

## **8 HUMAN RIGHTS IN BUDDHISM**

Dhammaloka Buddhist Centre

9<sup>th</sup> June 2000

I have just returned this afternoon from a three-week trip to Malaysia and Singapore. It was an exhilarating and inspiring trip. I gave many Dhamma teachings and also attended a Buddhist conference. When I gave the talk there were two 'Black Marias' full of riot police stationed outside the venue in the CBD in Singapore. I gave the talk to a very large crowd of over a thousand people in one of the auditoriums. So here in Dhammaloka I feel I'm with a nice cosy group of friends. I actually found out later on – and I was quite disappointed – that the riot police weren't there for my talk but for a 'karaoke bar' and night club next door. It would have been something if I could have put in my biography that so many people attended one of my talks the authorities had to station riot police outside.

It was wonderful to see so many people interested in learning about meditation and listening to the Dhamma. Actually, it shows that in those countries – Malaysia has something like a twenty-six percent Buddhist population and Singapore around forty-five percent – they are very short of good teachers. They need good teachers to teach Buddhism in a way that makes sense and is relevant to human life in a profound way. Not telling people what they already know but challenging them to find a deeper, more accurate way of looking at life. And the Dhamma must be entertaining, especially in places like Malaysia and Singapore where the people are so stressed out. The last thing they want is a lecture. They want a little fun now and again, with a little bit of Dhamma in between. That's my style.

I also attended the 'First Global Conference on Buddhism' in order to see other ideas in Buddhism, to widen my own perspective on the Buddha's teachings and also to participate and give some input on the West Australian experience of Buddhism. The tradition at this Buddhist Centre is Ajahn Chah's forest tradition. It's a tradition that is extremely vibrant all over the world.

I would like to talk this evening about a topic that was presented at that conference by one of the speakers, a professor in Buddhist studies from England, '*The Relevance of Human Rights to Buddhism*'. It was only a twenty-minute presentation but it struck a chord with me because about two years ago someone asked me if I could give a talk on that subject. Because of one thing or another – I was going overseas or teaching a retreat or something – I never got around to it. What's the relevance of human rights to Buddhism? This is a very important subject. It is something many people talk about. It gives them a direction, whether for good or for bad. So I thought this would be a good opportunity, while it's fresh in my mind, to talk about Buddhism and human rights.

### **Rights and Freedoms**

One of the things that really impressed me with the talk I heard at the conference was that the whole idea of human rights is a very Western idea. It basically comes from the Judaeo-Christian culture. In many places, especially in the East, people have a lot of trouble with human rights. Not so much in its fairness and the role of justice, but in what underpins it. Where does it come from? Why human rights? Without an understanding of the underlying theory behind human rights, it sometimes doesn't make much sense. For example, when I reflect on the principles and work out the consequences, I am amused by the human right that 'everyone is born equal'. That might be so according to Christianity or Judaism but it certainly isn't correct according to Buddhism.

So far as Buddhists are concerned, we are not all born equal. Some people are born big, some people are born small. Some people are born intelligent, some people are born stupid. The point is we come into this world with our *kamma* from past lives. So, straight away – for a Buddhist – that principle of equality at birth doesn't make sense. Even as a young man it never made sense to me. I could see that when people were born they certainly were not equal. This is just an idea. Even though it is a noble idea it isn't true. Throughout my life as a monk I've always preferred truth. What 'actually is' to what 'I would like it to be'. Idealism has its place but surely it must be founded on truth and reality. Otherwise we are just building a fantasy that

doesn't really have any meaning or any solid foundation in the reality of our lives. Isn't it true that each one of you came into this world with advantages over some people and disadvantaged compared to others? It's called the law of *kamma*.

The other thing that doesn't make sense in the Western idea of human rights is the whole idea of freedom. So often our societies – especially in the Western world – celebrate this idea of freedom, and we think we live in the so-called free world. Governments and societies are trying to enshrine that idea of freedom into different societies but basically I don't think they know what the word means. Because of that they get into so much trouble and difficulty and create a lot of mischief for society; just as we do in our own little societies and in the home. We know what the rights and freedoms in our society are, but what does that freedom mean? When you start to apply the law of *kamma* to this idea of human rights and freedoms there are some things that don't make sense.

