

# **The Call for a Deeper and More Inclusive Interreligious Engagement**

## **A talk for the Niwano Peace Foundation**

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I want to thank the Niwano Peace Foundation for this tremendous honor and for recognizing the global peace work of women spiritual leaders, who are the core of our organization. Interfaith engagement is one of the most critical human activities at this period in history, and yet its importance is not adequately recognized by most of the global community. The Niwano Peace Foundation has long stood out as one of the few organizations to recognize the role interfaith plays in creating a better world.

I want to share with you some of my experiences and observations during the last nearly 17 years that I have been involved in interfaith work, and I want to express some thoughts on what I see to be the most pressing call for the interfaith community today.

I have been involved in interreligious activities for most of my adult life but for many years it was more from the academic side. As a graduate student at Columbia University in New York City, I undertook an enthusiastic study of the great masters and mystics of the major world religions and found an unexpected unity of experience and vision, although these have often been cloaked in different metaphors and narratives to suit various cultures and times. I came to my spiritual path when I was about 20 years old, and one of the things that drew me to the Hindu path was that my teacher Paramahansa Yogananda spoke of the underlying unity of

the world's faith traditions. My studies confirmed what I learned from my teacher and what I intuitively felt to be true.

I didn't engage in interfaith work professionally until some 20 years later when the Secretary General of the United Nations, His Excellency Kofi Annan, consented to the organization of the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders in the year 2000, to be held in the General Assembly Hall of the United Nation's New York headquarters. The idea was to explore how the religions could work in partnership with the United Nations in resolving some of the key global conflicts, and it was the first time the major religions were being invited to convene in the General Assembly Hall. I was asked to serve as the Vice Chair and to aid in the organization of the event. My experiences during this process helped to set the course of my work.

Since the Summit was to be held at the United Nations, we were to work at the highest level within the religious institutions. This was a real departure for me. Being a long time meditation practitioner, I had far greater interest in the experiential and esoteric side of religion. However, I was soon to find that even at the institutional level there were people of wisdom and great commitment to the common good – and this attracted me.

A few incidents occurred during the process of organizing the Summit that drew my attention. The Secretary General's office had put together an advisory council from the United Nations, and we kept them informed and updated on how things were progressing. One woman on the council was particularly concerned about having women religious leaders

participate in the Summit. I was unaware of any problems in this regard, and so began to seek out women religious leaders.

I was seated at a dinner at Oxford, England with a group of religious leaders when I happened to mention to the man seated next to me that we were having trouble finding women religious leaders for the Summit at the UN. I was only trying to make dinner conversation, but he reacted strongly to my remark and asked in a rather stern voice, “Why do you need women religious leaders?” When he saw the surprise on my face, he added, “take my advice and stay away from that issue or you might find that nobody will come to your summit.” That was in 1999. The world has changed a lot since then – but in some quarters of the world, I would get the same response today.

We had difficulty finding women religious leaders and so we compensated by finding women public figures – like Jane Goodall. I was not happy with this solution, but I was still in a learning phase. Much of our time during the organization of the Summit was involved in dealing with political issues – like the fact that the Dalai Lama could not be invited to the United Nations and the response from some prominent religious figures who said they would not come if the Dalai Lama was not invited. So the gender issue got lost amidst the political negotiations.

On the opening day of the Summit, as we were waiting for the religious leaders to enter the General Assembly Hall to begin the prayers, we encountered another gender crisis. A prominent monk was to open the prayers, but he wasn’t permitted by his particular order to come in close contact with any woman, and there was a Buddhist nun, the only woman in a delegation of about a dozen Thai Buddhist monks, who was seated near the entrance where he

was to enter. I was told she had to be moved, and when I asked why, the response came, “because she is a woman.” A number of people on our staff had tried to get her to move, but she didn’t understand English and refused to be separated from the monks of her delegation. The clock was ticking and we had to begin, and so I was asked to move her. It was a difficult moment for me. But when I went up to her and took her hand, she smiled and followed me. The crisis was solved but it left a deep imprint in my mind. Later when the Thai delegation came to greet me, I apologized to her, and we became fast friends. She was one of the founding co-chairs of the Global Peace Initiative of Women.

The women religious leaders at the Summit were not happy and asked for a followup Summit specifically for women religious leaders. We went back to the Secretary General’s office and he agreed, suggesting that we hold this second Summit at the Palais des Nations in Geneva. So I began working with the religious communities in Geneva, and the first response that I received was, “we don’t want your American feminism here. We don’t have women religious leaders.” I was taken aback, because I never thought of this work as a feminist matter, and I began to wonder why this issue was so threatening to so many. In order to get around the subject of women religious leaders, the Geneva community suggested we change the title of our event from “The Global Peace Initiative of Women Religious and Spiritual Leaders” to “The Role of Women in the Faith Communities.” I refused, and so began the difficult process of bringing this vision to fruition.

