

Lecture 94: Evolution or Extinction: A Buddhist View of Current World Problems

The Venerable Sangharakshita

Friends,

The first thing that I must make clear this evening is that the particular topic on which I am going to speak this evening, that is to say, 'Evolution or Extinction: Current World Problems, a Buddhist View', was not originally chosen by me. Some weeks ago, some friends of mine in another place - in another city, in fact - suggested that I should speak on this topic, and when I thought it over, when I turned it over in my mind, I realised that in a way I was quite glad to have an opportunity of speaking on this topic. As most of you, I think, know, it's not the sort of subject on which I usually speak. In fact I can go so far as to say that to the best of my recollection I have not yet spoken, that is to say, not spoken in public, on this sort of topic before. As nearly all of you know, most of the talks, most of the lectures which we've had, in the course of the last five years or so, under the auspices of the FWBO, have dealt, in one way or another, with more or less Buddhistic themes, more or less traditional themes, spiritual themes, for want of a better word, or have dealt with some aspect of the Buddhist tradition in relation to some aspect of modern life, thought, experience, and so on. For instance, as many of you again know, we've had a whole course of lectures on the Noble Eightfold Path, we've had a whole course on the Bodhisattva ideal, we've also had, say, talks, lectures, on the relationship between Buddhism on the one hand and, say, certain aspects of Western philosophy and psychology and art and psychoanalysis on the other.

But at the same time, despite this difference, despite this, as it were, new departure, I can say that there is a sort of connection, there is a connection between my giving this talk this evening, on this sort of subject, on the subject of current world problems, and my preoccupations in other talks, other lectures, more directly with Buddhism, with different aspects of the spiritual path; because I can say, in a very general way, that the giving of lectures at all on Buddhism, whether it's on the Eightfold Path, or whether it's on the Bodhisattva Ideal, or whether it's on Tibetan Buddhism or whether it's on symbolism, all this is part and parcel of my own life and my own work as a Buddhist. And I may say that I live this life, this Buddhist life, or try to live this Buddhist life, and engage in this sort of work, including the giving of lectures, partly at least on account of the view which I take of modern world problems, or current world problems. So therefore in speaking tonight on this question, speaking tonight on this subject, of current world problems from a Buddhist point of view, I'm not in fact dealing with something which is to me of, as it were, academic or peripheral interest, or even of just general interest; in a sense I'm trying to make clear through this lecture, through the consideration of this topic, the sort of *raison d'être* of my own existence, as it were, as a practical working Buddhist. Not just a Buddhist inwardly in faith and conviction, but so far as outward activities also are concerned. So for me, therefore, in view of these considerations, this lecture tonight, on this sort of subject, represents a sort of almost, one may say, autobiography, at least philosophical autobiography. It constitutes a sort of confession of faith, because it shows, or will show, I hope, where I stand and perhaps to some extent why I stand where I do. And I hope this will become clear to some extent as I proceed.

Now when, originally, it was suggested to me by my friends in that other city that I should speak on a subject of this sort, as I started turning it all over in my mind, my mind went back, went back a number of years, went back to a quite different place, went back to different country, even to a different continent, went back to India; and in India, as I think nearly everybody knows, I spent quite a number of years, practically twenty years, and in the course of those years which I spent in India, I had the opportunity, I might even say I was under the obligation, of attending a large number of public meetings. Indians, if I may say so, have a positive weakness for public meetings, large public meetings, the more speakers the better. If you have fifteen or twenty speakers, well that shows your meeting is really successful; and if each one speaks for at least an hour - wonderful! - everybody's very pleased, it's a very good, a very successful meeting. And sometimes - so fond in fact are Indians of these long speeches - that sometimes as I've stood up to speak, someone has whispered behind me, 'You must speak at least for two hours!'. This is how generous they are with their time, and with your time also, in India. So attending in this way all these meetings, many of them open-air meetings held late at night under a sort of glare of arc lighting, many of these meetings which I attended were distinguished by lots and lots of speeches. And I remember that at these sort of meetings one of the favourite topics of speakers, that is to say Buddhist speakers especially or people speaking on Buddhism, was Buddhism and world peace. You go along to any sort of Buddhist meeting, especially large public meeting in India, sooner or later someone is going to speak about Buddhism and world peace. And these lectures, these talks or speeches on Buddhism and world peace would practically always follow a standard pattern, whoever was speaking. First of all the speaker would give a very vivid, very graphic description of the terrible plight

of mankind nowadays. He'd dwell upon all the flood, fire, havoc of various kinds - wars, pestilence, examples of human selfishness - and of course he'd bring in the general prevalence of violence, the deterioration of moral values, young people no longer interested in religion, etc. etc. He'd paint a very black and gloomy picture indeed, and say we were on the brink of a holocaust etc, etc. and then, of course, when everything seemed black and no solution, he'd bring in Buddhism. And he'd say, well Buddhism teaches non-violence, it teaches peace, it teaches love, it teaches compassion, it teaches all these wonderful and beautiful things, so if everybody in the world just followed Buddhism, that's all they have to do, then of course there would be world peace, and all our problems would be solved automatically. And at this point, of course, everyone in the audience would burst into spontaneous applause, they'd think how wonderful this was, and what a wonderful thing he'd said, and he'd sit down beaming with satisfaction, you know, having said all this; everybody would be happy and of course the world would go on just as before. *[Laughter]*

So I'm not going to follow this line tonight. I'm not going to paint a picture of all these dreadful world problems, current world problems, and then say, well look, let's all follow Buddhism and it'll all be beautiful. It's not that this particular line is untrue, it's not that. Of course, we know, if everybody in the world followed Buddhism, if everybody followed the Noble Eightfold Path, if everybody sat down and meditated every day, if everybody practised the four Brahma Viharas and tried to be affectionate and kind and joyful and peaceful, well of course we wouldn't just have peace, we'd have heaven on earth. We know that. But it represents really far too much of a simplification. It's an over simplification. You simplify the problem, you simplify the solution. In the abstract it's beautiful, but in practice nothing seems to happen. Not only that: one brings in Buddhism, but why bring in only Buddhism? You could say well if everybody in the world followed, for instance Jainism. Jainism is even stricter about non-violence etc. than Buddhism itself is. Or suppose you followed certain forms of Hinduism, or Taoism, if everybody followed any of those, you'd still have world peace. You don't even necessarily have to bring Buddhism in. Or you might say you don't even have to bring religion in. Suppose everybody was a Humanist, suppose everyone followed Plato, or Socrates, or even Bertrand Russell, you'd have world peace on the spot. So religion even here has no monopoly.