What I've seen in the world is that people want the freedom of desire. They want to be free to express their desire. free to follow their desires at whatever cost. What Buddhism wants, what Buddhism celebrates, is not the freedom *of* desire, but freedom *from* desire. That's going in a completely different direction.

One of the stories I told at the conference was the story of the 'Wishing Game'. Five children were playing this Wishing Game. The first one was asked, "If you had a wish what would you want" and the child said, "If I had a wish I would want an ice cream." She liked ice cream. The second child who was a little bit older said, "If I had a wish I'd wish for an ice cream factory." The first child thought that was really clever because if you had an ice cream factory you could get an ice cream whenever you wanted one. Not just one ice cream but hundreds of ice creams. The third child was asked, "What's your wish" and he said, "I'd like a billion dollars. Because with a billion dollars I can buy an ice cream factory, a cake factory, a fish and chip shop or whatever else I want, and I could do a lot more". The first two kids thought, 'wow! Aren't we stupid? Why didn't we have think of that?' They thought that this young fellow who wished for a billion dollars was a genius. But the next child when asked

what he wished did even better than wanting a billion dollars, he said, “I wish I had three wishes, so that I could wish for an ice cream factory with my first wish, a billion dollars with my second wish, and with my third wish I could wish for another three wishes.” They thought, ‘wow! You can’t do better than that.’ Can you think of a wish that is even better than that – to have three wishes and the third wish is that you can wish for another three wishes? But the last child did surpass that, he was the Buddha to be, and said, “I wish I had no wishes.”

Isn’t that interesting? Because when you have no more wishes it means that you are completely content. You’re free from all desires. You’re free from all that wanting. You’re free from all feeling of lack, the feeling that somewhere in your life, somewhere in your body, somewhere in your mind, something is missing. Imagine what it would be like if you had no more wishes, completely happy with whatever comes along, completely happy with this present moment. You don’t wish for it to be anything else. You look at your husband and he’s absolutely perfect. You don’t wish him to change at all. You look at your wife and she’s so beautiful. You don’t wish her to be anything different, neither better nor worse. No more wishing is going against the grain of modern society isn’t it? We want to have the freedom to have more wishes. We want the freedom to have more choices and more money to express our choices. We want more freedom to express our individuality.

Buddhism says the cleverest child is the child who wishes for no more wishes. So, the freedoms that people celebrate and enshrine in such documents as the Declaration of Human Rights, are basically the freedom to follow desire. I remember reading in one of the great philosophical cartoon strips, ‘Calvin and Hobbs’, about an American boy who had just learned from his teacher that ignorance is bliss. He knew it was guaranteed by the American constitution that you had the right to the pursuit of happiness. So he added the two together and said, “If I’m guaranteed my right to pursue happiness and ignorance is bliss, why am I going to school?” It’s strange, isn’t it, what we talk about as freedoms in the world.

## **Freedom of Expression**

These things are not freedoms, they actually imprison you. For instance, consider the freedom to express yourself. Do you actually feel free when you've got so much choice? When you go into the supermarket or into the shops, there is so much choice. When there is so much choice it can make life so difficult. Wasn't it lovely when there was only one brand of muesli? It was good enough, you quite enjoyed it; but now you've got a choice between so many different brands. That's the problem with freedom. It's just so complicated, so troublesome for the mind. Sometimes freedom just gives you a headache. What brand should I take? I'm challenging you here. The whole idea of these talks is to make you look at things in different ways. Buddhism gives you a different perspective on things. That's half the job of mindfulness, to open up different ways of looking, different ways of seeing, and different ways of practising.

So, instead of actually looking at freedom as the freedom to indulge desire, maybe we should aim for and aspire towards freedom from desire. A Buddhist declaration of human rights would be very different from the human rights that people celebrate in the world. They call it the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but I don't think that they consulted Buddhists or anybody else for that matter. They just call it universal because it sounds universal to them. It's completely dogmatic and insensitive at times. Obviously with human rights there are some things that all people would want to recognise as worth protecting. The aim of human rights is to protect. All people want freedom from oppression and freedom from being treated unfairly.

