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RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE  
FREEDOM AND PEACE.

( Address during the public session on Thursday, October 3rd )

Honourable Chairman and distinguished delegates,

Before going into my talk, I, on behalf of the Buddhist community world over would like to thank Fr Albert and the members of WFIRC for their selfless commitments in making the inter-religious dialogue a success. I shall speak a little about the acts and words of Buddha in the few minutes, not because I am a Buddhist but because Buddha is a leader for all of us.

Buddha taught the four noble truths in his first sermon:

All worldly things are suffering,  
There is a cause of suffering,  
There is a cessation of suffering,  
There is a path to the cessation.  
Understand the sufferings, avoid the causes;  
Attain the cessation, practice the path.

Likewise, I shall also give my short talk taking the subject, "Religion and Religious experience and the Struggle for Justice, Freedom and Peace" in the context of the Four Noble Truth. As a doctor before treating a patient needs to diagnose the sickness, we must also understand and know all the mishaps and problems that we face in order to get rid of them. In spite of the advanced material developments that scientific achievements brought about, we are in a turbulent era with so much corruption, disasters and adverse calamities. We are enmeshed in a worldly predicament which is infested with social evils like violence, aggression, wars, bribery, nepotism, smuggling, drug-trafficking, kidnapping etc. We have casteism, racism, fanaticism and infidelism. We are in dearth of justice, freedom and peace. Besides we face natural calamities like floods, cyclones, volcanic eruptions, famines, earthquakes, global warming etc. There are millions of problems confronting us.

From where do they arise? Well, there are many causes and conditions, but let's consider the root cause of our problems. Self-grasping or egotism is taught by Buddha as the root cause. Though there is no self entity which is existent, we cling to it as existent. This gives rise to the mistaken notion of self from which arises I, my, you, others and so on. This gradually creates a wide gap between self and others showing favouritism, loving self and hating others, attaching to self and despising others. Then arises desire, attachment, lust, anger, malice, greed, jealousy, grudge and all such evil thoughts. When these evil thoughts manifest themselves in words and deeds, they become evil speech and actions which we call as "sin". These sins give rise to all the sufferings and problems directly or indirectly.

But fortunately, we also have an optimistic goal - the cessation of our problems. Our goal is two-fold - a temporary one and a permanent one. As immediate temporary results, we seek a peaceful world with harmony, amity, happiness, joy, morality, freedom, peace, justice and without corruption, violence and

evil. Our ultimate result is liberation or supreme enlightenment. Today, in this inter-religious dialogue, we are more concerned about the temporary outcome, a world with harmony and peace. We know we can never bring together all religions regarding the concept of ultimate salvation.

Like a doctor has many methods and prescriptions to cure a disease, we have also different solutions and answers to solve our problems and mishaps - and they are the religions. Religion literally is derived from the Latin word "religio" meaning "to bind". Any principle or practice, theory or teaching that upholds integrity and amity, sanity and spirituality, that which uplifts man from a lower mundane level to a higher plane of edification where one transcends the woes and worries of everyday life is religion. In brief, religion is an art of living a virtuous daily life in harmony and peace and finally attaining deliverance.

Let's consider here some Buddhist approaches to our problems and mishaps. Rationality and compassion - these two exquisite principles made Buddhism an outstanding religion / philosophy for more than two and a half millenia. Buddha like Socrates knew that the humans are rational beings with superior conscience and intelligence. He, therefore based his teachings on valid reasonings and experiences to meet the analytical examinations of astute human minds.

Thus we find the uniqueness of Buddha in his rationality and also his social outlook, an outlook that was uncompromisingly egalitarian. Lord Buddha was first of many leaders to break the social barrier of caste, class, colour and race. He did not use the yardstick of social grouping to measure the nobility of a person but instead refuted the concepts of estimating an individual's virtue and value through flesh, colour, blood and skin. So Buddha was often regarded as the first protagonist of equality and freedom.

Lord Buddha has shown us many ways to eliminate suffering and attain emancipation. We have the principle of selflessness, impermanence, karmic law, dependent-origination, altruism, four immeasurable thoughts, Buddha-nature, non-violence, eight fold paths, taking refuge etc. Whatever the principles, they are pragmatic and practicable in transforming a human character. Every teaching directly or indirectly meets the end of transforming human minds. Once a disciple of Buddha displayed his miracles to a crowd. Buddha summoned him and admonished him not to demonstrate such petty miracles. To his surprised disciple, Buddha said, "The miracle you performed is not a miracle, the real miracle is the miracle of transforming the human heart."

Among the numerous teachings I shall briefly explain the Buddhist concept of selflessness, dependent-origination and altruism. Buddha is again unique in expounding that there is no self or soul that is truly existent. Which is self? Hands, legs, body, head? None. Nor is mind self because we say my mind. There is no self entity in the eternal phenomena either. If the body is soul, it decays; if mind is soul, it changes; if soul is unchanging, a person remains unchanged forever. Thus "self" is a mistaken concept of our minds. Because self-grasping or egotism is the root cause of all evils, we must realise selflessness.

As corollary to this concept of selflessness is the

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theory of dependent-origination or relativity. This is called a rosary ( \_\_\_\_\_ ). Can anyone of you point out the rosary? Is this bead rosary or the thread? No. A rosary is a congregation of thread and these little beads, but our rough mind grasps it as one. It is dependently originated relying upon causes and conditions. I am short because there are people taller than me. I can become tall by comparing myself to those shorter than me. So, tall and short; good and bad; I and you are all relative. Nagarjuna argued that all phenomena are dependently originated. Whatever is interdependent is devoid of inherent nature or essence like an illusion. So, all things are illusory and devoid of true nature. Thus, we say everything is "voidness", since there is nothing we can cling and attach to with prejudices and discriminations than mere projections of our perverted views.

Next is altruism, it is the intrinsic gist of all Buddha's teachings. All beings are alike in desiring happiness and discarding sorrows. Why should we then show favouritism? Shantideva, an 8th century Buddhist poet said in a logical verse :

I must dispel others' sufferings  
Because they are sufferings, like my sufferings.  
I must benefit other sentient beings,  
Because they are sentient beings, like my body.

Therefore, we must love others as equally as oneself and bear with the shortcomings of others, have patience and sympathy for those who are bemused with ignorance. Once a woman rebuked and ridiculed the Buddha so that at last she got exhausted and could abuse no more. Then the Buddha said in a soothing tone, "Sister, if you have a precious gift and if you give it to your friend, and if he doesn't accept, to whom does it belong?" "To myself, ofcourse," she answered proudly. "Well, sister I don't accept your rebuke," replied Buddha. To whom does it belong? To herself verily. The Buddha was once on the bank of river Rohini where the troops of Shakya and Koliya clans lay bound to clash in a bloody war after a dispute over the distribution of the water of Rohini. The lord saw this maneuvre for the massacre of precious human life and intervened in, asking them, "Human blood or water, which of them is precious? The monarchs got ashamed. They disarmed and confessed to the lord. So, Buddha's approaches were always reasonable and successful.

Now to draw the conclusion, in this strife-stricken world, religious teachings are the sole source of solace and sanity. A universal feeling of amity is no less needed today than in the past. Let us, therefore, step out as one whole body, discarding the sectarian prejudices and discriminations and breaking the barrier of difference in concepts and beliefs, march on a triumphant crusade against the evil. In this way we may realise our sacred theme :

" Religion and human solidarity ".