

Tenth Daisaku Ikeda Annual Lecture
“All the World My Home, All the People My Kin”:
A Universalist View From Asia

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I'm truly honoured to be invited to share with you some thoughts on this world we inhabit and which we all need to care about.

A Tamil Poem on Universality

“All the World My Home, All the People My Kin” is the translation of the first line of a classical Tamil poem composed more than 2000 years ago in India. In Tamil, it reads: யாதும் ஊரே, யாவரும் கேளிர் “Yaathum Oore, Yaavarum Kelir”. It reflects a worldview that all of humanity is symbiotic and all of this planet is interconnected. It reflects a worldview that while we are separated by geography we are also connected by the same geography. It reflects a worldview that while we are divided by colour, creed or caste, we all still belong to the same family.

The world, even 2000 years ago, was not so small, nor the people of that time so congenial, that this statement “All the World My Home, All the People My Kin” would have referred to any kind of reality. Even then it would have been considered a statement of great aspiration, a statement of great hope. Even then there would have been many skeptics, as there are today, who held such sentiments to be both naive and simplistic.

Yet, that Classical Tamil poet (Kanian Poongundranar) was not alone in such sentiments. Similar expressions have been found in many cultures and languages. The Chinese have a saying “Si Hai Wei Jia” -- 四海为家 – which literally means “The four seas are my home.” The Quran has a reference: “All human beings are naught but a single nation and yet they disagree” (10:19)

Indeed, such disagreements had manifested themselves as warring nations, warring ideologies and warring religions. Two thousand years of history since the time of the Tamil poet, have not led us to a paradise of unity and harmony but to the hellholes of Iraq and Afghanistan, of Somalia and Sri Lanka, of Ireland and Palestine. Even after the Great War to end all wars in the 1940s, we continue to indulge in conflicts some of which could trigger the Third World War.

As if not satisfied with killing or maiming people, we are also destroying our precious planet through careless, even mindless environmental damage. We are depleting our lands and rivers, our flora and fauna, our oil and minerals as if they are in endless supply. We are desecrating our skies and the seas which are the life sources of our planet.

Thus we as a people, and this planet as our habitat have been devastated by our own action -- or rather inaction in some cases.

That is why I thought it would be a good occasion to reflect on our condition.

Interconnected World

“All the world my home” -- is it just a poetic expression of a vague notion of a connected world? Or is there some basis for such a conception?

I wonder how many of you now remember what was once a highly exciting theory that caught the imagination of many thinkers in the 1970s -- the Chaos Theory? In 1972, a meteorologist named Edward Lorenz presented a paper to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, entitled *Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in Brazil set off a Tornado in Texas?* In simple terms, what he discovered was that even a tiny change in the initial condition in a dynamic system could have a huge effect on the system over distance or time. In the case of climate change, which was the subject of Lorenz's study, in a sense, the flapping of a butterfly's wing in Brazil could possibly cause a tornado in Texas. And this effect came to be popularly known as the “butterfly effect,” thanks to Lorenz.

There are many kinds of butterfly effects that will demonstrate to us how interconnected the world really is.

Let us take another, a much more recent example that most of us in Singapore experienced first hand. On 13 March 2003, Singaporeans woke up to find out that there were three victims of the dreaded disease SARS, the acronym for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome. The killer virus was reported to have originated from the Guangdong province of China and within a matter of weeks, it spread to more than 35 countries and infected thousands and even more critically, it devastated the life routines of millions of people around the world, including ours in Singapore.

It was a disease we had never heard of before, we had nothing to do with its origin thousands of miles away and we did nothing to welcome it, yet we could not escape its deadly embrace. That is the connected world for us.

Less dramatically but no less critically, the world is experiencing innumerable demonstrations of what has come to be known as Globalisation, a phenomenon that really shows up what a village this world really is. In the flow of trade and investment, in the movement of goods and people, in the spread of fashion and entertainment, and many more such transactions, we can see the world being crisscrossed by numerous strands of connections and conjunctions.