So this is not the sort of approach, this sort of over simplified approach, this is not the sort of approach that I am going to try to make this evening. I should perhaps also make it clear that what I shall be giving is a Buddhist view of current world problems. I'm not professing or trying to give the Buddhist view, because we may say there isn't a 'the Buddhist view'. There's no sort of official Buddhist party line in this or any other matter. So I'll be speaking just as an individual, just as myself, though I am of course speaking as an individual who has been, in the course of the last thirty years quite, I hope, deeply influenced by Buddhist teaching.

Now we're concerned, let's not forget, with current world problems. But what are these problems? In case we've forgotten, in case we're so happy and comfortable and Enlightened sitting here, let's just remember, or let's just remind ourselves, of some of them; these problems, these current world problems are, of course of many different kinds: they're political, obviously; they're economic, almost equally obviously; they're social; they're ecological - a favourite new word; they're psychological - a very favourite comparatively new word - and they fall into all sorts of divisions and sub-divisions. Perhaps right at the head of the list we've got the problem of peace, world peace; or rather, of course, we could say there's no problem of peace, because peace itself is never a problem; the problem is war, the problem is violence. We've got the problem, that is to say, of conflicts which arise, which tend to arise, which sometimes break out into the open, between sovereign national states. In the world we've got, I don't know now how many hundred sovereign national states: they all claim to be the sole judges and arbiters of their own destinies. And obviously sometime or other their interests are going to come into conflict, that is collision, even violent conflict, violent collision, and problems arise. We know this only too well. And then there are all the problems connected with wealth, or the lack of wealth, problem of ownership, problem of distribution etc. There's also the problem we know, of say racial discrimination, the problem, or rather the fact, that certain people are looked down upon, discriminated against, simply on account of the colour of their skin and for no other reason. And there's the problem of health, the problem of how to ensure that every child, every individual citizen grows up sound and healthy, not only physically but mentally. There's the great problem of mental health, there's the great problem of mental illness, especially in many parts of the Western and Westernized world.

I remember, as I think I've mentioned before, that when I came back to this country in 1964, from India, having spent twenty years in the East, I was very, very much surprised, not to say shocked at the high incidence of mental disturbance, trouble of various kinds, even among the people with whom I was

directly in contact - leave aside all the people about whom I heard, people in mental hospitals, people receiving psychiatric treatment - but even amongst the people with whom I was in contact, in the Buddhist movement itself, there seemed an extraordinary amount of mental disturbance and mental illness, compared with the people that I'd known, among whom I had worked, in India. So there is this also very great, even terrible, problem of mental health and mental illness, which seems to be, if anything, getting worse rather than better.

There's the problem of law and order, the problem of how to reconcile the claims of law, the claims of order, with those of freedom, especially personal freedom. The problem, as some people put it, of juvenile delinquency, and so on. And we've got, of course - nowadays we know a lot about this - the problem of employment, the problem of unemployment. I must say that I don't personally feel that unemployment is a problem: it's a pseudo-problem: what the problem really is, is the problem of enforced leisure. It seems rather strange that people who want to work can't, and people who don't want to work sometimes have to. So there should be a sort of redistribution of the hours of leisure. Let them go to those who can use them, and let those who can use work, have the work. It seems to be a rather simple sort of thing, but apparently it isn't. And then there's the problem, if you like, of the role of women in society. Nowadays this is another question being very much agitated and discussed: what is the role of woman? Has she a role in fact at all? Ought not she perhaps simply to be herself? Not accept any role, not allow anyone to impose a role upon her? Or maybe she should just find the correct role, the role that really suits her, whatever role she likes, any role. These are the sort of things that are nowadays being discussed. And these are just a few, just a very few of the problems which confront us, or at least which just pluck at our sleeve every now and then, and there are many other such problems, as I am sure you know. I'm quite sure also that some of you have got your own favourite problems that haven't been mentioned; perhaps you're rather disappointed, perhaps you were expecting me to mention your own pet problem, but I haven't. But that isn't intention, it's simply that I've drawn up the list as it occurred to me, but I am quite sure that there are very many other problems, some of them equally pressing with those which I've mentioned.

One might even go so far as to say that most of these problems are not new problems, they're old problems in one form or another, they've been with us practically since the dawn of human history. But there is something new about these problems, there's something new about all, or very nearly all of the problems I have mentioned, and also some that I haven't mentioned. What is new about the majority, if not all of these current problems now, is their global character. The problems I've mentioned are, none of them, as far as I can recollect, confined to just one small section of the human race. All these problems, whether political, economic, social, directly or indirectly effect all of us on this planet, all of us on this globe. Even if they don't impinge upon us very strongly and powerfully in our personal lives, at least we know about them and perhaps we're, at least emotionally, affected by them to some extent. Formerly this was not the case; formerly, even perhaps a hundred years ago, something very catastrophic could happen in one part of the world, affecting thousands, even millions of people, and the rest of the people in the world might not know anything about it at all. There might be a war in one continent, one country, a war which was waging for a long time, which was very destructive in terms of property and human life, very tragic, very terrible, but news of that war might not reach the rest of the world, or many other parts of the world at least, for quite a long time, in fact it might never reach at all. Many people, the majority of people, perhaps, wouldn't know anything at all about that war that was raging or had raged in that distant part of the world.

