

The agricultural community in Sri Lanka
(Colombo, October 20, 1981)
Interchange with the Buddhist Sanga in Sarvodaya

Greetings to the Sanga... to the brothers, sisters, elderly and everyone gathered here today.

Doctor Ariyaratne has been very considerate with us. The words he has said about us are far more elevated than what we deserve.

In reality, when we arrived at this center, we were impressed by its sobriety and by the value given to work. We have frequently spoken of humanizing the Earth, but humanizing the Earth must be seen in practice. To Humanize the Earth can be just an idea, yet here we have seen that humanizing the Earth is being practiced. We have seen, above all, a strong moral force in motion. By contrast, in all other latitudes we have seen that the Earth is becoming dehumanized and that the world is becoming dehumanized.

I come from a place that has an agricultural background. In only a few years, I have seen the population in the countryside decrease and become concentrated in the cities. I have seen the destruction of the traditional family and the abandonment of the elderly. While the countryside lost its people, the urban centers grew creating belts of impoverished people. If the information provided by the United Nations is correct, in 1950 half of the population of the world lived in the countryside and the other half in the cities, towns or rural areas. It would seem that if this statistical tendency continues to move in the same direction, by the year 2000 more than 90% of the workers of the world will be living in cities. This will have explosive consequences from every point of view.

The work that we have seen in Sarvodaya and in its social organisms, with respect to decentralization and the creation of compact centers for (peasants) countryside workers, is an idea that provides a new possibility in the world. The question is whether we can situate the new generations in centers such as those designed here and ensure that there will be health, education and the possibility of work available for all. And, that even cultural and university centers could be located in rural areas...

The global process shows a continuous concentration in the cities; the concentration of capital in few hands and urban concentration - in short, concentration in every sense of the word. The seemingly decentralized forms that appear simply break the order of the preceding form and promote concentrations at another level. If the states disintegrate, the Para-State becomes concentrated. If the centralized companies disintegrate, it strengthens the corporations and the financial capital. It seems that nothing has a centrifugal force. Everything is becoming concentrated, and if something appears to be a de-concentration, it is only a step taken to break with the previous scheme of things but that later becomes a part of a greater form of concentration.

The human being has also become a consumer. The human being is thinking that everything ends up in himself, and that everything is geared in function of himself. Here, in Sarvodaya, new ideas and new behaviors are being proposed, but the direction these are taking is the inverse of what has been discussed so far. Here the idea is not to consider the human being as a consumer. Here the idea is to cover the basic needs. Here the idea is to distribute and decentralize - to bring the culture to the countryside. In fact, here the idea is to de-concentrate the compulsive process that the world of today has taken. It is extremely important to understand this experience. Regardless of the degree of success this experience may have in the future, it is still a valid action in and of itself.

On the other hand, I believe to have grasped the vision about the human being and society that is prevalent in Sarvodaya. It seems that here man is not considered to be an isolated being, but rather a part of the social relation. The idea of compassion is behind all of this. An idea which considers that, instead of ending up in oneself, actions end up in others. I seem to have detected that the concern not is placed on one's own suffering, but rather on another person's suffering.

This is exactly the same point of view that we have sustained for a long time. We say that problems are not resolved in one's own consciousness, but that it is necessary to leap over your own problem and deal instead with the other person's pain. This is a moral act par excellence; to "treat others like you want to be treated."

Some people think that they have many personal problems, and that because of these problems they cannot do anything for anybody else. It is extraordinary to see how people with a high standard of living in the West feel that it is impossible for them to help others because they think they have too many problems.

Nevertheless, we have seen the poorer sectors of society who, in spite of having real and enormous difficulties, are able to find the strength to help others, to share their food, and to leap over their own suffering to carry out continuous acts of solidarity.

Here, we have seen this same moral force but organized and expanding... this force that is intended for others and that makes us better people in the measure that we help others surpass their suffering. We have little knowledge regarding this center, but we have attentively noticed the eyes of the children that were picked up from the street. We have noticed their smiles, and the behavior of those who work here. And we have understood that behind all of this there is, once again, a new moral force in motion.

This is a great social movement. In fact it is more of a spiritual movement, but I would define it as a great moral force in motion. This is the valid impression that I am able to transmit based on the little I have seen of Sarvodaya. I can also say that I need more time to learn from all of this.

Thank you for the attention you have given me.

-- We would like to listen to your message. Sila, in Theravada Buddhism, is the moral rule that leads to the correct action and one must make this evident.

-- Reverend, my message is something simple and it can be applied in daily life. It is a message that refers to the individual and his immediate environment. It is not a message that refers to the world in general. It refers to the people who love, live and suffer with their couple, their family, their friends, in other words, with those who are close to them.

The world has serious problems, but it would be a disproportion to try to change the world if it is not really possible for me to do it. But what I can change is my immediate environment, and in some way, change myself. And if my possibilities of action and transformation should reach further than that, in this case, my neighbor would me more than just my couple, my friend, or my coworker.

We say that we must be aware of our own limitations in order to carry out coherent and efficient actions. Therefore, we propose to form small groups of individuals with their immediate environment wherever we happen to be. These groups can be of any kind, that is, urban or non-urban, and I should call upon all the volunteers who wish to leap over their personal problems and attend to others. As these small groups grow, they will become connected and their possibilities of transformation will also grow.

