

Talk at an Agricultural Collective

Colombo, Sri Lanka, October 20, 1981

An Interchange with the Buddhist Sangha in Sarvodaya

Greetings to the Sangha, to the brothers, sisters, and elders, and to all of you here today. Doctor Ariyaratne has been too kind and has spoken of us in terms that are too lofty.

Truly, since coming to this center, we have been impressed by the sobriety and the value of the work being carried out here. We have often spoken of *humanizing the Earth*, but this is something that must be carried out in practice. Humanizing the Earth can too often remain nothing more than an idea, but here we have seen that humanizing the Earth is put into practice. We have seen, above all else, a moral force in action. This contrasts with what we see today in all latitudes, where the Earth is being dehumanized and the world is becoming dehumanized.

I come from an agricultural region, and in recent years I have witnessed how the countryside has become depopulated as its people have concentrated in the cities. I have witnessed how the family that once existed has been gradually destroyed and the elder generation cast aside. The countryside has been abandoned, and the cities have swelled, gathering around them zones of people trapped in poverty. If the numbers given to us by the United Nations are correct, in 1950 half the world's population lived in rural areas and the other half in cities, towns, or villages. If present statistical trends continue, it appears that by the year 2000 more than 90 percent of all the working men and women on the Earth will live in cities. This will have consequences that will be, from every point of view, explosive.

The work that we have seen in Sarvodaya and its social organizations, the decentralization that has been accomplished, the creation of compact agricultural centers in the countryside, is an idea that holds out a new possibility for the world. Of course, the question remains whether the new generations will be able to make their lives in centers like those proposed here, in which health care, education, and the possibility of work for all are right at hand, where even cultural and university centers can be established in rural areas.

The worldwide process we are witnessing today is one of continuing concentration in cities. Everywhere we see urban concentration, the concentration of capital in the hands of a few, concentration in every sense of the word. Apparent decentralizations are in fact simply breaks with the old order and lead only to concentrations at another level. Nation states disintegrate only to re-concentrate into larger parastates; as centralized businesses disintegrate, multinational corporations and financial capital only become stronger. It seems that nothing is centrifugal, but everything is centripetal. Everything concentrates, and the apparent de-concentrations are simply steps in the breakup of the old frameworks, which then become incorporated into even greater concentrations.

More and more the human being is being transformed into a consumer. Today, people think that everything begins and ends in them, that everything pertains to them alone. Here in Sarvodaya, new ideas and new behavior are being proposed, and a new direction is being demonstrated that is opposite to the prevailing, selfish direction. Here in Sarvodaya there is no question of viewing the human being as a consumer; here you are trying to meet the basic needs of life. Here you are trying to distribute and decentralize, and to bring culture into the countryside. Here it is clear that you are trying to reverse this compulsive process of concentration that has swallowed up today's world. It is of the utmost importance to understand this experience which, independent of any success it may have in the future, is a valid action in and of itself. Furthermore, I believe I have understood the vision of the human being and of society that is taking visible shape here in Sarvodaya. Here it seems that a person is not considered an isolated being but is viewed instead within the sphere of social relations. Underlying all this is the idea of compassion, the idea of action that does not end in oneself but rather extends to the other person. I believe I have seen that the concern here is less with the suffering one might be going through *oneself* than with the suffering of the *other*.

This is precisely the point of view that we in our Movement have long maintained. We say that problems are not resolved within the consciousness of a single person; we say that one must leap over one's own problems and go to the pain of the other person. That is the moral act *par excellence*: "Treat others as you want them to treat you."

There are those who think that they have a great many personal problems, and that because they have so many problems, they can do nothing for others. This is quite extraordinary, but in the West one sees people with a very high standard of living who nevertheless find it impossible to help others, because they believe that they themselves have too many problems. And yet we have seen how the poorest part of the population—those who suffer real hardships and face enormous problems—are still able to direct themselves toward others, are able to share their food, are able to leap over their own suffering in repeated acts of solidarity.

Here we have seen that same moral force, but organized and expanding—this force that goes toward others and makes us better in the measure that we help others overcome their suffering. We have been here only a short while, and yet we have looked deep into the eyes of the children who have found refuge from the street. We have seen the smiles and the conduct of those who work here, and we have realized that behind all this, once again, is that moral force in motion.

This is a great social movement, or rather spiritual movement, but I would define it as a great *moral force* in motion. This is the impression I would communicate from what I have seen so far in Sarvodaya, but I would also say that I would need more time in order to learn from all that is being done here.

Thank you for your kind attention.

"We would like to hear your message. In Theravada Buddhism, sila is the moral rule that leads to right action. Please explain, please make your moral rule explicit."

Reverend, my message is simple and applicable in everyday life. It is a message directed toward the individual and his or her immediate surroundings. It is not a message directed toward the world in general. It is directed toward people who love, live, and suffer in the company of their husbands or wives, their companions in life, their families, friends, and coworkers—in the company of those right around them.

The world faces many critical problems, but it is exaggerated of me to focus on changing the whole world if it is not within my real possibilities to do so. The only thing I can change is my immediate surroundings, and in some way change myself. And if my possibilities for action and transformation should reach further than that, in that case my neighbors will include more people, more than my loved ones, my friends, and those I work with.

We say that one must have an awareness of one's own limitations in order to carry out an action that is both wise and effective. Therefore, everywhere we go we propose that people form small groups, each consisting of the individual and his or her immediate human surroundings. These groups, whether urban or rural, gather together all those volunteers who want to leap over their own problems in order to direct themselves to others. As these small groups grow, they connect among one another, and their possibilities for transformation also grow.