But this sort of thing, we may say, is no longer possible. Whatever happens, anywhere, is known to everybody who cares to know almost instantly, because one of the great characteristics, one of the great features of the history of the last few decades is this very greatly increased facility of communication among human beings. And it's as though, we may say, it's as though the world had shrunk, as though the globe had become quite literally a smaller place, a smaller planet. There's no need to go into this, no need to emphasise this, this is a matter of common knowledge, though it doesn't always perhaps sink as decisively into our consciousness, into our awareness as it should do.

Now when we hear about these problems, when we're confronted by these problems, when they are practically forced upon our attention, what, we may ask, is our reaction to them? We hear for example about a fresh outbreak of hostilities in Vietnam, yet more fighting, yet more people killed, yet more homes destroyed, yet more orphans made, yet more people terribly scared and disfigured. So what's our reaction? Or we hear for instance about a famine in, say, Bengal: people dying of starvation, not enough food to go round. Well, what's our reaction to that? Or we hear for instance about, say, a race riot, in one of the Southern states of the United States, or we hear about some new example of the pollution of the

atmosphere by industry, by maybe atomic fallout, something of that kind. Or suppose we hear about something quite different, suppose we hear about the latest population explosion in some part of the world or other. So what's our reaction when we hear about these problems? When we see them before us, before our eyes, at least in the pages of the daily newspaper or on the television screen? Well our initial reaction when we see at least some of these problems, when we see examples of them, our initial reaction may be a very strong one, may be a very emotional one, we may be for a while quite sort of carried away by our feelings. There may be an initial reaction, say, of indignation that such a thing should happen at all, that there should be such a problem; may be a reaction of concern, that we ought to try and do something; might be a reaction of outrage against the people responsible for perpetrating the problem, if a perpetrator can in fact be identified at all, and there may be a reaction of worry, anxiety - suppose the problem catches up with us, suppose we are involved?

So these are the initial reactions or some of the initial reactions that are possible when we are confronted by these problems in one or another of their very numerous and often very dreadful forms. But in the end, very often, only too often, it's a different feeling that overtakes us, a different feeling that overcomes us. Only too often, when the initial feeling of indignation, or concern, or outrage, or worry has died away, has exhausted us, itself, the feeling that we experience is simply one of... helplessness, helplessness. As we reflect, we see that the problem is so big, it's so complicated, there are so many factors, so many agents. We feel we, on the other hand are so small, we are so weak, and there are so many problems, not just one - scores, maybe even hundreds of problems. So this, very often, only too often, is our reaction in the end - the position to which we finally come, the feeling that finally overtakes us, overpowers us - that we can't do anything about this problem, any of these problems, the problems are too much for us. So often we just try to forget, we say. 'well it's just too bad, I'm very sorry about it all, but there's nothing I can do; so why worry, let me just try to forget, if I can'. So we close our newspaper, or we switch off our television set, and we get on, perhaps, as best we can, with our own personal lives; and we try to forget the current world problems, we try to forget the problems of the world, the problems of other people, and with a greater or less degree of hedonism we try to get on with our own personal lives.

Now, in my opinion, thinking all this over, this sort of attitude, of just retreating from the problems, retreating into the personal in a rather narrow sense, is really an attitude not worthy of a human being, one who's trying to be a human being in the full sense of the term. It represents a sort of abdication of responsibility, one may say. So, the question arises, what is one going to do? Admitting that you're helpless, or it seems that you are helpless to begin with, so far as the solution of these larger, these really great problems, is concerned. Supposing you are helpless, all right, you accept that, what are you going to do? You can't just turn aside, you can't forget, you can't withdraw, you can't ignore, so what are you going to do?

Well, my suggestion is, for a start, that we begin by trying to see things, trying to see everything in perspective. This never hurts anyway. To try to see not just, as it were, the individual trees, in the shade of which we happen to stand at the moment, but to try to see the growth and development of the whole wood, the whole forest. In other words try to see in perspective, not just the present, but the past, even the future, if one can have a glimpse of the future, as well. So if we look in this way; if we try to look at the world; if we try to look at world problems in perspective; if we try to envisage, as it were, the history of the whole human race, try to see man from his very beginnings, then what do we see?

Well, speaking very very broadly indeed, perhaps too broadly, but maybe not too broadly just for the purposes of this lecture, we see, dividing, three great periods of human history. We see to begin with a very long period, a vast period, about which we know really very little, which lasted some six hundred to seven hundred thousand years, perhaps nearly a million years according to some authorities. And then, following this first vast period, we see a second period, a shorter one, of a mere, say roughly, thirty thousand years. And finally we see a period, the last period, of two thousand five hundred years. So let's look at these three periods of human history just a little bit more closely, though still very, very broadly indeed, in very, very broad perspective.

The first period, of course, the period of six or seven hundred thousand years, a vast primeval period, about which in detail we know very little, is the period of what we may describe as 'primitive man'. It's the period in the course of which, what we sometimes describe as the ape man developed into true man. It's the period towards the end of which hunting developed, weapons were invented, weapons of stone, and when fire was invented. It was a period, this vast primeval period, of very few people; we can hardly imagine now how few people. We don't know the exact numbers, but perhaps there weren't more than

even one million people scattered all over the surface of the earth - maybe less than a million. And how did these people live? They didn't of course at that time live in towns or cities, not even in villages. They didn't even stay in one place at all. They just roamed about in bands, small bands, twenty, thirty, at the most forty or fifty strong; and only after a very very long period, right towards the end of this period of primitive man, they started living in caves, building for themselves very rough and ready huts, even perhaps a sort of nest. So this is the first period, the period of primitive man, the period that lasted for six to seven hundred - even up to a million years. We have this behind us, this is part of our inheritance, our heredity, that for close on a million years we lived, our ancestors lived, in this way as primitive man. So that we can see that there's a very big, very deep level, of our consciousness, which is primitive.

