

Uniting Religions through the Four Embracing Methods

– A Buddhist Perspective in Establishing Dialogues among All Religions

Dear Counselor for Religious Affairs, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Peaucelle, Respected Director General Madam Bokova, Summit Facilitator Professor Cuthill, Honourable Ambassadors and Representatives, Distinguished Guests and Friends:

Great meeting you all again. The day before, I reported to everyone on the importance of uniting religions, returning religion to its form of education and mutual learning among religious faiths. In reality, it can resolve conflicts and overcome challenges and thus, bringing forth peace and harmony across the world.

Earlier, Professor Medwin Hughes, Vice-Chancellor of University of Wales Trinity, talked about promoting interfaith dialogue from a university's perspective. I hope to share from a Buddhist's perspective on how to go about doing it.

Foreword

To achieve peace and harmony across the world, communication is utmost important. If opportunities for communication and interaction are missing between people, countries, political parties, ethnic groups and religious groups, misunderstanding and contradiction arise. As a result, these lead to many problems that can be avoided in the first place.

Arguments and even wars are attributed to a lack of interaction and communication. An ancient Chinese saying goes literally like this "Agreement amongst administration; peace among all". How can peace and harmony be achieved among men? The problem lies with getting them in agreement. As such, it is very important in getting different religious faiths into dialogue. It is a huge question in getting different religious faiths to communicate.

Between 1998 and 1999, I was actively involved in uniting the 9 different religious groups in Singapore. They were like brothers and sisters, living harmoniously like a family. They cared and respected for one another, and were cooperating well. They even cross-learnt the holy texts from each other. It was very successful and brought forth peace and harmony in Singapore.

Mr Chan Soo Sen, a Minister in Singapore at that time, ever asked me over a meal how and what method was used in uniting the 9 different religions. I told him that that method was taught by Buddha, and it is known as The Four Embracing Method or what we called in today's context method for public relation. Men of today do not know this

method. If they do know this method, world peace will be observed across the world. There will be no wars. Wars alone lead on to more antagonism and it is endless. Therefore, to promote interfaith dialogue, it is key that the principle of the Four Embracing Method is understood.

The Four Embracing Method

The Four Embracing Method is the method for public relation in Buddhist context. It is meant to unite men and it depicts the way men interact. It is about caring, respecting and protecting the others, and renders help when needed. The Four Embracing Method is also used to resolve conflicts. When it is used in the context of a family, harmony within the family can be seen. When it is used in the context of a society, peace within the society can be achieved. Regardless of the context, The Four Embracing Method can achieve its objectives effectively.

1. Giving. By giving, it refers to giving of presents and treats to the others. It is a mean of establishing positive affinities with the others. This helps in promoting interfaith dialogue.

The first of the Four Embracing Method refers to giving. It is about giving of presents and treats to the others. Everyone loves to receive presents and no one would complain about it. By this, the relationships between men can be improved.

How to go about establishing a relationship between men? One must always meet up. To meet up, it comes with proper rites. It is not about how expensive the rites are but the sincerity. We met up once a month, and each time, we met up, we always brought along some presents. We would not go empty handed. We treated all religious faiths to meals and presents frequently. Over time, we got along really well like brothers and sisters.

Most religious groups are engaged in their own charitable activities. Christianity and Islam ran schools, hospitals, hospices, kindergartens and employment organisations. These charities are heavily dependent on donations. Therefore, when we paid them a visit, we would make some donations to the charities ran by the respective religious group.

In Singapore, during year-end, we would organize get-together, inviting all religious leaders, preachers and their fellow followers. In addition, we would also extend the invitation to the residents of the orphanages and old folk homes ran by these religious groups. During normal days, these residents were hardly visited and thus, we took the opportunity to invite them there during those festive occasions. What a meaningful opportunity to spend time with those residents. On top of that, we also invited the top officers of the government to the dinner. In that way, we established mutual understandings among different religious groups. We were like a happy family, uniting

all religious groups together.

2. Kind words. Caring words and words of encouragement help in promoting dialogue between religious faiths

The second Embracing Method is about kind words. Kind words are not referring to lovey-dovey words. They are protective and truthful words for the recipients. Those words are truly beneficial and not harmful to the recipients. That way, trust can be established.

During our conversations, we talked about filial piety, respect for the teachers, Five Norms, Eight Virtues, history of ancient China and the ancient governing methods in China. When we preached about those teachings, we must be able to practice it ourselves. That way, they are convinced by our actions. By treating the others sincerely as if they were part of our family and our fellow citizen of the Earth, they can feel our truthfulness. By mutually caring and cooperating with one another frequently, our relationships can be improved. That is the truth behind kind words.

The greatest fear between religions is the proselytisation of followers from one faith to the other. With that in mind, we strongly opposed the proselytizing of followers. That action is immoral. We highly praised every religious faith, and regarded every religion as number one. All religious faiths are equal and point to the same end-in-mind. Not only did we praise the other religious faiths, we learnt from one another.

We highly encourage all religious faiths to return to its educational roots and learn from one another. I led by example. Besides learning the Buddhist scriptures, I would learn the holy texts from the other religious groups. I made notes as I learnt those holy texts. Later on, those notes were compiled into a publication titled “Many Faiths, One Family”. In that publication, it captured the essence of ten different religious faiths. I presented the book to the other faith leaders as a proof of my seriousness in my learning. The latter were very happy upon receiving it.

3. Beneficial Actions. All actions point to the welfare and well-beings of the others. This truly promotes interfaith dialogue.