What is this growth based on, and what unites these groups? It is based on the idea that to give is better than to receive. It is based on the idea that every action that ends up in oneself produces contradiction and suffering, and that actions that end up in others are the only ones that effectively overcome personal suffering.

Wisdom is not what enables man to surpass personal suffering. The thoughts and intentions may be right, but the right action could be missing. There is no right action if it is not inspired by compassion. The basic human attitude of compassion, a human action that goes towards others, is the basis for all personal and social growth.

As you well know, all of this has been said long ago. So we are not saying anything new here, but we are attempting to become conscious of the fact that this self-enclosure, this individualism, this turning of the actions upon oneself, are the cause of the total disintegration of today's man. Nevertheless, in many places, these simple ideas do not appear to be easily understood. Lastly, many people believe that by immersing themselves in their own problems they can at least avoid new difficulties. Of course this is clearly not true. Quite the contrary is what really happens. Personal contradiction contaminates the immediate environment.

When I speak of contradiction, I speak of actions that are harmful to one's self. I betray myself when I do things that oppose what I feel. This creates permanent suffering for me, but it does not stay with me, it ends up contaminating everyone around me. This suffering, which seems to be individual and which derives from personal contradiction, ends up as social suffering.

There is only one kind of action that allows the human being to break with his permanent contradiction and suffering. This is the moral action with which the human being directs himself towards others so that they may overcome their suffering. When I help someone else overcome their own suffering, I later remember myself in my own kindness. On the other hand, when I carry out a contradictory action I remember that moment as something that twisted my life. This is how contradictory actions invert the wheel of life, whereas, actions that end up in others, so that they may overcome their own suffering, are actions that start up the wheel of life.

Any action that ends up in oneself inevitably leads to contradiction and to contaminate the immediate environment. Even pure wisdom, the intellectual wisdom that stays within oneself, leads to contradiction. These are times for action and this action consists in starting to help others to overcome their own suffering. This is the right action, the compassion, the moral act par excellence.

-- Is it possible for this idea of people helping other people dangerously lead to the "blind leading the blind?"

-- Reverend, it is possible for a blind person to use other senses. It is possible for the blind to hear a distant waterfall or a serpent slithering in the night. Therefore, it is possible for a blind person to use other senses to warn others -- who do not have such sharp ears -- about an impending danger. And I say furthermore, that that blind person is not only useful to others in his same condition, but also to those who have eyes but cannot use them at night.

-- In order for this harmony to develop within us it is necessary to do something within ourselves. A child grows naturally, without having to think about it, but still, his behavior has no direction until he learns something about himself. The forces of nature also act without any direction, without any conscience of what it does.

-- Reverend, the human being also learns by doing and in the measure that he does things, he learns. A person learns to type by practicing with their hands, and thus, by trial and error one learns. The mere action of thinking, is a primary action of the consciousness. But of course it is not the same thing to think while divagating than to think with a direction. Thinking with a direction already has implicit an action of the consciousness. And if I resolve to stop thinking and to produce a void, I am taking action in that direction.

-- We wonder: do actions come before thought, or does thought come before the action.

-- Reverend. From our point of view there are no lineal causes and effects in this matter. It is, instead, a continuous feedback circuit where one thing overlaps with the other, and this produces growth. As a visual image, and seen from above, this process is circular; like a wheel. Viewed laterally, we understand that it is a spiral in motion that grows every time a new circle begins. Thus, a person may lack knowledge about something, but in the measure that they work on that one point, their experience gets richer and new ideas arise which are then reapplied over the same point. In this sense, the human being has grown with respect to other living beings. He has grown by confronting, with the pain of his own body, in his attempts to get warmth, clothing, and food, and by attempting to avoid the future physical damage when nature has attacked his weakness. Thus, he has transformed nature, by trial and error. Now he must stabilize the instability... always by acting, learning and growing. This is the idea with which I would answer your question about thought and action.

-- Unfortunately, human beings have difficulties in confronting nature, and this brings them suffering.

-- Reverend. Unfortunately, you are right. The human being has suffered in his confrontation. He still does today. But we must also remember that he has learned through this suffering. In reality, progress has been a rebellion against suffering, against death; the motor of human history has been the rebellion against death. But of course, man has suffered tremendously.

We know that there is a great difference between pain and suffering. Pain is physical, and it will be overcome once the social organizations and the sciences develop sufficiently. In fact, physical pain can be overcome. Medicine corroborates this fact and social progress demonstrates it. Mental suffering, however, is an entirely different thing. There is no science nor any social organization that can make mental suffering recede. The human being has grown through his success in overcoming a lot of his physical pain, but he has not overcome his mental suffering at the same time. The important role that many of the great messages and teachings played, was based on understanding that in order to overcome suffering, specific and precise conditions are required, and there is nothing that we can say about this. There are the teachings, and we have respect for them in the same form they are in.

But in this perceptual world, in this world of immediacy, in this world that has attachments for the consciousness, where illusory perception and memory produce an illusory consciousness in me, and an illusory I; in this world in which we are provisionally immersed; in this world, I do what I do so that pain can be surpassed, And I strive so that science and social organization take a direction that will improve human life. I also understand that once the human being really sees the need to surpass mental suffering, he will have to appeal to comprehensions that will tear the veil of Maya; that will tear the illusion. But the correct road must be based on the immediate (needs): with compassion, by helping to overcome pain.