And secondly the period of the true men, the period that lasted, as I've said, for some thirty thousand years. This is the period in the course of which agriculture was invented. Man learned to plant, he learned to raise crops, learned to reap, learned to make bread. And this is the period also that saw, as far as we know, as far as we can tell, the beginnings of religion and art. In those days, of course, religion and art weren't separated, as far as we can tell, as much as they are nowadays. They formed a sort of single, organic complex, and towards the end of this period, this thirty thousand year period, in some areas, especially in the well watered river valleys, villages became established, villages became larger, and eventually even towns and cities started springing up, and in some of these areas, these river valley areas indifferent parts of the world, a number of towns started joining together, came under a common overlordship, and in this way, gradually, slowly, by degrees nation states begin to emerge, at least on a small, on a limited scale. And then one nation state comes into contact with another, comes into conflict - you get war, you get conquest and you get eventually the beginnings of empire, with one state, one man even, one conqueror, lording it, not just only over his own kingdom, his own state, but over a number of conquered and tributary states. So that's the second period, the period of true men.

And then the third period, the modern period, the period of the last two thousand five hundred years, this is the period at the beginning of which the great religions sprang up. During this period we have arising and passing away a number of world empires, Eastern and Western. This is the period, as we know only too well, of science and technology. And still more recently, very recently indeed, it's the period of global organizations and global problems, problems of the kind with which we are concerned today.

So here we see, as it were spread out in a vast panorama before us, these three great periods of human history, the primitive period, the period of true man, the modern period. Now though I've mentioned three, though I've divided the course of human history and pre-history into these three great periods, one could say that in a sense, in another sense, there are not three but four great periods of human history. But this fourth one is not so much a period in its own right; it's more, we may say, a sort of period of transition between two periods, a period of transition from the period of true man to the modern period, and this period, the period of transition, is the period of what Karl Jaspers calls 'The Axial Age', the Axial Age, and this, according to Jaspers and other thinkers who followed his way of thinking, is the six hundred year period from around Eight Hundred BC to around Two Hundred BC. So why is it called the Axial Age? Well Jaspers gave this name 'The Axial Age' to that very short period of history - short in comparison with the total period of human history and pre-history - he called it the Axial Age because, as he saw it, and in this insight many are agreed with him, the whole period marks a turning point, a very decisive turning point in human history as a whole. So he calls it the Axial Age; because on this point, on this six hundred year period, in a sense, the whole of human history turns as on an axis.

So what happened? Why should this six hundred year period be called the Axial Age? In what way, in what sense was it a turning point? Well, it was a turning point for, in a sense, very obvious reasons because all over the civilized world, during those six hundred years, man, the human race, seems to take a great step forward. Let's then look at the different parts of the civilized world of those days very briefly. Suppose we look at Greece, at Ancient Greece, then what do we see? We see that in those days, in that Axial Age, it was a period of Socrates and Plato, as well as a whole galaxy of other thinkers, it was a period of the great dramatic poets, of Aeschylus, of Sophocles, and so on; it was the period of great non-dramatic poets, like Pindar. In fact this period in the history of Greece, during the Axial Age, constitutes, we may say, one of the great glories of human achievement, human thought, human civilization, human culture, falling within the Axial Age. And then, if we turn to Israel, what do we see there? We see that there the Axial Age was the period of the great prophets, of some of the of the greatest of the prophets, it was during this Axial Age that the second Isaiah spoke out, it was the period of Jeremiah and of Amos, and of a number of other great Hebrew prophets, some of whose insights echo, as it were, down the corridors of the Western world even today. And if we go just a little further afield, if we turn to Persia, we see that it was the period of Zoroaster or Zarathustra, or the last of the

Zarathustras, the last of the line and the most famous, the founder, or the refounder of the new Zarathustrian religion, the religion of light, the religion of light and darkness, of the conflict between light and darkness. And suppose we go even further afield, go right into the East, to the Far East, to the extreme East, what do we see there? If we turn to China we find that this was the period of the two greatest figures, perhaps, in the whole history of Chinese thought, especially moral thought, and moral practice and moral life, and even mystical life. We encounter there the great figures of Lao Tse and of Confucius, the two greatest teachers, indigenous teachers of China. And of course, suppose we turn to India, India during the Axial Age, what do we find there? We find that the Axial Age there was the period of the greatest Upanishadic sages, it was the period for instance of Yajnavalkya and of course it was the period of the Buddha, Gautama the Buddha, and the period of Mahavira, the founder of Jainism.