We have also added to the physical space of our world another dimension called the cyberspace. The internet which became a popular network for ordinary people in the early 1990s, today connects almost two billion people in 230 countries and this worldwide

network is growing with millions more each year. The moment you go on to the internet, you are connected to people across the globe.

There is also the mobile phone the use of which is growing even faster than the internet. Mobile phone subscription is reaching five billion this year while the world population is now less than seven billion. With millions of subscriptions being added each month, it may not be long before the entire world is wirelessly connected.

With these communication technologies, you can access the world's greatest libraries. You can transact business with someone in Brazil as if he is your corner shop owner. You can watch President Obama address his Congress even as he is doing it. You can hear the BBC Prom as the music flows out of the Royal Albert Hall in London. You can witness Olympics runners touch the tape in split seconds ahead of each other in Beijing. You can even hear their heavy breathing. And you can see and speak with your loved ones across thousands of miles. All this sitting in the comfort of your own home in Singapore.

That is why some commentators have called this phenomenon the death of distance.

All these examples of an interconnected world make the point that while our physical home will remain in one small spot or in one country, our mental home, our intellectual home, our business home or our leisure home now knows no bounds -- of geography or of national flags. Shakespeare's words "The World's mine oyster" uttered in 1600, have new meanings today.

Indivisible Humanity

Now let me turn to the other half of the poetic expression: "All the people my kin."

Again, such sentiments were not unique to Indians. Many other cultures in Asia and elsewhere held similar worldviews.

There's a Chinese saying: "All under heaven are one family" *tīānxià-yījiā* 天下一家 -- which subscribes to the same philosophy.

When Ms Tan Gek Noi of SOKA read my draft speech last night she reminded me that Buddhism teaches that all life is interrelated. She pointed out the the concept of "dependent origination," which holds that nothing exists in isolation, independent of other life. The Japanese term for dependent origination is *engi*, which literally means "arising in relation." In other words, everything exists only because of its relationship with other things.

I especially like the way the Africans have developed the concept of Ubuntu. In Zulu language it says: *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* ("a person is a person through (other) persons"). What a wonderful idea, expressed so succinctly!

Even in the West, the universal family was not unheard of. Francois Fenelon, a French writer of the 17th century had said "All wars are civil wars, because all men are brothers."

Yet brothers have killed brothers in the name of god, country or ideology. And they continue to do so till today. Which makes "All the people my kin" wishful thinking. Yet, I'm not discouraged because every now and then come along leaders of thought and action

who instill in us a sense of optimism and inspire us to strive on for the greater good of mankind.

Though history has thrown many such leaders around the globe, I would like to make reference to one man who lived not too long ago in Asia and who made an impact across the whole world and who left an indelible mark in millions of hearts and minds.

Let me begin with a quote from that man:

All my actions have their rise in my inalienable love of mankind. I have known no distinction between relatives and strangers, countrymen and foreigners, white and coloured, Hindus and Indians of other faiths whether Mussulmans, Parsees, Christians or Jews. I may say that my heart has been incapable of making any such distinctions. By a long process of prayerful discipline I have ceased for over forty years to hate anybody. All men are my brothers and no human being should be a stranger to another. The welfare of all, sarvodaya, should be our aim. God is the common bond that unites all human beings. To break this bond even with our greatest enemy is to tear God himself to pieces. There is humanity even in the most wicked.

Even if you are an atheist, you will agree, I think, Mahatma Gandhi makes sense. And unlike most preachers, he practiced what he preached. He once said “An ounce of practice is worth more than tons of preaching” and he had tons of practice.

Gandhi was revered both in India and around the world not so much for gaining independence for India from the British Empire, a monumental achievement in itself, but much more for the humane principles he embodied and espoused. One of them was, as you heard just now, *sarvodaya* – which is Sanskrit for “welfare for all”, and another was *ahimsa* – Sanskrit for “non-violence” or “non-injury.”

These two principles, in my view, go to the heart of the matter of building a world that is home for all and nurturing a humanity in which all people are kin.

