

**Address at the United Nations at the International Celebration of Vesak**  
**May 7, 2012**

**Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi**

Venerable Members of the Sangha, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests,

We have gathered here today in the Hall of the General Assembly at the United Nations to celebrate Vesak, the day that commemorates the birth, the enlightenment, and the parinirvāṇa of Lord Buddha. Throughout its long history of 2600 years, Buddhism has contributed in incalculable ways to the ennobling of humanity. It has offered moral guidance, a refined system of values, profound philosophies, methods of personal cultivation, and inspiring ideals that express the highest visions of the human potential. From its origins in northern India it spread throughout Asia and became the spiritual heart of the greatest Asian cultures. Over the past two centuries, its universal message has spoken to people in all continents, and it now has won an increasing number of adherents in the West.

However, it isn't enough for us to pride ourselves on the lofty contributions that Buddhism has made in the past. Today we are called to the solemn task of determining what the Dharma can contribute to humanity's future. This task is especially critical because global developments are throwing into question the prospects for a continuing human presence in the world. Thus the mission facing us, as followers of the Dharma, has become inescapably urgent.

The threats to the future of human civilization are evident on several fronts. I will mention just three. These have often been analyzed by commentators better qualified than I am, and thus I will merely touch on them. My main concern is to see how Buddhism can offer an antidote to these harmful tendencies.

One, which we all know well, is the persistence of war and conflict. Although the Cold War that engulfed the world for almost fifty years melted in the early 1990s, it has been replaced by wars of a different nature: communal wars, ethnic wars, and now by the all-encompassing "War on Terror," which pits the most powerful nation on earth against sinister teams of terrorists hiding in mountain enclaves and crowded cities. What makes war so risky is that a large number of nations now have the material and know-how needed to create nuclear weapons. When hostilities reach a certain pitch, there is always the risk that one country or a rogue group, in a gesture of desperation, will use such a weapon, thus setting off a chain of nuclear attacks that will leave deposits of radioactive waste enduring for centuries. But the

horror of war is not confined to nuclear weapons. New weapons, potent and deadly, have given war a chilling, impersonal quality it never had in the past.

A second disturbing problem is the widening gulf between the small rich elite and everyone else. Such a divide has always existed, of course, but it has become sharper and more polarizing. The rise of free-market ideology allows the few with strong ambition, affluence, and power to manipulate the world's economic system to their advantage. Thus they have been funneling more and more of the world's wealth upward to themselves, while letting the poor sink into ever more degrading poverty. Even those in the middle class find themselves holding the bad end of a nasty deal. Gateways of opportunity have narrowed, and many middle class people are slipping from their comfortable perch into chasms of debt, homelessness, hunger, and poverty. Such is the current situation in the U.S. and Europe, where governments subservient to corporate and financial rajahs push "austerity"—a code word for crushed hopes and broken dreams—on people from the middle and working class. These austere policies in the "developed world" mean even harsher conditions for folks in traditional countries, breeding resentment and the potential for violent blowback.

The third major crisis we face is escalating climate change, especially global warming. Because the change of the climate is slow, gradual, and hard to reverse, it is particularly insidious. Over the past couple of years we have already had a taste of what climate change will entail in decades to come. We've seen torrential floods in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, which uprooted millions of people from their homes, claimed thousands of lives, ruined fertile land, and delivered an economic blow in billions of dollars. The same countries, and many in central Africa, have had to endure prolonged droughts, record heat waves, and other bizarre weather events. These overturn the lives and livelihoods of farmers whose survival depends on regularities in the weather. The situation will become even starker in the future, as supplies of fresh water become scarce and the oceans rise, encroaching on coastal low lands, inundating cities, and swallowing up small island nations.

When we look at the current global situation, the question we should ponder is how the Dharma can help to ameliorate these weighty problems. Before I mention my own thoughts on this question, I think it is important to note that Buddhism is not an evangelizing religion, which means that for people to make use of Buddhist teachings it isn't necessary for them to undergo formal conversion. The Dharma can offer insights, values, ideals, and practices that people of any religion—and those without a formal religion—can adapt and apply for their personal

needs and as solutions to social problems. I think this is a special strength of Buddhism that we should recognize and appreciate.

The first key that Buddhism can offer to help us tackle the threats to human civilization is the teaching that lies at the core of the Dharma, namely, the four noble truths. The Buddha taught the four noble truths primarily as a tool for diagnosing personal suffering—psychological suffering and the suffering intrinsic to life in samsara—but this same formula can be used as a lens for understanding our collective predicament. The four truths are the fact of suffering, its origin in craving and ignorance, its resolution by ending craving and ignorance, and the noble eightfold path as the way to end suffering. The four truths are thus fundamentally concerned with the true nature of suffering and happiness and the causes that underlie them.

The causes of social disorder are essentially the same as those behind personal suffering. Just as personal misery is caused by our individual craving and ignorance, so too are the ailments that infect human society. When we use the formula of the four noble truths, we can see that the multiple problems that we face at national and international levels—wars, economic inequality, the violation of human rights, as well as damage to the environment—spring from a common source, which might be described as a tendency to place narrow, short-term interests above the long-range common good of the human community.