We do need regulations and laws to protect the weak from the strong. I think one of the goals of a declaration of human rights is to protect the so called 'level playing fields'. This is not only to protect freedom of expression, of speech, but to protect religious expression as well. I was quiet surprised in Singapore and Malaysia to find that Buddhists were afraid to express their religion openly. I expected it in Malaysia, because it's a Muslim country. Buddhists there are very afraid to express their religion, especially when it comes to the point of building temples. They are afraid to say exactly what they are doing because they would never be given building permits

or be allowed to actually practise. In one place where they are building, they plan to plant trees on the edge of the property so that no one will be able see what is happening inside, because the Malays might be upset and stop them. Sometimes they don't even have a Buddha statue. One meditation centre I went to was officially an estate manager's because, if they called it a meditation centre, they would be closed down.

I had expected that in Malaysia but I was surprised that they were hypersensitive even in Singapore to what was going on. I took part in a three-hour talk-back radio show in Singapore. It was really good fun. But the presenter told me beforehand not to mention Buddhism or the word meditation. Otherwise he'd get the sack! Because the people are so hypersensitive, you couldn't really express who you were. The organisers of the conference that I attended really thought that the riot police and the two 'Black Marias' – that I mentioned earlier – were from the government. So many people in the government in Singapore are heavy evangelical Christians that the organizers were afraid because so many people were going to a Buddhist lecture.

When we consider human rights or the idea of freedom, we see that there are some things that should be done. Giving people freedom to choose, especially their religion and allowing people to express their religion, is one example. We should not be brainwashing people. I heard today that someone has bought the lease of a powerful transmitter in the Northern Territory and is blasting Christian propaganda across South East Asia. That's not going to make us many friends in the Muslim world. It's a silly thing to do. When pursuing human rights and freedom we have to be very mindful and have loving kindness, compassion, and sensitivity to the people around us.

In Buddhism it's not freedom for freedoms sake. I can't go and do just whatever I want or preach Buddhism to anybody I see. That was one of the reasons I was personally very impressed with Buddhism. The Buddhist monks and teachers I knew weren't ramming Buddhism down my throat. They weren't telling me that if I did not believe in Buddhism I would go to hell. That happens in some religions! People have

told me in Malaysia and Singapore that sometimes their children come home from school very upset, because the teachers tell them that their mummy and daddy are going to go to hell because they are Buddhists.

That is really too much. So I told the Buddhists, even in Malaysia, to stand up for themselves. If any Christian comes and tells you the Buddha wasn't God, he wasn't even a prophet, he was just an ordinary man, say, "Hang on, that's only partly true! It's true the Buddha wasn't a god. It's true he wasn't a prophet or a Son of God, but he *was* the teacher of God. The place of the Buddha in the scheme of things according to the *suttas*, according to the actual teachings of the Buddha in the Scriptures, is that our Buddha is your God's teacher". That's true! In Pāli *satthā devamanussānaṃ*, means the teacher of gods and men. That is in the chant that you did if you were doing the *pūjā* (devotional offerings) at seven o'clock:

*Itipi so Bhagavā Arahaṃ sammāsambuddho*

*Vijjācaraṇasampanno sugato lokavidū*

*Anuttaro purisadammasārathi satthā devamanussānaṃ.*

*Satthā* means 'teacher', *devamanussānaṃ* means of gods and men, there are many places in the *suttas* where it is recorded that the Buddha went up to heaven to see Brahma and taught him the Dhamma.

One of those exchanges is in the Brahmanimantaṇṇika Sutta in the Majjhima Nikāya (MN 49). The Buddha went to see Brahma by using his psychic powers, but one of the attendants in Brahmas assembly said, "Do you know this is Brahma! You should go and bow down to him; he is God, the almighty, the creator, etc. etc. etc." The Buddha replied, "No way, Brahma is making a big mistake." He tried to teach Brahma that he was subject to the law of *kamma* and subject to the law of impermanence, and that he had come to his present state from another world. Brahma was actually born into his role. The role of God, of Brahma, is just a job, a position which falls vacant at the end of the universe. Someone else gets it next time. That's the Buddhist teaching. Of course Brahma didn't believe him. The only thing that eventually convinced Brahma was a psychic contest. Brahma said, "Look, I can

vanish, and you won't be able to find me", and the Buddha denied this. According to the *sutta* the god tried to vanish but wherever Brahma went the Buddha followed. I think that is because Brahma lives in the highest of the sensory realms and he can go from there into the first *jhāna* realm. But when the Buddha went into the second *jhāna* realm that was beyond Brahma's conception and experience, he couldn't find the Buddha. The Buddha won the psychic contest and, because of that, Brahma realised that this was no ordinary person and started to listen and understand the laws of impermanence. He understood that he wasn't a permanent being in this universe. He wasn't the almighty, the permanent, etc. He understood he was just like any other being, subject to the law of *kamma*, subject to impermanence. That was when Brahma became a disciple of the Buddha.