So we see, as we look about the world in the Axial Age, we see, that all these more highly civilized areas, Greece, Israel, Persia, India, China, were as it were bursting during those centuries with spiritual life and spiritual activity. They produced all sorts of great people, great creative figures. Some of them we know now as founders of religions; no doubt they didn't appear in their own days as founders of religions: no doubt the Buddha didn't think of himself as a founder of religion in our sense, but founders of religions they, as it were, retrospectively became. Others like Plato, Socrates, were great seminal thinkers, whose insights have greatly influenced us ever since. In fact, I think it was Whitehead who said, of Plato, for instance, that the whole of the history of Western philosophy, in fact the whole of Western philosophy itself was simply a series of annotations to Plato. That's probably an exaggeration, but it just gives one some idea of the extent and depth of Plato's influence, and he, as we have seen, was a man, was a figure of this Axial Age. And others, the great poets, the great sculptors, and so on, these were great creative, great artistic figures. But whether we regard them as founders of religions, people of profound mystical experience, whether we regard them as great lofty seminal thinkers, or whether we regard them as creative figures, artists and so on, we find, on looking at them, comparing them, that they all seem to have one thing in common - whether they belong to Greece, or Israel, or Persia, or India or China - they all have one thing in common, which is they stand out very clearly. They have, as it were, a recognisable individuality: they are all recognisable individuals. They stand out sharp and distinct, as it were: we can recognise them: even across the gulf of centuries we can, as it were, know them, enter, in a way, into a sort of personal relationship with them. The individuality is so intense and so strong, so unique - if one can in fact use an expression as so unique. But when one says that they're all Individuals - Individuals with a capital 'I', as it were, one does not mean by 'Individual', 'individualist'. An individualist, we can say, is just a person with a particularly strong ego that perhaps he's particularly fond of inflicting on other people. But an Individual is something different - not an individualist. An Individual, a real Individual, a True Individual, whether a religious, spiritual Individual, or a creative Individual, or thinking Individual, a real Individual is one who has developed, in one way or another, through one discipline or another, to one degree or another, greater or less, self awareness and self consciousness. In other words an Individual is one who is not just a member of a group, who transcends the group; not just a member of the tribe, the nation, the state, not a member, and just a member, of any sort of group at all. He stands, as it were, on his own two feet, he's just an Individual, alone, if you like, unique. He's one who has, we may say, a direct, personal relationship with the deeper reality of things. His relationship is not just, as it were, on the surface. In fact we can go so far as to say perhaps, in a somewhat poetic way, perhaps, that an Individual is one through whom, as it were, the deeper reality of things, the truth behind appearances, if you like, functions in the world, or is present in the world. Through the Individual, the True Individual, you see the Universal. The Individual and the Universal in fact coincide.

So what does all this mean in terms of our wider perspective? It means that from the time of the Axial Age of history, we see at work in history a new tendency, a tendency that wasn't at work in history before, except perhaps in a very rudimentary and anticipatory sense. So what is this tendency that with the axial age now makes its appearance in history? - at least to the extent of now being noticeable and visible. The tendency is what we may describe as a tendency for the increased production of Individuals. This is the new tendency that makes its appearance on a comparatively extensive scale with the Axial Age - a tendency for the increased production of Individuals, meaning of course by Individuals, people who, in one way or another, to a greater or lesser extent, have realised their own true spiritual selfhood, their own true spiritual nature.

Sometimes, of course, these Individuals exist in isolation, in comparative isolation, but more often, it seems, we find them together, not together in large numbers, but together in twos, threes, perhaps even a few more than that. So these Individuals, who as Individuals are together in contact, deep personal contact, real Individual contact - not just contact as members of the same group - these Individuals, as

Individuals, form, between them, a new, a different kind of group that we can't even still call a group. They form between them, they make up between them, these Individuals who have now started emerging, what we call, for want of a better term, a Spiritual Community - a spiritual community, or if you like just a community, provided you understand the term correctly in this context. So we can go a step further. We can generalise just a little bit more, and we can say that from the time of the Axial Age we see, we find at work in history, two great tendencies, two great lines of development: First of all there's a line of development of larger and ever larger groups, starting off with the family, going on to the tribe, the nation, the empire, corporate state etc. Or, on a slightly reduced scale, even things like the shop, the business, firm, international, supernational corporation and so on. This is one line of development, one tendency of history, the development of bigger and bigger and ever bigger groups, culminating in the enormous, the mammoth groups that we now know of in the world as a whole.

And then there's the second tendency at work in history since the time of the Axial Age, the tendency towards the development of Individuals, in the sense in which the term has already been described and spiritual communities in the sense of communities made up of Individuals, just a few Individuals. And we know, of course, that the Individuals and the spiritual communities that are made up of the Individuals are always very very few in number, compared with the total population. The spiritual communities, especially, are very very small. Perhaps we can say that they are small by definition. You can't really have a world-wide spiritual community. A spiritual community by definition - and this is a very sobering thought that we must take very seriously - is small. It would seem to be a sort of law of history, a law of human development, that when a spiritual community reaches a certain size it tends to take on the characteristics of the group, and as it takes on the characteristics of the group, or a group, becomes a group, it degenerates. We know that this has happened in the West, we know that it's happened in the case, for instance, of the Christian churches, but that's another story, we've no time to pursue it now. I did think a little while ago that it might not be a bad idea to design a sort of series of pictures showing the emergence of individuals, individuals forming spiritual communities, as it were separating themselves from the group, then the spiritual communities getting bigger, feeling as it were, the attraction, the gravitational pull of the group, taking on different characteristics and attributes of the group, and then being absorbed back into the group as a pseudo-spiritual community within the group, which is what the church is, which is what most conventional, traditional, orthodox religious bodies of any religion are in fact. So maybe sometime in the future we'll get one of our artists, or pictorial friends to produce a sort of series of illustrations to make the nature of this process very clear to everybody, but anyway, that is just by the way.

Now spiritual communities, True Spiritual Communities, that is to say communities made up of real Individuals, may be very small, very small indeed, insignificant, but they exert, qualitatively speaking, a very great influence. They're just like a sort of leaven, which leavens, we may say, the vast doughy, stodgy mass of the general population. But to this too we'll be returning perhaps a little later on.

What I want to do now is to take a closer look, from a somewhat different angle, of the two lines of development that I've mentioned, the development of the group, development of ever larger and larger and larger groups, and the development, the production, of individuals and spiritual communities of individuals. So we're going to take, as it were, a cross section of these two, and we'll find, though perhaps we might not be quite clear how it's happened, we will find that this gives us, as it were, four terms.

