

Pure Land Learning Centre – Multi-faith Forum 17 March 2012

Transcript of the Talk on: Morality and Virtues: A Cultural Perspective

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Amitofu, Honourable Master, Distinguished Venerables, Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen. A very warm namaste to you – a greeting from my birth country and a very bright Good Day – a greeting from adopted country.

We live in exciting times. We have access to the vast resources of knowledge, wisdom, learning and experiences from peoples from different backgrounds their traditions and cultures. We can learn from the experiences in history, we can learn from experts in all fields. We can visit most parts of the world without having to make arduous journeys and we can see and talk to people in remote places without leaving our homes, with increasing ease with the aid of modern technologies. Recent discoveries in science throw new light onto old teachings giving fresh perspective to way we do things in the future.

Albert Schweitzer said – *“Once you’ve seen a vision of how wondrous the world can be, you can no longer be complacent.”*

Today I’ll be giving you a glimpse of some of these aspects very briefly as they are in reality all big topics and one could dedicate many seminars to each of them in their own right. They all play an important part if the global culture that is now emerging so its important to note their salient points.

1. Looking at Culture: Culture is a very big word.

Culture encompasses the most complex aspects of humanity and human interaction:

- how people express themselves in language, in thought, the arts, music, dance;
- social activities, manners, etiquette, social norms, negotiation, protocols, conventions,
- pursuit of education, training, improvement, development
- pursuit of science, applications of science
- spirituality, value systems, religion, beliefs,

“A nation's culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people.” - Mahatma Gandhi

2. Culture is deeply influenced by:

- history of the group
- average age of the people in the group
- religion
- politics
- opportunities and threats
- vision of the future..... and so on....

3. All of which makes the single word culture into one of the most varied aspect of human civilisation

Like everything Culture changes – cultures transform positively with knowledge, tools and opportunities or stagnate from fear, control, suppression leading to lack of creativity, inability to grow with changes in the socio-political environment and other similar factors.

4. Here in Toowoomba we have people from:

- 120+ different ethnic backgrounds
- 117+ languages
- 80+ religions

Any one who thinks we live in a mono-culture has to think again.

This is a rich, colourful kaleidoscope in a small region with a population of around 170,000+.

5. So there is a huge variety in the people's expectations. For example, in the way they:

- treat their elders
- treat their children and other members of their family
- interact with other men and women in the community/society
- how they treat their teachers
- how they treat guests
- how they treat their hosts
- how they conduct negotiations
- how they respond to leaders in the community
- how they respond laws & social norms in the wider community (written and unspoken norms)
- give gifts/ receive gifts
- celebrate festivals

All of these effect what is considered to be moral and virtuous in a particular culture.

6. Examples:

We all have examples from our own experiences when we meet people of different cultures and we feel we haven't been understood and don't understand what we are being asked for.

- Rules of Honour
- Never break a promise – better to die
- Politeness/Sarcasm (excessive politeness)
- Dating/Marrying Norms
- Order in which guests enter a function
- Order of Introductions
- Eye contact when addressing people of the other sex or higher social status
- Eye contact in building trust/raising doubt
- Hospitality Rules
- Feet Rules

7. With so many different expectations – misunderstandings will happen no matter how much we learn about other cultures. There are many many avenues where any one can unintentionally offend, generate misunderstandings, leading to distress, mistrust and conflict.

At the same time there is incredible opportunity to create common ground through respect and understanding thus building harmony.

The big questions are:

How can one avoid misunderstandings becoming conflict?

How can we Build a Harmonious Culture?

8. Do not be fearful of change. Change is one of the constants of life.

“Change is not something we should fear. Rather it is something we should welcome. For without change, no one in this world would ever move forward to become the person they are meant to be.”
– Anon

9. One of the world’s leading experts in peace building John Paul Lederach outlines 5 Practices to Transforming Conflict. It is all about capacity building.