The third Embracing Method refers to Beneficial Actions. If our actions are nothing but selfless and beneficial to the others, the recipients would love them. Trust and happiness could be built. Such relationship would be strong and long-lasting. This is “beneficial actions”.

There was an Islamic vocational school in Singapore back then. It was well run and had many classes when I visited the school. The premise was rented and not long after, the owner decided to put it up for sale. The school operator was short of SGD750,000. They turned to me for help. SGD750,000 was a huge amount. Our normal sponsorship would not go beyond SGD100,000. I discussed with the President of Buddhist Lodge,

who suggested organizing a fun fair on the school's behalf to raise fund. A 7km route was then planned out with the authority. Together with the deputy minister for Foreign Affairs, we led a group of 200-300 people, each holding on a little flag, and walked our way to the fun fair site. Buddhists, making up the majority, and some Muslims ran the stalls at the fun fair. To our surprise, we raised over one million Singapore dollars on that day. The whole sum of money raised was given to the school. The whole site was purchased using that money and thus, solving the problem that they faced previously. That was an example of "beneficial actions".

Equality is key in treating the others. If our actions are benefitting the society, the others would gain from them as well. We suggested "All Gods are embodied as one, and all religious faiths are one family". We promoted to everyone that there is only one God in this universe. Who is the one God? He is none other than the creator and founder of each religion. If there is only one God, why are there so many different religions? During the olden days, transportation and technology were not advanced. People hardly interact. Lifestyles and cultural backgrounds were different in different parts of the world. As such, the one God had to manifest himself and be in different places to preach his teaching. If we were to open up the holy texts of each religious faith, we find teachings revolving around benevolence, love, filial piety, respectful of teachers, 5 precepts and 10 meritorious actions. They do not propagate negative behaviours. Wholesome acts are common throughout all religious groups. From there, we could see that there is only one God.

The core teaching of all religious faiths revolve around love. In Christianity, it talks about love for Man and that God loves the whole mankind. In Buddhism, it teaches about great compassion and loving kindness. In Islam, it preaches about God is truly benevolent. By that, all religions can be united, and it is via love that all religions can be united. God's love must be demonstrated in our actions or else, the love is too abstract to grasp. As a worker for God and fellow followers, we need to act out that love and bringing it to higher level. We represent God in loving everyone. Over the past 10 years in working on uniting all the religious faiths, no one disputed on that saying. In today's world when information technology is so advanced, as students of God, we need to come together as one. By recognizing the fact that we are one family, we can then be united, without segregating one from another.

Our actions must be beneficial to the others, to everyone and to the whole society and mankind. In a broader context, our actions should benefit all sentient beings. In Mahayana Buddhism, that encompasses all sentient beings of the nine realms, extending across all Dharma realms and dimensions. We all need to possess such magnanimity as that is our true innate magnanimity.

4. Collaborative engagement. With one common understanding, we engage in the same endeavor. That promotes interfaith dialogue.

The fourth Embracing Method refers to Collaborative Engagement. There is a need for

all to come together and work on one common task, and that is to resolve conflicts in the society and bring forth peace and harmony across the world. If we are in total agreement, such endeavor will be a success.

In year 2000, we at Buddhist Lodge received an invitation from the Catholic group, inviting us to a Christmas Mass. Together with another 50 renounced monks and nuns, all fully attired with the formal 25th official robe, we participated in the Christmas mass – a very magnificent scene at the church. No one ever witnessed such level of participation before and was very surprised and motivated on that day. All religious faiths can indeed be united and be treated equally and in harmony. With the unity of religions, conflicts can be resolved and world peace can be achieved. By taking lead in participating in events of the other religious faith, the latter will reciprocate in future. Over time, we become one family. We would even open up and discuss the problems faced within in our own faith.

The most effective way to unite different religious faiths is through touring. On normal days, those religious faith leaders are very caught up; they hardly meet up. Even if they were to meet up, it would be a max of 1 to 2 hours. Going on a tour is different. The whole tour may last over 10 days. From dawn to dusk, they would be spending time together during the trip. They would be interacting like friends without boundary. Therefore, touring is the best way to establish relationship. They would be spending time sharing one's teachings. On top of that, they would be sharing thoughts on how different religious groups would tackle issues faced. Buddhist, Christian and Islamic leaders and more would discuss their personal experiences and thoughts. Through such interactions, mutual understanding can be established and unity can be achieved. Organizing tours together frequently also meets another objective of illustrating to the other countries the need to unite the different religious groups.

Conclusion

Over the 18 years of experience, the Four Embracing Method has proven to be effective in uniting the different religious faiths. We made use of the Four Embracing Method to successfully unite the 9 religions in Singapore, and achieved the same results in Indonesia, Malaysia and Australia. The 18 different religious faith groups in Toowoomba, Australia are united like a family – a very good example to share.

The common theory of all religious faiths is that they all preach about love, morals, ethics and causality. The way to unite religious faiths is The Four Embracing Method. The 4 countries that we mentioned above are real life examples of uniting different religious faiths, and it is proven to be achievable. If all religious faith groups can establish a common consensus, treat one another equally and harmoniously, the end result will have a positive impact on the ethnic groups, political groups and countries. With equality among all men, world peace and harmony can be realized. That is the ultimate goal of ours. May we all work and achieve the goal together.

Lastly, may you be blessed with good health and happiness. May all your lives be smooth sailing. May the world be blessed with peace, harmony and prosperity. Thank you everyone.