All right what are these terms? Or four categories, if you like. First of all there's what we may describe as the statistical individual or social unit. By statistical individual or social unit we mean one who is simply a member of a group, who has in fact no existence of his or her own apart from the group. Who is, as it were, submerged in the group, even identified with the group, and therefore possesses no real, no true individuality. Such a person, the statistical individual, the member simply, of a group, will always accept, very often implicitly, the norms, the values etc., of the group to which he or she belongs. And so therefore we find, in the case of the statistical individual, one who's just a member of the group and nothing more, a comparatively low level of consciousness and awareness. And of course most members of the human race obviously come into this category. So this is category one: the statistical individual, the social unit.

And then secondly, second category, there's the group itself. The group consists of a number of statistical individuals or social units, consisting in fact, usually, of a very large number of them. And the bond of union, as it were, between members of groups, between statistical individuals, are usually more

or less, as it were, material - not necessarily attaching any deprecatory meaning to this term 'material' - they're united maybe by ties of blood, as in the case of the family and the tribe, they're united by ties, as it were, of soil - they all live on the same land, they've lived together on the same land, them and their ancestors for generations, they're united through their allegiance to the land on which they've all lived for so long; and they're united often, especially in the case of larger groups, or members of the larger groups, by economic ties, ties of economic interest, they're united very often by fear; they're united by the need to defend themselves against perhaps larger, more powerful dangerous groups, united by a need for safety. So the ties, the bonds which unite the members of the group, the statistical individuals, tend to be of this nature - more material. One can also say, of course, that the same statistical individual, the same social unit, can be counted a number of different times, that is to say can be a member, or can occur in, a number of different groups. You can belong at the same time to a social group, an economic group, a religious group, a family group, a class group, cultural group, linguistic group, racial group, language group, you can belong at the same time to a number of different groups; and the groups themselves often have a tendency to overlap. They not only overlap, they sort of cohere. So all these overlapping, mutually cohering groups together make up, we may say, what can be called the world, that is to say the world in the sense in which the term is used in the old Christian phrase, 'the world, the flesh, and the devil'.

So these groups make up the world. And groups as groups generally tend to discourage true individuality. Very often they're afraid of it and its manifestations: the group requires conformity, and I remember once I said, being perhaps a little paradoxical and extreme, that in relation to the individual, one can take it as an axiom that the group is always wrong.

All right, that's the second category, the category of the group. Third category, the category of the Individual, the True Individual. So what is an Individual? what is a True Individual? This a very important question. If you like, it's the central question of our lives: are we Individuals, are we True Individuals? Can we claim to be Individuals or are we just social units? So what is an Individual? An Individual first of all is one who is aware, who is aware, who looks and who sees, and who begins to understand - himself, other people, the world, history. The Individual is one who has developed at least a measure of self consciousness, not self consciousness in the sense of, as it were, embarrassment, but he's conscious of himself, he as it were weighs himself up, he's able to see himself objectively. An Individual is also one, we may say, who has established his own direct relationship with, for want of a better term, we can call the Absolute, or if you like the Ultimate of things, who's got some contact, some experience of that, and who's established his own relationship with it. An Individual also is one whose emotional nature is refined. We all have emotions, but usually, those emotions are crude, as it were violent, whether positive or negative emotions. In the case of the Individual the emotions are there, yes love is there, joy is there, peace is there, compassion is there, they're all refined emotions. This is perhaps one of the most important aspects of Individuality, of spiritual development in general, the development of these more refined positive emotions. So the True Individual is distinguished among other things by his positive and refined emotional nature. And then again, the Individual, the True Individual is one whose energies flow naturally and spontaneously, no blockages, no inhibitions, no checks, his energy is always purely, spontaneously flowing; it's free, it's not hung up anywhere. And then again, we may say, the Individual is one who not only looks about him, not only sees, but sees objectively, who's not influenced by purely subjective factors, who can see things as they are. And perhaps above all, from the point of view of the present discussion, the Individual is one who is free, at least comparatively free, in all grosser respects, from the conditioning of the group. We've all been born into groups, so we all start off as members of groups, of a number of overlapping, cohering groups, and that conditioning of the group is always with us at the beginning, but the more we become Individuals, the more we develop spiritually, the more we become free from it, free from the group conditioning. And this is a very, very important aspect of our whole spiritual life and development.

Sometimes one of the best ways in which we can become free from group conditioning, is just to go into some other group, and see how different the conditioning is there, experience these differences for ourselves, and then we tend to begin to question the validity of the absoluteness which we'd assumed so far of our own particular group conditioning. This is why travel is very valuable from this particular point of view. And also, we may say, an Individual is one who is not psychologically dependent on the group. He doesn't require for his own peace of mind the approval of the group. He's quite prepared, if necessary, to stand by himself, to disagree with the group. He doesn't particularly mind having everybody in disagreement with him. He doesn't mind just thinking his own thoughts, even though nobody else thinks those thoughts, nobody else sees things as he sees them, and he doesn't mind even, if necessary, disagreeing with the group and even being disapproved of by the group, disapproval can't, as it were, pressure him into conformity. He's not psychologically dependent on the approval of the

group. And we can also say, in conclusion, that an Individual is one who encourages others to become Individuals too, who encourages them in a way to be discontented with the group, with any group. So this is what we mean by the Individual, this is our third category, the category of the Individual. It's just a very brief description, a very brief delineation that maybe will give you some idea of the meaning that we attach to this term.

So fourthly, fourth category, after that of the Individual, comes of course the Spiritual Community, and the spiritual community is essentially a free association of Individuals, and as I've emphasised, already, and as I've emphasised even more in other lectures, a spiritual community is not a group. And the most fatal mistake that a spiritual community can make, is to start functioning as a group. It's as important, we may say, to distinguish the spiritual community from the group. It's as important, we may say, to distinguish the Spiritual Community from the group as it is to distinguish the individual from the individualist. And it becomes especially important, especially in this particular context, to distinguish the spiritual community proper, the community made up of True Individuals, from the mere religious group. Most religious groups are not in fact spiritual communities, they're just groups with a religious or pseudo-religious or pseudo-spiritual label, and not much more than that. So from this point of view, very often we have to avoid religious groups as much as we avoid any other sort of group.