So, if anyone knocks on your door and asks if you believe in God, you can say, "Yes, but we also believe in the Buddha and that the Buddha is your God's teacher". That way you will get rid of them pretty quickly. Only say this if they get heavy with you because we want to be diplomatic. We want to be kind, but sometimes it's worth fighting fire with fire. Buddhists should at least stand up for their beliefs, understand what their beliefs are, and not just be wimps.

### **Freedom of Inquiry**

I spoke in Malaysia about such things as the Gnostic gospels, which is another tradition of Christianity. In early Christianity there were three strands of Christian belief. One was the church at Jerusalem, which was basically a Jewish Christianity. They were still circumcising each other and keeping the Jewish traditions. It wasn't very popular with the Gentiles in Rome because they didn't have anaesthetic in those days. The Gentile church was found in many other centres outside of Jerusalem. Places like Antioch, Corinth, and Rome. Then there were the Gnostic Christians. They weren't centred anywhere but were an independent strand of Christianity with no hierarchy or organisation but with groups of people meeting in many different places.



When Jerusalem fell in 70AD, because the Romans were – for one reason or another – fed up with the Jewish people, they tore down the temple and dispersed the people. This action destroyed the Jewish Christian church and from then on it was a contest between the Gnostic Christians and the much better organised, more powerful, Roman Christians. Little by little – this is just basic history not Ajahn Brahm making it up – the Gnostic Christians were suppressed, considered heretics, and eventually annihilated by the Roman Christians. They were killed, their books were burned, and their libraries were destroyed.

It's strange but when you try and suppress anything, when you try and hide something, especially bad *kamma* or mistakes, it usually turns up again somewhere! In 1945 somebody, in a place called Nag Hammadi in southern Egypt, found some old texts, old papyrus manuscripts, dating I think to the first and second centuries AD, which came to be called the Gnostic Gospels. They can be seen at the Nag Hammadi Library. In these texts there are actual sayings of Jesus Christ that are very, very different from what we read in the Bible. If you are interested in another form of Christianity it's very interesting to read things that give a different slant to that religion. You can look up a book called 'The Gnostic Gospels' by Elaine Pagels, who is professor of Religious Studies at Princetown University in America. The reason I'm saying this is because one of the teachings in the texts quotes Jesus as saying that God was in his heaven one day saying, "I am the first born, the creator, the lord of all that is and ever was, the most powerful, etc., etc.". Then someone says, "No you're not. Don't get above yourself God. There are other beings in this universe which you simply do not know about." God replied, "Who said that? Why are you saying that?" That is in the Gnostic Christian Gospels, which puts God in a very different place from that depicted in Roman Christianity.

I mention this because when we have more knowledge and understanding, when we have more information, we get a much wider and broader picture of things. It's that wider knowledge that is one of the things that should be a basic freedom for all human beings. Knowledge should be freely available. It shouldn't be slanted or biased according to certain people's views or religion's agendas.

There are some freedoms that we love to have, that are really our right. One of those freedoms that we would certainly put in a Buddhist charter of human rights is the right to freedom of inquiry, freedom of information, and freedom to question. It is by questioning that we find the truth. The Buddha encouraged us not to just sit back and listen, or to only take a book and study it, but to also question. One of the *suttas* lists the five things that help one become a Stream Winner, (the first stage of Enlightenment). It starts off with *sīla*, virtue, morality, keeping precepts and continues with these two beautiful words *suta* and *sāḱacchā*. *Suta* means literally ‘listening to Dhamma discourses’. You might call it learning or having the informational input about the Buddha’s teachings. *Sāḱacchā* means ‘discussion and asking questions’. The other two factors, interestingly, are *samatha* and *vipassanā*, calm and insight. These are the five supporting factors for the arising of Enlightenment. Here I’m just focussing on *sutta* and *sāḱacchā*, the ability to have the information and also to discuss it.