What is the basis for the growth of these groups? What is it that unifies them? They are based on the idea that *it is better to give than to receive*—on the idea that every act that ends in oneself generates contradiction and suffering, and on the idea that actions that end in others are the only acts that make it possible to surpass one's own suffering.

It is not wisdom alone that allows a person to overcome his or her own suffering. There can be right thought and right intention, but right action can be missing. And there is no right action that is not inspired by compassion. This basic human attitude of compassion, this notion that human action should go toward others, is the basis of all individual and social growth.

As you know, these things have been said for many, many years, and so I am saying nothing new here. I am only trying to make people aware that this self-enclosure, this individualism, this turning of action back in upon oneself, is producing a total disintegration in the men and women of today. Nevertheless, it seems that in many places even such simple ideas are not easily understood. And lastly, there are many people who think that closing themselves up in their own problems at least avoids new difficulties. Of course, this is not true. In fact, what generally occurs is the contrary—personal contradiction spreads, contaminating one's immediate surroundings.

When I speak of *contradiction*, I am speaking of acts that are harmful to oneself. I betray myself when I *do* things opposed to what I *feel*. That creates permanent suffering in me, and that suffering does not remain in me alone—it contaminates all those around me. This apparently individual suffering that arises out of personal contradiction winds up becoming social suffering.

There is only one act that allows the human being to break with his or her contradiction and permanent suffering. This is the moral act in which human beings direct themselves toward others in order to help those people overcome their suffering. When I help another person surpass his or her suffering, I later remember my own kindness. On the other hand, after a contradictory act I recall that moment as one where my life went wrong. Thus, acts of contradiction invert the wheel of life, whereas acts that end in other people—helping them surpass their suffering—turn the wheel of life.

All acts that end in oneself inevitably lead toward contradiction, toward contamination of one's immediate surroundings. Even pure wisdom, intellectual wisdom that resides only within oneself, can lead to contradiction. It is a time for action, and the action that is called for consists of beginning to help others overcome their suffering. That is right action, compassion, the moral act *par excellence*.

"In that action of people helping other people, does there not exist the danger of 'the blind leading the blind'?"

Reverend, it is possible for a blind person to use other senses. It is possible that, walking through the night, a blind person might hear the distant sound of a waterfall, or the slithering of a serpent drawing near. Therefore, it is possible for a blind person, relying on other senses, to warn those whose hearing is not so acute that there is danger nearby. And I would go further to say that this blind person is not only useful for others who are blind but also for those who have eyes but in the night are unable to see.

"In order that harmony be generated within us, it is necessary for us to do something within ourselves. Children grow up naturally, without thinking about it, but their conduct has no direction until they learn something about themselves. The forces of nature also act without direction, without consciousness of what they do."

Reverend, human beings also learn by doing—in the measure that they do things, they learn. People learn to type, for example, by putting their hands to work, and then through trial and error they gradually improve their movements. We say that one *learns by doing*. The very act of thinking is a primary act of the consciousness. Of course, letting your mind wander is not the same thing as thinking with direction. The act of thinking with direction implies a prior act of consciousness. And if I propose to stop thinking, producing a mental void, then I'm acting in that direction.

"We ask: Is action prior to thought, or is thought prior to action?"

Reverend, from our point of view, there are no linear causes and effects. There is a circuit of feedback in which one thing feeds back upon another, and this produces growth. Put in visual images, if we view it from above, the process is circular—it looks like a wheel; if we view it from the side, we realize it is a spiral in motion that grows at every turn. Thus, it is possible not to know how to do something, but by working on that task one's experience is enriched, and from this enrichment there arise ideas, and these new ideas are reapplied to the task. In that sense, the human being has grown differently from other living beings. Human beings have grown through having grappled with the pain of their own bodies as they tried to obtain warmth, shelter, and food, and endeavored to foresee the future physical injuries with which nature challenges them. Thus, through trial and error, the human being has transformed nature. Now, the human being—always active, learning, and growing—must restore balance to the current imbalances. This is the idea with which I would answer your question about thought and action.

"Unfortunately, the human being has difficulties in attempting to deal with nature, and this brings suffering."

Reverend, unfortunately you are right. The human being has long experienced suffering, and still today continues to suffer in that encounter with nature; but we should also recall that through this suffering the human being has learned. Progress, in reality, has been a rebellion against suffering, against death—the motor of human history has been the human being's rebellion against death. Of course, humankind has suffered enormously in this process.

But we know that there is a great difference between *pain* and *suffering*. Pain is physical, and this pain will be overcome when science and the organization of society have developed sufficiently. Truly, physical pain can be overcome. Medical advances show this to be the case; social progress demonstrates this as well. But *mental suffering* is a very different thing. There is no science or organization of society that can overcome mental suffering. Human beings have grown as they have managed to overcome a great deal of their physical pain, but they have yet to surpass their mental suffering. And the notable and significant function that the great messages and great teachings have served has been to make us understand that we need very precise conditions in order to surpass suffering. About this point we can say little more at this time. There are the teachings, and we respect them as they are.

But in this world of perceptions, in this world of the immediate, in this world of aggregates for consciousness, in which illusory perception and illusory memory produce in me an illusory consciousness and a consciousness of an illusory self; in this world in which I am provisionally submerged, I do things in order that pain may be overcome, and I try to help science and the organization of society move in a direction that improves human life. I also understand that when human beings truly need to surpass mental suffering, they will have to appeal to understandings that rend the veil of maya, that penetrate illusion. But the straight path is one that begins immediately before us—it is the one we walk in compassion, in helping others to overcome pain.