Now we may say that the purpose of the spiritual community, the community of Individuals is twofold: mutual spiritual development, that's the first, and the provision of facilities for those members of groups, various groups who want, or seem to want, to start becoming Individuals. These are the two associated main functions of the spiritual community: that the members of that community should help one another in becoming still more Individual, and that they should provide facilities for such members of the various groups all around them who would like to start trying to become themselves Individuals.

Well, perhaps now, after all that, it's time we came back to our current world problems, because they haven't been solved, they're still there in the world, and we have to turn back now and consider them. So in the light of the discussion that has just gone we may say that all the problems, all the current world problems that confront us today, are essentially group problems. They're problems which arise within and between groups of various kinds: political, economic, social and so on. And as I mentioned earlier, most of these problems are not new: most of them, if not all of them, have been with us since the dawn of history itself. But what is new now, what is we may say dangerously new, is the size of the various groups involved - political, economic, commercial, social, racial - the size of the groups involved, and the extent of their power, their material power, especially their power of mutual destruction. This is what is new. So though the problems have been us since the beginning, at least in a rudimentary form, what has happened now, what has happened in the last one or two decades is that they have become increasingly urgent, even perhaps catastrophically urgent, so that we have, in a sense, to solve them or even perish.

But these problems cannot be solved just on the level of the group. All that one can achieve on the level of the group is a balance, a precarious balance of power, of conflicting interests. And that balance, as we know only too well perhaps, can be disturbed at any moment.

So in this sort of situation, what is the solution? Personally I see only one solution, and it's a comparatively long-term solution, so let's hope we have enough time to put it into effect. The solution, the only solution really, is that we, that is to say the human race, has to produce more Individuals, more True Individuals, and more spiritual groups; and these, the True Individuals and the Spiritual Communities will act as they've we hope always acted, but now, we hope, more powerfully and effectively than ever, act as a leaven, and eventually to some extent at least, at least to the extent, that marginal extent of safety, transform the whole group, the whole global group.

So we can say that a consideration of current world problems makes it clear to us that we have before us today only two alternatives: on the one hand there's what we call Evolution, the Higher Evolution, spiritual development, becoming an Individual; that's one alternative, and the other alternative is extinction. It really means that we, the human race that is to say, individual members of the human race, must develop spiritually, or sooner or later just perish.

So in a situation, not to say predicament like this, what should one do? What should each one of us do? This is a question which I've certainly asked myself from time to time, and it's because I've asked myself this question that I'm giving this talk, giving this lecture this evening, and expressing the views

that I am expressing. In my view, at this very highly critical juncture of human history, every thinking human being can and should do four things - four things, so what are these four things?

First of all he should he should develop himself. Secondly, join a spiritual community. Thirdly, withdraw his support from all anti-spiritual forces ie. all groups, and four, exert whatever influence for good he can in any group to which he unavoidably does belong. So I'm going to devote the rest of our time, which I'm afraid isn't very much, to a few brief comments on each of these four points.

One should develop oneself: so what does this mean? Self development means essentially the development of consciousness, or if you like of the mind, because it's in this that human development consists. Not in physical development - we seem to have reached the limit, the peak there - but in development of mind and consciousness. The raising of the mind, the raising of the consciousness to a higher and ever higher level of awareness. This is the only true human development: not anything material, not anything external, but the raising of the level of consciousness, and we do this, mainly in the case of most people, through what we call meditation. Of course meditation is a word that's much banded about these days, and the meaning isn't always clear, but what do we mean by meditation? We mean by meditation three things, three levels; first of all what we call concentration, the integration of all our energies, personal and impersonal, conscious and unconscious, to the experience of supra - what shall I say? - supra-ego states of consciousness, supra-personal states of consciousness, and thirdly, contemplation in the sense of the direct seeing, the direct vision by the uncontaminated, uncluttered mind, by the mind in a state of higher consciousness, the seeing of what is Ultimate, the seeing of existence, through, as it were, to its Ultimate depths - contemplation, insight, vision. So this is what we mean by meditation - integration of all our energies, raising of the consciousness above the personal, the egoistic level to higher, wider dimensions, even cosmic dimensions, and then the seeing of Reality, the seeing of Truth face to face. This is meditation, through which we truly evolve and develop. And of course there are very many different methods even within the Buddhist tradition as we know. But what is important is just to find someone who can teach you at least a few of the methods, or at least one of the methods, and then practise regularly, stick at it. And in connection with that of course, in association with that, to try to simplify one's life as much as possible: this is also one of the ways in which one develops - to get rid of all the unnecessary things, the unnecessary interests; not to waste time, as so many people do waste time in unnecessary social contacts, contacts in unnecessary activities of various kinds. And of course to try to base one's life, one's living more and more on ethical principles, especially the principle of right livelihood - maybe taking just a part-time job, giving oneself plenty of time free for meditation, study, creative work, and so on. And also, another very important aspect of one's development, the refinement of one's emotions through the experience of the fine arts, looking at great paintings, sculptures, listening to music, reading poetry, perhaps even creating oneself, if one is so minded, if one is so inclined, if one feels oneself an inner creative urge. All these are means of personal spiritual development. And then having some at least general acquaintance with history, world history, history of the human race, cultural history, with science and philosophy, comparative religion, mysticism, these are all means, these are all ways, methods, of one's individual development.

So this is the first thing that one should do, in this present juncture of history, in one or another, or a number, of these different ways, that I've suggested - one should develop oneself. And one should never forget that this is really the first consideration. If you're not trying to develop yourself, you're not making any contribution at all really, however externally active you may be, to the ultimate solution of current world problems; neither of course are you doing really anything for yourself. So self development, development of the Individual himself.