One of the things that really attracted me to Buddhism was that I could ask any question, even though they were sometimes silly questions, because the teachers respected and honoured questioning. Those teachers would never make a questioner feel silly or embarrassed by saying, “What a stupid question that is, you foolish person. Don’t ask that question again.” I’ve tried all my life never to do that. If someone asks me a question, even though I sometimes think, “What a dumb question, haven’t you been listening?” I always try to answer it fully. I’ve had some dumb questions in my time. Probably the hardest and most foolish question I was ever asked was when I was giving a talk, many years ago, to fourteen year old girls in a high school. After my talk on Buddhism, I expected the questions to be on Buddhism, but this one girl put her hand up and asked, “Do girls turn you on?” That was a hard one to handle. Whenever I asked a dumb question – although I never asked questions like that of monks!! – the monk would always be very patient with me and would actually explain very gently saying, “Look, you’re misunderstanding; you should have asked the question in this way”. But they would never make you feel small because you had asked a stupid question. I really appreciated that because it showed a sense of kindness and respect. The teacher respected the student.

To question is a right for people. That's why I say, "Whatever question you have, come and ask it. I may not know the answer. It may take me a while, and sometimes you may not be satisfied with my answer, but always ask the question". Often when people ask questions and I reply, I ask them if the answer is okay. "Did I answer the question satisfactorily?" "Did I understand the question?" That's respect for the person who had the guts to put their hand up and ask.

I act like this because of my own past experience. Sometimes I've asked a question and because the person hasn't really understood it, or because the question is simply a bit too hard for them, or it's showing them they've made a mistake, they skirt around it or make a joke of it. I remember Krishnamurti, the teacher – I was quite interested in his teachings for a while. Later I heard a recording of one his talks given in the New York Library. It was quite a famous talk. I've seen the audio cassette in public libraries. I was really interested in the talk and at the end there were a lot of stupid questions. Krishnamurti answered those questions reasonably well, but then someone asked a really good question, which was very deep and challenged much of what he had said. I was disgusted when the answer was, with a very condescending and superior voice, "Do I have to answer everything?" The audience laughed. But this poor man was ridiculed even though it was the best question of the session. Krishnamurti just skirted around it with humour, and I thought that was really wrong.

I tell people that if lecturers at universities really know their stuff, if they are really experts at their subjects, they can answer any questions. If they skirt around questions or are afraid of questions, it's a good sign that they don't know what they are talking about. I told the people in Malaysia and Singapore, and I give the same advice to you: there are so many teachers and Gurus, monks and nuns and goodness knows whatever, floating around the world today; you should ask them difficult questions. That's the only way to find out if they know their stuff. Ask them the hardest questions, the most probing questions, and see if they answer them with a sense of equanimity, with a sense of respect – not like a politician avoiding the issue but like someone who knows what they are talking about. If you know, you are not afraid of

questions. This is a good way for people to check on teachers, on Gurus, on monks, or nuns who go around the world teaching. There is a huge danger in believing charlatans. So ask deep questions.

I think in any charter of Buddhist human rights we should have the right to question anybody and the right to demand a fair answer, whether it's from politicians, preachers, or whoever, because I think that would protect truth, and access to the truth should be an inalienable right for people, an inalienable right for all. Find out what your governments are doing. Find out what your doctor says about you, what they have diagnosed you as having. But especially in religion we should have the freedom to find out the truth.

### **Defining the Boundaries**

We also need some checks and balances, because we need boundaries for everybody. Sometimes when we don't understand the meaning of freedom, we remove all the boundaries, whether in the practice of religion, or in the practice of education. Whether it's living together as a family or just in general life, we don't put boundaries in place because we think freedom means 'no boundaries'. We get into all sorts of confusion. In fact one of the speakers at this conference, who I didn't really respect, said she was a Buddhist without boundaries. I was not at all inspired by her. Why do you even call yourself a Buddhist if you don't have any boundaries? To be a Buddhist you've got to have boundaries. I accept some statements and ideas but not others, otherwise why call yourself a Buddhist. Why not call yourself a Buddhist-Christian-Jewish-Moslem-Atheist-freethinker? That's not having boundaries. The point is, it's good to have boundaries.

