Activating Difference: Appreciating Equity in an Era of Global Interdependence

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It is a great – and, indeed, humbling – honour to be able to open the academic sessions of the "Third International Conference on Gross National Happiness: Worldviews Make a Difference: Towards Global Transformation". Although the comparison is not at all warranted, it is hard for me not to recall the opening remark of the 9th century Chan Buddhist master, Linji, when he was invited by the provincial governor to speak before an audience of several hundred people about the meaning of Buddhist enlightenment: "As soon as I open my mouth, I will have made a mistake."

Like Linji, however, I am obliged to speak.

As I understand it, ours is a gathering that seeks to shed practical light on the means-to and meaning-of happiness, where happiness is understood not only as a matter of subjective well-being, but also as a distinctive quality and direction of relationships – a quality and direction of our interdependence and interpenetration.

The hope expressed in the title of this conference and in the efforts we have been expending in coming together is, I think, not at all misplaced. For the most part, humanity is getting things right. Globally, we now produce enough food to feed every person on the planet. We have realised living conditions and developed medical practices that allow us collectively to enjoy the longest life expectancies in history. Literacy is at an historical high. Communication takes place at the speed of light. World-class libraries are available to anyone with internet access, and the range of choices exercised in pursuit of lives worth leading by the world's nearly seven billion people is wider and deeper than it has ever been – a pursuit now globally recognised as a basic and universal human right.

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The devil, as the saying goes, "is in the details". More than 800 million people today are chronically hungry. One out of every five people currently live in what the World Bank terms 'absolute poverty' – conditions so degraded and degrading that they do not afford even the hope of a dignified life. One billion people do not have access to clean drinking water, and 2.6 billion live without adequate sanitation. One out of every seven people in the world are illiterate (two out of every three of these being women or girls), and functional illiteracy affects nearly one out of every four people living in many of even the most highly developed countries. For tragically large numbers of people, the fact that they 'possess' universal human rights does little to offset the effects of systematically perpetrated human wrongs.

The fact that humanity is mostly getting things right is scant consolation to those living in absolute poverty or to those surviving on less than what $2 a day might buy in the United States today, a population that is now equal to that of every man, woman and child alive in 1965. What must be done to open spaces of hope for these mothers, fathers, sons and daughters? How do we work out from present conditions, as they have come to be, to realise – at a bare minimum – dignified lives for all?

One place to begin, I think, is to reflect personally and collectively on a key implication of the Buddhist teachings of karma and interdependence: all experienced realities imply responsibility. We are all in some degree complicit with the inequity and suffering that are no less a part of the contemporary world than are its many wonders. Fortunately, as the Buddha insisted, it is precisely because of karma that we are able to realise lives dedicated to the liberating resolution of all trouble and suffering. By changing the complexion of our values-intentions-actions, we can change the patterns of outcome/opportunity that shape our personal and public experiences. Indeed, to the degree that we heed the Buddhist injunction to see all things as impermanent, it is clear that there really is no question about whether change is possible. Change is already continuously underway. The only real question is: change by what means and with what meaning? Or to turn the question around: since change is ongoing, why does it seem to be heading us in the direction of greater inequity and greater suffering for

greater numbers? How do we go about effectively changing the *way* things are changing?

A unifying aim of the various sessions of this conference is to reflect on how best to answer the questions just posed about opening spaces of hope and dignity for all, and about orienting change toward greater equity and happiness. As a prelude to them, let me offer a few thoughts of my own.

First, it is my own conviction, that truly dignified lives cannot be lived by *any* unless dignity is a reality for *all*. It is my further conviction that all will not enjoy dignified lives until the *differences of each* are enabled to make a *difference for all*.

For most of us, having been educated to a global modern standard, it is natural to assume that it is only through moving in the direction of greater universality and equality that inequity can be overcome, poverty reduced, and dignity made possible for all. That is, we believe that it is through our commonality – not our differences – that we will find a happy route to global transformation. As I understand it, the main title of this conference, "Worldviews Make a Difference", insists otherwise. And I would like to take a few moments to press the point that global transformation for greater equity, dignity and happiness will not come about through deepening our sense of commonality alone, but only to the degree that we also activate our *differences* as the basic condition for *mutual contribution*.

It is a central tenet of Buddhist traditions – but one that I believe is shared by all systems of effective religious, social and political practice – that meaningful change can only be initiated and sustained on the basis of present circumstances, as they have come to be. In the present era, the *way* things have *come to be* is very much a function of the interlocking array of processes that we refer to as 'globalisation'. Let me mention three key affects of these processes, each of them in large measure both driven by and driving scientific and technological advances.

First, and most notably perhaps, is accelerating and intensifying change. Globalisation is bringing not only *more* change *more* rapidly, but also the advent of qualitatively distinct kinds of change. Of particular importance is the phenomenon known as 'emergence': structurally significant changes occurring

in complex systems that in principle could *not* have been anticipated, but that after the fact *do* make perfect sense.