In 2002, we managed to bring 750 women leaders, mostly from the religious communities but also some from business and government, from over 75 countries to the

Palais des Nations. Whereas there were many political issues and much competitiveness at the 2000 summit, there were no politics at the Geneva Summit. We had no thought of forming an organization out of this gathering, but we immediately received requests to come to conflict areas and help organize peace dialogues, and so The Global Peace Initiative of Women Religious and Spiritual Leaders was born. We later shortened the name to The Global Peace Initiative of Women (GPIW).

We spent our first five years organizing dialogues in conflict and post-conflict areas -- including Israel and Palestine, Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan, Cambodia, and between India and Pakistan. The dialogues were initially with women, and then young leaders, and then eventually a mix of everyone. What was distinctive about these dialogues is that they were shaped and led by a diverse group of women religious leaders, always balanced between East and West. So we brought Buddhist nuns and women swamis to meet with the group from Sudan, Iraq and other conflict areas. This had a tremendously positive impact as it opened the participants to the wider world and they saw the role women can play in other cultures.

There is a second theme, aside from the gender issue, which has motivated the work of GPIW, and that is the need not only for gender balance but East-West balance. Interfaith work has been mostly shaped by the Abrahamic traditions and has been for most of its short history an Abrahamic dialogue. There has been a need and rationale for this as there has been and still is much tension in the Abrahamic world. However, half the world has been left out.

During the Millennium World Peace Summit I saw the resistance of many western institutions to deeper engagement with the Eastern or Dharmic traditions. And then after the

9/11 tragedy in 2001, when the Pope organized a world prayer in Assisi, I saw again the disregard, perhaps unintentionally, for the Eastern or Dharmic traditions. I remember that each faith was asked to pray in a separate room. The Catholics had their room, as did the Jews and the Muslims, but most of the Eastern or Dharmic faiths were lumped together – the Shintos, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and others all sent together to one room to pray. Not only was it considered unacceptable for the world's religions to pray together, but the Eastern or Dharmic traditions were not given the same courtesy of their own room. This was an indication to me of a great imbalance in the interfaith world, but this lack of awareness, which still prevails in many interfaith gatherings, was not even noticed. How can there be meaningful interfaith when we still abide by a hierarchy of religions, when some are considered more valid than others? This is against the whole premise of interfaith, and this has been and still is the very cause of so much religious tension. Until Hindus and Buddhists, among other Eastern faiths, are at the table equally, not only participating in equal numbers, but equally shaping and forming the discourse, we will not achieve religious harmony.

It is no longer enough to have token representation. True balance is what we must strive for. This is an important point. Gender balance and East-West balance are critical not for the sake of being polite or politically correct, not for the sake of being inclusive or of being considerate to these groups. It is critical because the world is very much in need of what the Dharmic traditions and women have to offer. With regard to the Dharmic traditions, a whole body of wisdom has been ignored, wisdom that has great relevance to the multiple crises we face as a world community. This is changing but it is changing most rapidly outside of the traditional interfaith networks.

GPIW decided to make the achievement of East-West balance one of its major goals and so in 2009 we organized a summit in Cambodia on the theme “Giving Greater Global Voice to Eastern Wisdom”. Hindu and Buddhist leaders came from all over the world to talk about the common ground between these two great Dharmic traditions. The rediscovery of the shared wisdom, vision and practices of Buddhism and Hinduism gives the spiritual heritage of Asia a new strength globally.

Around this time GPIW also turned its attention to the US. Thus far, most of our work had been global, in conflict and post conflict areas, but American society was and still is undergoing many tensions and transitions. We decided to explore the changing religious landscape in America and to focus on the growing meditation movement and so brought contemplative leaders from the Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Native American traditions to the Aspen Institute in Aspen, Colorado. The purpose was to explore how the spread of meditation practice is influencing American society and changing the religious dynamic of the country. Today, Buddhism is the fastest growing religion in America. Many Buddhist principles, such as interdependence and mindfulness, have become mainstream concepts and are finding their way into the education and healthcare systems, among other mainstream institutions. At the same time, 20 million Americans are now practicing some form of yoga, and concepts such as karma and reincarnation are now widely embraced. Many, many Christian clergy are not only practitioners of Buddhist meditation, but also teachers. It is not uncommon to find a Catholic priest who is also a Zen Rishi. In the state of Colorado we have the first Christian-Buddhist Church, where the community practices both religions. At one of the largest Episcopal Churches in New York, there is a Living Christ Sangha, where mindfulness