Develop a capacity to

- See presenting issues as a window.
- Integrate multiple time frames
- Pose energies of conflict as a dilemmas
- Make complexity a friend, not a foe
- Hear and engage the voices of identity

Let us take a quick look at the recent developments in the world that are going to have a big impact on the future on culture.

10. Clues from The Universe:

In Physics – the discoveries in quantum mechanics in the last 50-70 years have now reached a point where there is recognition of:

- The intricate interconnectedness of everything the universe (not just on earth)
- all there is – is part of the one wave function irrespective of distance & time
- Consciousness in an integrated part of this highly complex wave function
- What we do now – effects not only the future but also the past.

11. Evolving Consciousness:

- Increasing Recognition of the role of our thoughts on matter
- Importance of understanding the ‘consciousness level’ of a problem and devising solutions with a higher level of consciousness.
- Effects of consciousness on the mind, body, healing.
- Consciousness of animals – from the smallest of creatures to the biggest of mammals
- Their ability to understand love and respond with love is opening frontiers in human understanding

12. All o f these throw new light into the ancient teachings:

Two examples for the sake of brevity:

“The one never became many, O Rama. When many candles are kindled from another, it is the same flame that burns in all candles; even so, the one Brahman appears to be many” - Sage Vashishta gave this advice to the Hindu God Ram believed to be over 9,000 years ago.

“As you did these things to the least of my creatures, you did them to me” - Jesus

These are not just meant to be inspiration for artists – rather they are deep truths about the reality of nature.

13. Most people realise we are one world. The developments in communications, technology and transportation have

- Interdependence of the global economy
- Ability to connect with people anywhere in the world
- Diasporas all over the world. We all have loved ones in most parts of the world or are close to someone who does.

14. Fundamental Truths about reality:

- We are part of an integrated whole.
- *One cannot harm even the smallest of creatures or neglect even a portion of the earth without adversely affecting ourselves. We are not separate from the whole – they are not separate from the whole.*

As humans that puts us right in the middle of the action. It all depends on us.

- Humans have to be the leaders in this field. What we do influences what everyone else does around us. When we act with love and understanding – other creatures also respond with love and understanding. *(I know this personally from over 11 years interaction with what are considered to be many of the most aggressive species of birds in Australia – magpies, butcherbirds, noisy-miners to name some.)*
- Before we can change others we have to change ourselves.
- *“Be the change you want to see in the world” – Mahatma Gandhi*

15. Building Harmony:

- To have harmony and peace – people have to feel secure, they have to feel they can trust people even though they may be from different backgrounds and cultures, even when they accidentally do something that may cause offence.
- If we want people to give us that security, if we want to be able to trust them – then they likewise have to be able to trust us and feel equally secure around us.
- To build this kind of security and trust for everyone requires a change in thinking.
- This can only be achieved if there is a mutual commitment and effort from all.

16. Essential Goodness – taught in all religions:

- To try to benefit everyone affected and harm no one.
 - not just the majority, or the people in our group or the people who will give us more money, land, wealth, power, status – But everyone.
- No one is perfect, in knowledge, resources or capacity – so no one can think of perfect solutions every time. So if the commitment is to try, success is wonderful but failure is accepted and mistakes are forgiven. Giving everyone the chance to learn and grow.
- Which is the essence of the principle of goodness – the ancient wisdom in all religions.

17. Happiness is the desire of all cultures.

- Morality and virtue are values that enable the growth of happiness for the peoples of that culture.
- Conflict and war stem from basic needs for food, refuge, education and income that are not met or from greed for power and wealth.
- Acknowledging the right of all people and all creatures to a life of happiness is the foundation of morality and virtue for a future culture of harmony, peace and happiness.

18. “As we begin to embrace the principle of goodness in our lives and all our endeavours, the world will begin to shine with the true light of lasting peace and harmony.” – Light, Goodness, The Tree of Life.

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Thank You

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