Second are homogenising effects that led many early critics of globalisation to fear the Westernisation or McDonaldisation of the world, but that in fact have fostered truly global forms of popular culture and, more importantly, patterns of institutional convergence that, for example, allow credit cards to be used the world over and are beginning to enable students to take advantage of virtually borderless higher education.

Third are pluralising effects that have taken the form of resurgent national and ethnic identities, but also niche marketing, global production networks, and such acutely uneven geographies of development that the top 2% of the world's people now own 50% of global wealth while the bottom 50% own less than 1%.

As a combined result, we are not only in an era of change, but a change of eras. More specifically, I would submit that we are in the midst of a transition from an era dominated by *problem-solution* to one dominated by *predicament-resolution*. Problems arise when changing circumstances make evident the failure of existing practices for meeting abiding needs and interests. Solving problems involves developing new or improved means for arriving at ends we fully intend to continue pursuing. For example, gas/electric hybrid automobile engines solve the 'problem' of rising fuel costs. Predicaments occur when changing circumstances lead to or make us aware of conflicts or competition among our own values, interests, development aims, and constructions of meaning. Predicaments cannot be solved. They can only be *resolved* through sustaining detailed attention to situational dynamics and realising both enhanced clarity and more thoroughly and deeply coordinated commitments.

World hunger is not a problem. Enough food is grown to supply adequate nutrition for all. What is lacking is the resolve to bring our economic, social and political values, intentions and practices into alignment with doing so. World hunger is a predicament. And an increasingly significant part of the reason that we make so little headway in addressing it and other apparently intractable issues like global climate change, illiteracy and mounting economic inequity is because we persist in thinking

about them as *problems* awaiting technical solution, rather than as *predicaments* commanding sustained and ever deepening resolve.

In sum: 21st century patterns of globalisation are raising crucial questions about the *means* and *meaning* of difference, presenting us with a paradoxical impasse or aporia. On one hand, we need to more fully recognise and respect difference, going beyond tolerating differences from and among others to *enable differences to matter more, not less*. On the other hand, we need to engage in more robust collective action and global common cause, *incorporating differences within shared and deepening commitments*. To ignore our differences now is to fail resolving current predicaments and to foster conditions for more, and more intense, predicaments in the future. To pass through the aporia posed by the complex realities of the 21st century, we must *activate* our *differences* as the very basis of all mutual contribution.

As a way of fleshing out what this activation might mean, let me distinguish between variety and diversity as two means-to and meanings-of difference – two qualities and directions of differentiation processes. Variety is function of simple co-existence, a *quantitative* index of factual multiplicity. It connotes things *being-different*: a surface characteristic that is visible at a glance. Diversity is a function of complex interdependence, a *qualitative* index of self-sustaining and difference-appreciating patterns of mutual contribution to shared welfare. Diversity connotes things *becoming-different*: a process of meaningful differentiation; a relational achievement that becomes evident, if at all, only over time.

To make this distinction more concrete, consider the ranges of plant and animal species and the interrelationships among them in a zoo and in a naturally occurring ecosystem. An ideal zoo, for instance, might include representatives of every relevant plant and animal species in a given ecosystem. But these species would, because of the nature of zoos, have very little relevance for one another. They would be in little or no position to contribute to one another's welfare as they do in the environments within, and along with which, they have evolved. Zoos are high in variety; ecosystems are high in diversity. In this room today, there is

remarkable variety in terms of cultural backgrounds, historical experiences, academic training, and religious or spiritual sensibilities. Whether or not this gathering begins to exhibit diversity will depend on how well we are able to go beyond how much we *differ-from* each another to how best we might *differ-for* one another.

To resolve the predicaments arising with complex global interdependence and to break through the aporia of difference they bring into focus, we must go beyond recognising the co-existence of different worldviews – the *variety* of ways in which humans conceive the *meaning* of 'the good': a good life, a good environment, or a good political economy. To bring about truly equitable global transformation, we must begin realising and continuously enhancing social, economic, political, cultural, technological, and – I would argue – spiritual *diversity*.

This means going beyond modern universalisms that would deny our differences in celebration of dreamed for equality. But it also means going beyond postmodern relativisms that would hold differences to be critically incommensurable and that would warrant the validity of fundamentalist tribalisms. The former are likely to result in a world in which everyone is exactly like *me*; the latter, one in which we live adjacent to one another in enclaves of mutually enforced *moral apartheid*.

There is no doubt that tolerance is better than intolerance. But tolerating the differences of others is no longer good enough. An era of predicament-resolution compels: first, developing capacities for harmonising distinctively differing worldviews and conceptions of the good; and, secondly, generating commitments of sufficient intercultural gravity to reconfigure the dynamics of our globally complex interdependence across both sectors and scales. Diversity itself, I would argue, should be seen as an indispensable global commons and public good.