The Buddha summed up the causes of disorder and misery in the three “bad roots,” greed, hatred, and delusion. Today the prevalence of greed, coupled with our technological capabilities, has led to a phenomenon that might be called “the commodification of the world.” Under the influence of free-market ideology, we regard everything we encounter as having no other value than its utility value, its potential as a commodity. We look at the natural world as nothing but a source of raw materials for making products to gratify human desires. We forget the precious value of every human being, and think only of how other people can serve our private or corporate ends as customers, clients, or consumers. Thus the world becomes a battleground marked by relentless competition where each seeks to prevail over the others. Even when bonds are formed, too often they are not based on true empathy but on personal expediency, easily broken when they no longer serve our purposes.

Hatred is manifest in the suspicions people feel toward others who may follow a different religion, speak a different language, or hail from a remote part of the world. We create fixed boundaries between “us” and “them,” and we look upon those on the other side of the boundary with fear and distrust. When this attitude becomes widespread, it can promote a “citadel mentality,” the idea that we have to protect the “homeland” from the alien “others.”

Coupled with the powerful weapons industry, such a mentality conduces to policies rooted in militarism.

Delusion strengthens greed and hatred by propagating false ideologies. Particularly pernicious, as I indicated earlier, is the ideology of the unregulated market, which takes economic growth to be the sole criterion of progress. The proponents of free markets hold that when the market operates without constraints it will ultimately benefit all. Yet, after thirty years of free-market dominance, the hollowness of this promise is blatant. The gap between the rich and powerful elite on one side and everyone else on the other grows wider. Economies totter on the edge of collapse, and too many people struggle for the necessities of life on a planet overloaded with toxic waste.

From a Buddhist point of view, any solution to the momentous problems we face today must certainly involve fundamental changes in policies and institutions, but these alone are not sufficient. What we also require, as the Buddha emphasized so often, is *inner change*, changes in our understanding, our attitudes, and our ethical standards. Here the Five Precepts can provide a framework for right action: to avoid killing, theft, sexual misconduct, false speech, and use of intoxicants. These precepts are not only a guide to individual conduct but have a wider, even global significance. The Buddha says that one who observes each of these precepts protects countless beings, gives freedom from fear to countless beings.

Beyond formal precepts, I would say that what we need most is a sense of humane responsibility, a *conscientious compassion* that enables us to regard the welfare of all humanity—and even the whole sentient world—as our own welfare. Through compassion we can identify with others and feel their suffering as intolerable. Through our sense of conscience we are moved to put compassion into action. We can't stop merely with compassion as a beautiful sentiment, but must be guided by a commitment to social justice to take the concrete steps needed to alleviate suffering and promote the well-being of those in need.

Conscientious compassion would lead to a worldcentric ethic—an ethical stance that takes the welfare of the world as the ultimate goal of national programs and international policies. To establish such an ethic, of course, is a challenge that we as Buddhists cannot meet alone. We must join hands with followers of all faiths, and with secular humanists too, with all who want to preserve the human race from subverting its future through reckless behavior.

As I see it, such a worldcentric ethic can be molded on three guidelines, which are formulated as counterweights to the three unwholesome roots:

- We must overcome greed with *global generosity*, by providing aid to the most needy and vulnerable, those afflicted with chronic hunger, poverty, and illness.
- We must replace violence and militarism with *peace, tolerance, and forgiveness*. Such a step must begin with an international consensus to radically reduce stockpiles of nuclear weapons, and eventually to eliminate all weapons of war. We must instead seek to resolve conflict through discussions and negotiations.
- We need *wisdom* to see through delusive slogans and ideologies. We must understand that we are all brothers and sisters, interconnected and inextricably interdependent. Irresponsible behavior anywhere has repercussions that can spread everywhere, while good action will ripple out, have an impact on others, and be reciprocated by goodness.

To propose such ideas might seem like wishful thinking, but if we reflect we would see that this program rests on a solid pragmatic foundation. It is rather the other alternative that involves wishful thinking, the idea that military domination, ruthless economic competition, financial manipulation, and environmental neglect can be pursued without jeopardizing our prospects for survival. To pursue our narrow self-interest—including ethnic and national interests—without regard for the consequences is to endanger the whole global community, ourselves included. To subordinate our private interests to the common good is to promote our own real, long-term good, which depends on peace, social justice, and a stable environment.

In today's world, the teaching of the Buddha can show us how to develop such a universal consciousness. The Dharma offers a clear understanding of the nature of happiness and suffering. It offers a deep view of the causes of suffering and the way to eliminate them. It offers an ethic of simplicity, harmlessness, and restraint. It offers a profound analysis of the mind and the means of mental transformation. It offers a sense of universal responsibility founded upon the great virtues of loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and impartiality. These are some of the guideposts that the Buddha set up for the world during his time on earth. As heirs to his teaching, it is our responsibility to practice them and pass them on, as the distinctive contribution of Buddhism to the future of human civilization.

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi is an American Buddhist monk from New York City. He obtained a PhD in philosophy from Claremont Graduate School in 1972. In late 1972 he received monastic ordination in Sri Lanka, where he lived for over twenty years. From 1984 until 2002 he was the editor for the Buddhist Publication Society in Kandy. He has translated numerous texts of the Pali Canon, the oldest collection of the Buddha's teachings, from the ancient Pali language into English. In 2002 he returned to the United States and now lives at Chuang Yen Monastery in Carmel, New York. In 2008, together with several of his students, Ven. Bodhi founded Buddhist Global Relief, a nonprofit dedicated to hunger relief in countries suffering from poverty and chronic malnutrition (see: <http://www.buddhistglobalrelief.org/main.html>).