meditation is practiced after the Sunday Christian service. What does this say about the changing religious landscape in America, and ultimately what does it say about the future of interfaith, as more and more people cultivate dual affiliations? The same is happening in Europe, only not yet to the same extent, because Europe is a more secular society. To help give voice to this new dynamic movement, GPIW formed the Contemplative Alliance in the US and in Europe, to explore how contemplative practice can help foster the individual and societal transformations needed to address the interconnected crises of climate change, environmental degradation, economic inequity, etc.

The spread of meditation practices has helped to bring the religions much closer together. There is a growing community of people who no longer see a hierarchy of religions, who view all religions as having their own distinctive perspective on truth, but each being valid. It is no longer a matter of which one is right, but rather which one speaks best to the individual.

A few months ago GPIW helped to organize an interfaith retreat here in Japan on the theme "Awakening Buddha Nature". Increasingly we have been choosing themes with language from the East and asking other religions to reflect on how this theme speaks to them. We invited a group from the US called the Interfaith Amigos, composed of a Christian, Muslim and Jewish religious leader. Amigos is a commonly used Spanish word for friends. The group formed after 9/11 when a Protestant Minister from Seattle in Washington State reached out to a local Imam and said they should start working together to ease the tensions caused by 9/11. They began speaking at churches and mosques and then decided to invite a Rabbi to join them. The Interfaith Amigos have become quite popular in the US and travel around the country

speaking on interfaith. I wasn't sure how they would respond to the theme of "Awakening Buddha Nature", but to my relief they loved it. They usually speak about religious friendship and they said it was a novelty to delve so deeply into a spiritual topic. When they got up to speak together, this is how they began:

The Minister spoke first. He said, "I have some good news." We all waited to hear what the good news was, and then he said, "Jesus Christ is not the only savior." Then the Imam spoke and he said, "I also have some good news. Mohammed is not the last prophet." Then the Rabbi chimed in, "And I have good news as well. The Jews are not the chosen people." Everyone laughed. For those of you who may not understand this, these three beliefs – that Jesus is the only savior, Mohammed is the last prophet and the Jews are the chosen people – are what keep these three Abrahamic religions at odds with each other and the rest of the world. The Interfaith Amigos now go around the country disclaiming these beliefs in a humorous and loving way, and this is helping to build religious unity. Their goal is not to discredit any one religion but to erase barriers. After this introduction, the Minister, Imam and Rabbi then went on to reflect on what Buddha Nature meant to them in the language of their tradition.

The Contemplative Alliance organizes dialogues around the US on critical issues, and wherever we go, no matter how small the city or town, there are Buddhist Centers, Hindu groups, Sufis and others. A new religious mix is emerging in America and this bodes well for the future, because it is helping people to overcome barriers and find those practices that enable their own spiritual growth. Spiritual growth is becoming more important than any specific

doctrine, and this will help in the evolution of society. Our work as interfaith leaders is to see and understand what is emerging as the next stage of interfaith and to tap this new dynamic energy so that it can be used to address the critical challenges we face. The spiritual shift now taking place in America and other parts of the world has the potential to change the way people regard a host of issues – from economic disparity to our relationship with the natural world – because these changes depend on a transformation in the consciousness of people.

A few years ago we brought a group of Afghans to India for a dialogue. I happen to find Dharamasala, India to be a very inspiring environment, and so we brought them there. As always we had a mix of spiritual teachers, men and women, from the East and Western traditions to guide the dialogue. We covered a number of themes relating to the conflict and methods of peacebuilding, and then after a few days, one of the participants asked, “when are we going to learn to mediate?” I was surprised because we don’t proselytize and so never introduce spiritual practices. We may pray together and sit in silence, but we don’t teach specific techniques. I asked the group if this is what they wanted, and they responded. “This is why we have come to India. We live in a state of fear, not knowing when or where the next explosion will be. We need to learn to deal with our fears.” I turned to the Afghan imams who were there and they nodded their consent, and so one of the teachers in our group offered some basic stress reduction meditation. This was the only time that we did this, because the need was so great. During that session, I realized that in many conflict areas people are seeking spiritual methods that ease their fears and anger, regardless of religious tradition. More important than doctrine today are practices that help people cope with life’s challenges.