Sarvodaya

The compassionate principle of welfare for all could only flourish in a soil of love – the inalienable love of mankind, as Gandhi put it. Though he emphasized the “inalienable,” it would be naive to assume that all of us could cultivate this inalienable love of mankind easily or quickly. It took Gandhi “a long process of prayerful discipline.” And even if we believe in God, it will take enormous effort to convince ourselves that “there is humanity even in the most wicked.” But we could all begin somewhere, beginning perhaps with what the Bible says: “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”

However, such love, whether between neighbours or strangers, will not come about readily or easily. There has to be a process. One such process is dialogue.

Daisaku Ikeda, the current leader of Soka Gakkai and often referred to as a peacebuilder, says, “Without dialogue, humans are fated to walk in the darkness of their own dogmatic self-righteousness. Dialogue is the lamp by which we dispel that darkness, lighting and making visible for each other our steps and the path ahead.”

At a cursory glance, the world, indeed, does not seem to be short on the supply of those lamps. There are so many platforms for dialogues such as the World Economic Forum that one could spend a life time attending forums. Unfortunately, much of the world has

taken dialogue to mean talking *at* each other and not *with* each other. There is much light but little illumination. We need to cultivate the art of the dialogue first. The fundamental purpose of such dialogues is not just informing or influencing the other but to be – equally – informed and influenced by the other. There has to be a symmetry of purpose in the dialogue.

And through dialogue we could reach a genuine understanding of the other -- the other person, the other ideology, the other religion, the other nation. Understanding, if pursued with mutual respect, could lead to appreciation and possibly acceptance. One day we might even agree with Gandhi that “there is humanity even in the most wicked.” And that is when we will come to the delightful realization that in order to be one, we all do not have to be the same.

It is unrealistic, indeed unnatural to expect all of humanity to be alike. Just look at Nature. The genius of Nature is to create diversity in order to maintain unity. An ecosystem works not because of the subjugation of all by one but by the interdependence of all on each other. And so must humanity ensure unity through diversity and not homogeneity. Unfortunately, the zealous amongst us tend to believe that all the world must be the same in order to be one. If a religion says that there can only be one God and that is my God, it cannot be a great religion. If a culture says that there can only be one culture and that is my culture, it cannot be a great culture. If a race says that there is only one great race and that is my race, it cannot be a great race.

What the world needs is the recognition and acceptance of the fundamental truth about humankind – as with the biodiversity of nature, humankind has survived and will continue to survive only when it manages its inevitable diversity in an intelligent and compassionate manner. That is why Gandhi emphasized Sarvodaya – welfare of all. And that is the first principle I would advance for nurturing a humanity that we all can call our kin.

Ahimsa

The second principle of Gandhi is even more problematic and, yet, more compelling. *Ahimsa* or non-violence or non-injury, as some prefer to call it, was not invented by Gandhi – as Buddhists know only too well! Indeed Gandhi himself had stated that “the common factor of all religions is nonviolence.” He considered Jesus Christ as “the most active resister known perhaps to history. His was nonviolence *par excellence*.” And he pointed out that “the very word Islam means peace, which is nonviolence.”

However, Gandhi applied the principle of non-violence in the most unusual and dramatic circumstances to great effect in our time.

He used nonviolence as a weapon against the most powerful empire in the world. He inducted millions of people into the practice of nonviolence and made them face up to violent forces directed at them. Even in the most passionate battle of his life and that of many millions of Indians which was the independence of India, he and his followers were willing to lay down their lives for nonviolence rather than meet violence with violence. Gandhi had said "There are many causes that I am prepared to die for but no causes that I am prepared to kill for."

The principle of non-violence obliges its practitioner to foreswear violence under any circumstances and at any cost. The practitioner must apply nonviolence in personal life as much as in public life. Thus it becomes a personal struggle, undertaken at the most private

and intimate levels, without the safety in numbers. And it is this process that I think is critical in developing a sense of oneness with all humanity.

As Gandhi saw it “nonviolence is a quality not of the body but of the soul.” Just as the “inalienable love of humanity” must spring from deep within our hearts, nonviolence too must find its roots in our hearts, not just in our brains.

