's virtues, and cultivating one's mind. There is a place that requires great endurance, great patience and a great effort. But to do that we need to be humble and bow deeply within. And life itself is often an extremely humbling experience.

The greatest effort is not to be concerned with the results. Effort requires us to be so very present. And I found that meeting after meeting, I found that what the community could offer and what

governments wanted were very, very different in their capacities to do. We just had to work through the processes. It brought us vast results. Many other results, many other things, many wonderful things evolved out of that.

The greatest meditation is the mind that can just let go. You know, when we are in prayer we can let go for a Christian, God enters. For a Buddhist, the Buddha-mind, the mind is purified.

I remember in 2003 in Melbourne when there was the Walk against War in Iraq. There were 70,000 - 100,000 people strong walking down the street from Parliament House to the park. They had a little stage erected in that park, and on the platform they asked me, "Reverend, would you please offer a prayer?"

I looked down into the crowd. Everywhere I could see there were people from all cultures and backgrounds, who were very agitated, they had been in a rally. There were many who had gone through war; many who had seen great devastation and disaster - they had members of their families who had gone through a war.

And I reflected in that moment, "If you are standing in the place of your brother and sister - observe the place of the one beside or behind you - stand in their place now, right now. You will see that they have family, homes, children, cultures generated through thousands of years. And they too, dearly love their homes, their families.

"If we reflect on their children's children to come - who have not yet been born, they too want to come and connect with cultures and histories and stories of you. You have people of different faiths, people of different cultural backgrounds, people who are born in every part of this world standing right here today. I want you to think about this".

And I watched a ripple effect. And as those in front of me stilled, and those behind them, it went up and down the road and for a few moments we were in union, we were in connection, we were one. Not because of my words, most could not hear them. But one, still mind reflected and embraced the other.

This is where great wisdom sees through the appearances and the differences, the ideologies, and all that deceives us into an idea that we are somehow separated or other -- we see right through that.

And the greatest goodness is the peaceful mind that permeates, connects and brings peace - not only to our neighbours - our human neighbours, but to the world of all living things. The world in which we live in and that spiritual world, that world in our deepest hearts where we connect. And this would be our greatest gift, our greatest goodness.

Reverend Chi Kwang Sunim has been ordained a Korean Zen Buddhist Nun for 33 years. She was traditionally trained in Korea under great Zen and Sutra Masters and lived in mountain monasteries and hermitages for nearly 20 years. In the late 90's on returning to Australia, Sunim created the Seon (Zen) Centre, which later became a small retreat centre in Kinglake, Victoria, where she currently resides and teaches. After the 2009 Bushfires, Sunim reduced her travel and teaching, to engage in local recovery and environmental projects.