There is much uncertainty and fear in the world – economic uncertainty, concerns about damage to the natural world, and fear due to social strife and polarization. How do we help people deal with their fears? One way is by coming together around shared practices that can connect people to their innate spiritual resources.

There is a growing community of people who have either been in the interfaith movement for a long time or have had much exposure to other traditions, who truly see and function from the place of deep unity – knowing there is one truth that speaks through many tongues. Like biodiversity, religious diversity is a gift to be treasured, but we are not to be deluded into thinking that a single path is the only true one. This evolution in understanding has profound implications for our ability to live together peacefully. So much of human history has been the imposition of one religion or culture on another. We must as a human community outgrow this instinct if we are to create a more peaceful world.

I want to return briefly to the issue of gender, because we are also being called to evolve beyond gender bias now. Initially the work of GPIW was to provide a platform for women religious leaders, but over time that changed. In 2008 we organized a big summit in India on the theme of the feminine aspect of the Divine in order to create balance in our understanding of that Ultimate Reality. One way of approaching this subject is to say the Divine or Ultimate Reality is beyond gender, but another way is to view It as containing both the masculine and feminine qualities. The Abrahamic traditions have lost sight of the feminine aspects of the Divine, although this understanding is there, hidden in those traditions. In the East it has not been lost and there are practices for the realization of Tara, Durga, and other female

manifestations of the Divine. In certain **Eastern** traditions it is this feminine aspect of the Divine that enables transformation – both individual and collective -- and transformation is what we are all yearning for. After 2008 our work began to focus more on evoking images of the Divine Feminine rather than on giving visibility to women religious leaders. In part this was due to the fact that society was becoming more accepting of women religious leaders and so this work was moving forward. Now the task was to bring gender balance to our understanding of the Primordial Creative Force, the ultimate Source of all. As long as this Force is conceived solely in masculine terms, as the Father, there is the ability to use this as a rationale for gender bias. Our religious iconography has profound implications for how we function as a society.

As we have traveled the world talking about the transformative powers held within the feminine expression of the Divine, we have found many within the Abrahamic traditions who have resonated with this message and who are now delving more deeply into this aspect of their own tradition. So the issue of gender balance has both an external and internal dimension – a societal and spiritual dimension. I have found in our work that often men understand the concept of the Divine Feminine energy and its transformative power, as much or sometimes more than women.

Today so many aspects of our planetary life are under threat – the oceans, forests, and rivers. We are losing plant and animal diversity. The climate has become unstable, and droughts and floods more common. Resources are rapidly being depleted. We are told water will become scarce in the future, and we are losing the natural seeds that are our heritage from our ancestors. What are we to learn from all of this but to find a way of living more in harmony

with the earth and the forces of nature – to live with greater respect, appreciation and love for the forces on which we depend for life. A transformation in understanding is very much needed.

Another crisis is forming at the same time. Economic inequity is reaching such an extreme degree that some change will have to come. More charity is not the answer but rather a fundamental shift in the way we live and work together – a shift toward a more sharing and compassionate society, where the goal is wellbeing rather than the amassment of money.

The answers are not clear. The problems are very complex and intertwined. But one thing we know – there are spiritual principles at stake and solutions will be found in proportion to our ability to grow and develop spiritually. We will need all of our human ingenuity and creative powers to envision and realize a new way of living on earth, and the talent and efforts of men and women are equally needed, as well as the knowledge and wisdom of East and West.

There is now a growing spectrum of interfaith work. There are still people in many parts of the world with little exposure to religions other than their own. For them it is enough just to learn and have some experience of “the other,” to gain respect and the ability to co-exist without violence. These elementary steps can guide them to the next level, where religions begin to truly engage with one another and learn to see the beauty and truth in all traditions. When I first began my interfaith work in the 1990s, the key word was tolerance. From tolerance we moved to respect and then mutual respect and understanding. For those of us who wanted to go deeper, the next words that came into use were oneness and unity – one truth with many expressions. For those who have been on this interfaith journey for many

years we cannot operate but from a place of unity. Our focus must now be on how we can gather our collective spiritual wisdom and practices so that we can transform our societies and address the challenges facing the global community.

The interfaith work of so many committed men and women has led to a new closeness and fraternity among the religions – a real ability to sit together in our meditation and be in unity. But we must go further. Much is at stake for our planet and its communities of life. Can we enable this unity to foster now a real transformation in understanding so that we can reset our values, so that our spiritual growth and development will have at least an equal place to that of humanity's material development? It is this spiritual growth that will provide the wisdom to guide us forward. The challenges we face are vast, but there are no problems that cannot be addressed through our united spiritual efforts.