Sometimes people say, "I'm not anything, I don't call myself a Buddhist. If you're a Buddhist, that's just being attached to a label, to a name". I ask them, "Are you a man? Are you a woman? Aren't you just attached to that label? If you are not attached to that label, when you go to the toilet which one do you go to, the 'Men's' or the 'Ladies?'" If you are not attached to being a man go to the ladies toilet and see what happens. You can see what intellectual garbage this is. I sometimes get really

embarrassed by my fellow Buddhists. Tina Turner when asked by a reporter, “Why are you a Buddhist?” replied, “Because as a Buddhist I can do anything I like”. That’s not being a Buddhist. Buddhists have boundaries. Creatures have boundaries, and it’s the boundaries that define who you are. You call yourself a man, because that means you are not a woman, you’re not an animal, and you’re not a *deva*. You are a man. If you call yourself a Buddhist it defines you as a Buddhist. Whether it’s Tibetan, Mahāyāna, Theravāda, Zen, or whatever, there are certain things that those labels require. At least you have got to believe that the Buddha was Enlightened. If you think, “Well I don’t know if the Buddha was enlightened or not. Sometimes I believe in the Buddha but sometimes I believe in Jesus Christ, and sometimes I believe in the Great White Ram!” What sort of Buddhist is that? That’s just a person who is incredibly confused. They are never going to get anywhere in this life. If you’re going to go to Fremantle you’ve got to get on a bus that has Fremantle written on the front otherwise you will never get there. You don’t have to go to Fremantle, you can go to South Perth, or you can go to Wanneroo, but at least choose the right bus and just sit on it until you get there.

If you are a Buddhist you should learn what the Buddha really said and what it means to be a Buddhist. But not just according to your own ideas. Buddhist means ‘of the Buddha’, ‘something to do with the Buddha’. The Buddha was a historical person. Everyone, even atheist sceptics, accept that much. The Buddha lived in India twenty-six centuries ago, and there is a lot written about him. Not just in old books but also in stone, in actual carvings on ancient temples. There are also carvings on stone pillars erected by the Emperor Asoka. The Buddha existed, there’s no doubt about that. With some of the other teachers we’re not quite so sure.

You have to know what it was that the Buddha taught to be a Buddhist. You have to have some degree of faith and confidence in those teachings. They have to make sense to you. The reason I became a Buddhist was because I read a book about Buddhism that made sense to me. I read other books at the same time, the Koran and the Bible. They didn’t make so much sense. By saying you are a Buddhist you are not criticising other religions, you are saying what *you* are. In the same way as being

a woman, you say you are a woman. You are not criticising men, you are just describing yourself. This is clear thinking. You are giving yourself a description that describes your reality at that particular time. With that description you take on the responsibilities and duties of that reality. A Buddhist is someone who believes in the Buddha – in other words someone who follows, as best they can, what the Buddha taught. Some Buddhists perform all of sorts of elaborate acts of worship. We talked about this in Malaysia where they call it ‘joss-stick Buddhism’. You might have seen joss-stick Buddhists they hold these joss sticks in their hands and sway backwards and forwards. They haven’t a clue why they are doing this. They go backwards and forwards like this because they have always seen their parents and their grand parents doing it. Then they put the joss-sticks into a jar. That’s not what the Buddha taught.

The Buddha taught that if you want to worship him – and this is in the Mahā-Parinibbāna Sutta (DN 16) – you should follow his advice. A Buddhist is really someone who has gone for refuge to the Buddha and is practising the Eightfold Path as closely as possible. Whether it’s Zen Buddhism, Mahāyāna Buddhism, or whatever type of Buddhism, the one thing in Buddhism that everyone has in common is the Eightfold Path. In Mahāyāna Buddhism they’ve got six *pāramīs*, or perfections, three of those are *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*, which is the eightfold path. No matter what form of Buddhism it is, you have to have *sīla*, virtue. You have to have right view and keep the precepts. You have to have *samādhi*, where you are practising some meditation and developing some *paññā* or wisdom.

So, first of all learn what the Buddha taught. Try and realize it. See if it makes sense or not, and in the meantime question it. Listen to find out what Buddhism is all about. Question it to make sure you understand properly what the Buddha said, not believing it yet. Then try it out to see if it works by practising it for yourself.

### **Freedom of Mind**

Sometimes people think that keeping rules and having laws is restricting their freedom. That’s why some human rights conflict with the laws. There is a conflict in

many countries between laws which are designed to protect society and to give freedom from bullying, freedom from disruption, freedom for a person to enjoy their property, their time, and their own religion, and what people call the 'freedom to do what they want'. I think this is the problem with the way that human rights are espoused at the present time. In Buddhism we realise – and the Buddha said this – that we gain freedom only within boundaries. We gain a lot of confusion, pain, and suffering, when we don't have boundaries. Look at your marriage. If you've no boundaries, no rules, what sort of marriage have you got? The husband if he likes a girl can just go there, be free; and the same for wife. What sort of life would that be? To be able to have harmony and peace we do need rules.