As with universal love, it would not be possible for most of us to renounce violence and embrace nonviolence in a swift change of character. It has to be nourished and nurtured in a systematic manner, even if in small steps. Gandhi noted that “nonviolence is a plant of slow growth, it grows imperceptibly but surely.” I believe we have to sow the seeds of this plant early and young in our children, as with many other virtues. We have to inject this morality into our workplace and play grounds. Most of all, we have to enshrine this as a principle of our political management.

Interestingly, at the international level we have indeed constructed many institutions, treaties and even disincentives to eschew war and violence. There is a wonderful sculpture at the United Nations garden called "Let Us Beat Swords into Plowshares." It was a gift from – of all countries in the world -- Soviet Union, presented in 1959, when it was the only other superpower in the world and branded as one of the most violent.

One would have thought that after the unspeakable horror of the Second World War, the two great superpowers who together won the war against evil Axis powers, would work together to prevent any future wars. Instead, they both embarked on the deadliest race for nuclear arms which only paused when they reached a state of MADness – the Mutually Assured Destruction stage. In other words, whoever starts a nuclear war, either nation had enough fire power to annihilate the other in a second strike. In other words again, the two most powerful nations learnt the simple truth that violence only begets violence and there is never going to be a winner in this mutually destructive race – only after spending billions of dollars and building thousands of war heads when all that effort could have gone into beating swords into ploughshares.

Let us ask ourselves why such madness prevails among our best and the brightest? The Realist school of International Relations would likely argue that that is the way of the world. A Machiavellian view of humankind would permit nothing more. But I stand on the side of Gandhi and perhaps that of the Constructivist theorists of IR who argue that "international politics is shaped by persuasive ideas, collective values, culture, and social identities". I believe that nonviolence as a fundamental value of human society will salvage the world better than any idea based on violence, because, as Gandhi argued, “nonviolence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind.”

Admittedly, there have been many critics and skeptics of nonviolence, even among the followers of Gandhi. They regarded nonviolence as a normative principle but accepted violence as a necessary evil. Some determined that individuals could practice nonviolence but nations cannot. Some others felt nonviolence is the weapon of the weakest, in direct contrast to his belief that it is the weapon of the strongest. Gandhi remained unrepentant till the end: “Nonviolence is the first article of my faith. It is also the last article of my creed,” he declared.

The Gandhi Legacy

Much of the world today has forgotten Gandhi, and has certainly abandoned his principles of ahimsa and sarvodaya. However, to those who would ask if his principles were followed by anyone at all after his death, I would remind them of two other great leaders: Martin Luther King of United States of America and Nelson Mandela of South Africa. Each in his own way but in much similar dire straits adopted Gandhian concepts of nonviolence and inalienable love of humanity. And they both acknowledged their debt to Gandhi. And they both succeeded against enormous odds. Unfortunately, one of them met his death at the hands of a gun-wielding fanatic much as Gandhi did. Fortunately, Mandela is living as a legend in his ripe old age of 92.

What these two leaders prove to me is that first Gandhi's principles are not idealistic or impractical but highly potent and transformational, and second – and this is the more telling proof – that if the right leaders lead us, we can achieve the seemingly unachievable.

Conclusion

In conclusion, first, I would like to submit that the idea of a planet that is the common home to all is becoming increasingly inevitable – whether we like it or not – because of the sheer interconnectedness of the world. So we might as well learn to like it and make the home better than it is.

Second, I would like to submit that the idea of a humanity that we all can call kin is not an inevitability and, indeed, we could become mortal enemies of each other – unless we adopt and practice something like the principles of welfare for all and nonviolence and dialogue as the process to understand, appreciate and accept the other as our kin.

My final plea tonight is simply this: Let us begin with ourselves first. As Gandhi himself said “be the change that you want to see in the world.” Let us make ourselves the building block of a human society that we would love and cherish. Then let us try our best to choose leaders who will lead us the way Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi did their people in their time.

Perhaps then the whole world will become more livable, and the whole humanity more likable.