And secondly, one should join a Spiritual Community. What does this mean? It doesn't necessarily mean joining any organised body, but it simply means that one should be in contact with as much as possible, other Individuals, True Individuals, or people at least who are trying to become True Individuals, have regular contact with them, try to, as it were spark oneself off through that contact, do what you can to spark them off, mutually spark one another off, in this way, and by contact with other Individuals, True Individuals, one doesn't just mean a comparatively superficial social contact, one means a real communication, a genuine, as it were, spiritual exchange. We know, I'm sure, that it's very difficult to develop spiritually entirely on one's own. The support, at least at the beginning, of a spiritual community, that is of other Individuals similarly interested, is very, very helpful. This is not just like the psychological support of the group. It's not just a sort of warmth that you get by belonging to the herd. Membership of a spiritual community, contact with other evolving Individuals, is something much more challenging and much more demanding than that, because the spiritual community demands, which the group doesn't demand, the group discourages it, the spiritual community demands that you should be

an Individual, that you should begin at least by being yourself, and then through being yourself try to become in contact, in communication, with other emergent individuals, yourself an Individual. And, of course, the best kind of spiritual community, we can say, is one which contains at least one person more developed, more evolved spiritually than the others. And such a person, in the Buddhist tradition, we know as a *Kalyana Mitra*, which means a good friend, a spiritual friend, or if you like, guru.

It's also very, very important, within the context of the spiritual community, it's very important that all the members of a particular spiritual community should have the same general outlook upon or attitude towards or approach to the spiritual life, all follow more or less the same spiritual methods, otherwise it may be difficult for them to help or even to understand one another. They may, if they like, some members of the spiritual community, all live under one roof and form, as it were, a resident spiritual community, but this not essential. What is essential is the regular contact between members of any spiritual community, between individuals, real contact.

Now thirdly, one should withdraw support from all anti-spiritual forces. One could say quite a lot on this point, but time is running short, so I'd better be very brief. By anti-spiritual forces one means all groups, agencies etc., which do not permit, or which even actually discourage, in one way or another, directly or indirectly, the development of the individual as such, even oppose it, quite openly. Such groups may include the family, the political party, trades union, church, state, and so on. So all these groups, they draw, they derive their strength from their individual members. So one should weaken, if one possibly can, the group as group by the withdrawal of one's own personal support. Some people, some extremists, one may say, would even go so far as to try to withdraw support from the state, as the sort of grand ultimate group of all groups altogether. But this is very, very difficult, even though, in a sense, it might be desirable. So withdraw support from all anti-spiritual forces, all groups which oppose the development of the individual, as far as you possibly can; otherwise you're pulling in two directions at once: on the one hand trying to be an individual, on the other you're supporting the very forces which are preventing you from being an Individual. So withdraw support from those forces.

Fourthly and lastly, one should exert an influence for good i.e. in the direction of Individuality in all the groups to which unavoidably one belongs. You can't help having a social circle of people who don't particularly want to be Individuals - you may have to go to a place of work, you may have to live at home. All right, if you have to, if it's unavoidable, never mind. But whenever an opportunity arises speak up, and act within the context even of the group, even if there's a bit of opposition or lack of understanding, speak up for the ideal of Individuality, and try and act upon it, try even and influence the group in the direction, or rather influence potential Individuals within the group, in the direction of True Individuality. Never just allow yourself to go along with the group, if one does happen to belong to one at all. Try to represent, even within the context of the group, individual values.

So these are the four things that one should do at this present, critical juncture in world history. Let me remind you of them because they are very important.

First of all one should try to develop oneself. That comes first.

Secondly, join a spiritual community: be in contact with other individuals or potential individuals.

Three, withdraw your support from all anti-spiritual forces, all forces or groups that weaken the ideal of individuality, and...

Fourthly and lastly, exert whatever influence for good i.e. influence in the direction of Individuality that you can in those groups of which, unavoidably, you happen to be a member.

So if sufficient people do this, if sufficient people do these four things, then more and more individuals will be produced. And as more and more individuals are produced, spiritual communities will multiply. You will never have one world-wide spiritual community - it would then very rapidly become a group, but you could have a sort of network of spiritual communities which extend all over the globe, and many of the members of which are in contact with one another, which exert a sort of silent, unseen influence.

A few days ago I was reading a very beautiful poem by a modern poet, and it ended on a rather earthy note. The author of the poem concluded by saying, 'What are we?' - she was talking about what we would call individuals. She said, 'We are earth worms.' To be an earth worm is a very high ideal. We are earth worms because we are just burrowing underneath the foundations of the existing order, and the

earth worm is a very humble insignificant creature. But if enough little earth worms just burrow away underneath the foundations of even the loftiest and strongest building's, they loosen the soil, so the soil starts crumbling away, the foundations will subside, and we must be much more like that, earth worms. So after reading this poem, I said to a friend who was with me, I said, 'maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to have a magazine and call it 'The Earth Worm', for this is really our function, to be, as it were, earth worms. So if a sufficiently large number of people, of individuals, are, as it were, earth worms, burrowing, tunnelling, withdrawing their support, loosening the soil, then these - not only these structures, these groups - but the current world problems associated with them will sort of, we may say, collapse. The centre of gravity will shift, the centre of gravity in world affairs will shift if this sort of thing happens, it will shift from the conflicting group or groups, to the co-operating, indirectly or directly co-operating, spiritual communities, and when that achieves, when, as it were, the influence of the spiritual communities of the individuals outweighs the influence of the groups as such, then humanity as a whole, practically, will have passed into a higher, a new stage of evolution, of human history, into what we might even describe as a fifth period of human history. And all this is possible, all this can be achieved. But, it's a very big and a rather terrible but, we may not have very much time left. So it becomes the duty in this sort of situation of every thinking human being to take very serious stock of his or her own position. It becomes everybody's duty to give very serious consideration to the view which at least one Buddhist takes of current world problems.