During my talks in Singapore and Malaysia I gave the simile of the fish in a tank – are they free or are they in prison? Is it 'Buddhist' to put fish in a tank or should they be swimming free in the seas, the lakes, and the rivers? What have they done to get put in prison? Sometimes people look at the aquarium and think it's a prison, don't they? But that's misunderstanding freedom. The meaning of that particular simile is that the fish in the tank are free from fishermen, free from bigger fish, and they are free from too much cold and too much heat. The temperature is controlled and they've got free medical care because, if they are sick, the owner will come and see them and make sure they are okay. They get free food delivered to them once a day. Fast food: they don't even have to ring up for the delivery boy, it just comes to them! The fish in the tank are free from so many problems. That's why, when I really think about it, if I was a fish I'd rather be a fish in an aquarium than a fish in the sea or in the ocean, in the rivers or lakes. I can swim back and forth, I wouldn't be able to go as far as other fish but I would be so happy. I wouldn't have to worry about anything. I'd be just sitting in the corner of the aquarium with my fins crossed meditating quite happily!

Now you may understand monks. We put ourselves in a monastery with a large wall around it and people bring us food every day just like a fish in an aquarium. But to live that life we have to put boundaries around ourselves. Our boundaries are all the rules of discipline which we have to keep. This is something that people don't understand about monks and nuns, especially the lady who said she was a Buddhist without boundaries. Without boundaries there's no freedom at all. In fact people who try that, who indulge in whatever pleasure or sensory aberration they like, who sleep

around with this partner and that partner, get so confused, so depressed. We used to call these people ‘screwed up’ in their minds. That is no inner freedom whatsoever. There is just so much pain. That’s the reason that places like California – I’m not sure if it’s true, but I think it’s pretty accurate – probably have the highest ratio of psychotherapists per unit of population of anywhere in the world. One of the reasons for that is that there is a lack of freedom of mind.

So freedom really needs boundaries. If we keep precepts we feel free. The more precepts we keep the more free we feel. It’s the same with meditation. Some people say meditation is so hard – you have to think of the breath but you don’t want to think of the breath, you want to think about your dinner this evening. If you think of the breath isn’t that just another prison? That’s why people sometimes even have the nerve to say that you can be attached to meditation. They really don’t know the difference between freedom and attachment, between liberty and being in a prison. If you watch the breath and just keep yourself on the breath, you don’t go anywhere else. If you put yourself in a jail with iron bars around the breath, you can’t go anywhere. Do that for twenty minutes, half an hour, or an hour and you feel so much bliss, the mind actually feels free. That is one of the fascinating insights of Buddhism. In fact the Buddha called those states the ‘states of *vimutti*’ and that literally means freedom or liberation of the mind.

It’s strange but you have to put yourself into only one small part of the present moment to gain liberation of the mind. You can’t even talk, that’s against the rules. Imagine trying to impose that on people! On meditation retreats we impose ‘noble silence’ and only allow people to eat in the mornings. If Amnesty International found out about our meditation retreats they’d probably complain. That’s what is called unusual punishment, unusual forms of torture. I would think they would have a strong case for banning it. People who go to those retreats at first, because they can’t talk, feel so uncomfortable. But after two or three days the discomfort disappears and they actually feel freedom. They are free from the necessity of having to talk and having to relate to people on that level. They learn how to relate on another level. There is so much freedom when you’re silent, so much more freedom when you stay on one point. What looks like a prison is actually the fullest liberty. It’s called release, and it’s the wisdom that is the truth.



It's a very narrow truth. The truth of Buddhism is 'impermanence', 'suffering' and 'non-self'. People often think that's such a small thing. Why believe that? You're just attached to one way of looking at things. Some people say that that's being attached to one view and real freedom is having any view, any view you like. You can believe in impermanence today and believe in permanence the next day. You can believe in God. You can believe in whatever you like. Nothing is right and nothing is wrong. Some philosophers end up by saying that there is no good and there is no bad, it's all relative. They say, in other words, that whatever you like is good, and whatever you don't like is bad. It depends on how you feel; truth is relative. Anyone who believes in absolute truth is dogmatic, just stuck in one way of thinking. But actually the opposite is true. If you have right view, you feel so free. It's not being in a prison; it's liberty. It's okay to say what you think is right and stand up for it.