A crucial entailment of enhancing diversity is moving beyond dichotomous thinking. The self-other dichotomy is perhaps the most basic and virulent expression of this, but no less entrenched are our tendencies to split the world into what is attractive or aversive, pure or impure, right or wrong, good or evil. In a phrase drawn from Mahayana Buddhism (but with resonances in other

spiritual and religious traditions as well), we must begin engaging our circumstances non-dualistically. This does not mean ignoring differences. Rather, as proposed by the Huayen Buddhist thinker, Fazang, it means seeing that all things are the same, precisely insofar as they differ meaningfully from one another. Non-dualism means realising that things ultimately *are* only what they *mean* for one another.

Given this, changing the way things are changing can be seen as a process of opening, within present realities, new courses of meaning making. Here, the early Buddhist contrast between aims and endeavours that have *kusala* results and those that have *akusala* results is quite useful. *Kusala* and *akusala* are normally translated as 'wholesome' and 'unwholesome', but in fact *kusala* is a superlative. It does not mean good as opposed to bad, skilled as opposed to unskilled, wholesome as opposed to unwholesome, or something that is just 'good enough'. Rather, *kusala* connotes heading in the direction of excellence or virtuosity.

Conducting ourselves in a *kusala* manner is the Buddhist meaning of going 'beyond good and evil'. It is the expression of resolutely appreciative karma – intentions and conduct that continuously result in adding-value-to or enriching our situation, but also to our becoming ever more valuably situated. According to the Sakkapanha Sutta, it is *only* by both decreasing the *akusala* and increasing the *kusala* that we stop proliferating impediments to liberation (*papanca*), dissolving the root conditions of conflict and suffering.

To break through the aporia of difference with which we now find ourselves confronted, we must go beyond being non-judgmental or averring the ultimate equality of one and all. These may perhaps help decrease the *akusala* effects of dichotomous thinking; but they will not generate *kusala* patterns of outcome and opportunity. For that, we must *conserve* our differences rather than *disarming* them.

Perhaps surprisingly, then, if we are to orient global interdependence toward greater equity, we must refrain from the temptation to conceive of equity in terms of equality of opportunity. Equality is a very useful fiction – the pursuit of which has done much, for example, to positively reframe gender

discourse and political practice – but it is a fiction nonetheless, and one that can hardly ring true in a world of fabulously widening income gaps. Equity can only be enhanced to the extent that the dynamics of our interdependence enable and encourage all present to contribute to furthering their *own interests*, in ways that are *deemed valuable by others*. In short, equity is rooted in the activation of our differences to be able to make a difference, for ourselves and for others. Ultimately, *there is no equity without diversity*.

One of the insights about diversity afforded by the natural world is that diversity is highest, not within any given ecosystem, but rather in the ecotone or zone of overlap between them. That is, diversity tends to be highest where the potential for conflicts among values, aims and interests is greatest. It is not coincidental that our era of increasingly broad and deep predicaments is also an era of historically unprecedented *potential* for both diversity and equity. Realising this potential would surely bring about a happier world. Doing so, however, will require that we work together to create social, economic, political, cultural and technological conditions under which we can realise and deepen our diversity as a crucial global relational commons and public good. This can be accomplished only by deepening our capacities-for and commitments-to contributing to shared flourishing, realising *kusala arcs of change*, moment-by-moment, from wherever each of us happens to be sitting, standing, walking or lying down.

Some might object that as good as this sounds, surely it is a path that could be travelled only by the extraordinary few. 'Global transformation' has a heroic ring, and it is tempting to insist that it can only be spurred and guided by those 'chosen by heaven'. To this, I would respond by invoking the Confucian response of Mencius when asked about the difference between the human and the animal. The difference, he admitted, is infinitesimal. What distinguishes the human is a disposition for enchanting the ordinary: taking eating and turning it into culinary and social art; taking cries of fear and pain and turning them into poetry and song; taking the act of procreation and transforming it into romantic love and family. It is our human nature to take things,

as they have come to be, and to *distinctively* enchant or appreciate them.

And given this, although some freedom-of-choice is certainly better than none at all, human freedom cannot be exhausted by the exercise of choice. That would be to root freedom in dichotomous thinking – a matter of getting what I want and avoiding what I do not want. Freedom finally becomes, then, only a means to further want or lack. Expressing our deepest human nature is expressing our disposition for entering into appreciative and liberating relationships.

There is a passage in the *Diamond Sutra* where the Buddha is asked what he attained with complete, unsurpassed enlightenment and liberation. His answer was: "Not one single thing." Liberating happiness is not something achieved or gained; it is a quality of relationship through which our entire situation is suffused with compassion, equanimity, loving-kindness and joy in the good fortune of others. Ultimately, there is no *freedom* or happiness to be attained. There is only the happiness of *relating-freely* in deep and mutual enrichment.

Although the dynamics of 21st century globalisation are generating ever greater and deeper *predicaments*, they are also generating ever more potent *opportunities* for realising global common cause and shared resolve on the most apt means-to and meaning-of happiness and human flourishing. Let me end by voicing hope that the academic sessions to follow will contribute, in distinctively differing and concrete ways, to the wise and *kusala* activation of these opportunities.