### **Conclusion**

Don't be a freethinker, which means that you think, think, and think. Be a 'no thinker'. Be a knower, not a thinker. All thinking is a sign that you don't know. If you knew why would you think? It's true, just think about that. So, here I'm putting out some different ideas about Buddhism, ideas that actually show that human rights are a central pillar of our society. They mean a lot to us because they have consequences for the way we live our lives, consequences for the laws of our society, and consequences for the way we do things.

Let us have another look at human rights from a Buddhist perspective, from the perspective of *kamma*. Sometimes we have to suffer. We know why – it's because we deserve it. We caused it! Equality is the equality of opportunity, the opportunity to make good *kamma* and to have happiness. All people are not born equal because they have all started from different places. Equality is in the equality to perform good *kamma* and the equality to rise in happiness and leave suffering behind. So we recognise the differences in people, even from the time of their birth. People are not all born equal, but they should have equality of opportunity, and that's a beautiful thing in Buddhism.

Everyone has the opportunity to make good *kamma*. It doesn't matter how much you are experiencing the results of bad *kamma* at this moment. If you're very sick, very ill, if you've just lost your job, or you're disabled, if you've just been in an accident, a divorce, or whatever else, there is always an equality of opportunity to take hold of your life. You can turn your life around to that which is truly wholesome, beautiful, and good at any stage of your life. You can do that! That's why Buddhism doesn't believe in fate, in the sense that, 'Oh, I'm hopeless. I'm not destined to have a nice life' or 'I can't become a monk', 'I can't become a nun'. In Malaysia people said, "Well, it's alright for you; you were born with such good *kamma*, that's why you're a monk. But I haven't got good *kamma*. I can't become a monk". I ask, "How do you know?" I always tell people to give it a chance and see what happens. Test it out and see if you have good enough *kamma* to become a monk. Give it a try. The point is we can always do something.

One of the other things which impressed me in Buddhism, was that even a person who was a prostitute, someone who went crazy, and a serial killer, were all examples of people who eventually became Enlightened. In Buddhism people with terrible *kamma* had the freedom of opportunity, even in this life, to get to the very highest achievements.

I think it is a good idea to enshrine in human rights not just equality between men and women, but more importantly to enshrine *equality of opportunity*. Opportunity for men should be the same as opportunity for women. It should be the same opportunity for any gender, any race, and any religion, because that is the Buddhist principle – not a Western Christian principle but Buddhist principles. With the Buddhist principle of forgiveness and kindness it is not necessary to enshrine punishment into human rights. Nowadays the victims of crime want to be the ones who punish the criminals. I'm not sure that is the law yet, but it seems to be coming. We seem to be enshrining in law the right to inflict revenge on somebody else, basically the right of an eye for an eye. But that's Judeo-Christian and Islamic; it has no place in Buddhism. In Buddhism we have the right to forgive. It's good to forgive somebody else, but it is also a human right and also freeing to forgive yourself as well. That's a powerful freedom. It took me a long time to change my conditioning on reward and punishment. If you are

guilty you have to be punished! You have to be spanked, or go to your room, go without your dinner, or some other punishment. If you don't get that punishment from someone else you inflict it on yourself. Buddhist human rights are the right to forgive and let go.

These are just some reflections on human rights from a Buddhist perspective. Sometimes we think that the Declaration of Human Rights is universal, applicable to all people in this world, just because it came from America and Europe. I think that America and Europe need to look at the different cultures that make up our world, not just Buddhist culture but also Aboriginal cultures, to make these declarations relevant. Instead of just calling them universal, first of all find out what the people of this world actually feel: consult them, instead of just imposing these ideals that do not have a foundation in all cultures. The speaker at this conference was suggesting, and I thought it was a marvellous idea, that this declaration of human rights is far from perfect. Let the Buddhists have an input. Rework it. Otherwise it's not really applicable and it doesn't make sense to many people. There are different ways of looking at things, and to look at things in different ways is called wisdom.

These are some points on Buddhism and human rights, freedom and everything else. But it's just a start, because the whole debate and investigation isn't over yet.