

Toward a Dialogical Civilization

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REPRESENTATIVE Director Morita, Director Kawada, and Fellow Participants, I am honored to have this opportunity to share some of my thoughts on the new idea of a “dialogical civilization.” In 1995, I had the pleasure of serving as one of the discussants for a lecture given by President Ikeda at the East-West Center in Honolulu. That was my first encounter with his vision on the dialogue between the East and West. It was also my first exposure to the idea of the “third civilization,” meaning a civilization that rises above the dichotomy of East and West. Both of us hope, I am sure, that the “third civilization” is also the civilization that will combine the strengths and resources from both the East and West. My first experience in the East-West dialogue was in college when I was engaged in weekly, if not daily, conversations with graduates from leading American universities, such as Oberlin, Princeton, and Yale, who served as instructors of English at my alma mater, Tunghai University, in Taiwan. By learning to express myself in English from them, I was easily drawn into a “conversation” comparing convergence and divergence of core values between American and Chinese civilizations. I still vaguely remember how I tried to use my extremely limited English vocabulary to convince my English instructors, who were only three or four years older than I, why empathy is at least as important as rationality.

In the 1980s when I assumed the directorship of the Institute of Culture and Communication at the East-West Center for fourteen months, I initiated a project on the dialogue of civilizations, specifically interchange among world religions. It attracted a number of prominent scholars of religion and leaders of faith communities, such as Ewert Cousins, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Huston Smith, H. Nasr, Raimon Panikkar, and Balasubramanian, to Honolulu for illuminating conversations. There were two dimensions to the project: a horizontal dimension and a vertical dimension. Horizontally, it involved major historical religions. The underlying question was: how can representatives of these major traditions talk among themselves inter-religiously and inter-culturally as con-

versational partners in a joint intellectual and spiritual venture. All seven so-called Axial-Age civilizations, identified by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers in the 1940s, were included: Hinduism and Buddhism in South Asia (India in particular), Confucianism and Daoism in China, Judaism in the Middle East and, by implication, Christianity and Islam, which historically evolved from forms of spirituality centering around the Hebrew Bible. Actually, as background, we should also include Greek philosophy as a spiritual tradition.

There is also a vertical dimension which involves all the indigenous religions, such as the Native American, Hawaiian, Maori, Alaskan, African, and, of course, Shinto traditions. Let me say a word about Shintoism as a manifestation of Japanese spirituality. Through my study and dialogue with eminent Japanese thinkers, notably Okada Takehiko, the Kyushu Confucian master, the student of Kusumoto, and the inheritor of the Mito tradition traceable to Yamazaki Ansai, Abe Masao, the Zen teacher, Nishitani Keiji, the philosopher and a follower of the founder of the Kyoto School, Nishida Kitaro, and Maruyama Masao, the public intellectual, especially in terms of his fruitful idea of *basso ostinato* (通奏低音), I came to realize a unique feature of Japanese civilization.

Although Japan, strictly speaking, is not an Axial-Age civilization, it successfully digested two Axial-Age civilizations—Buddhism and Confucianism—prior to the impact of the modern West in the mid-nineteenth century. This is perhaps the reason why, despite surface uniformity, Japanese culture is rich, varied, and diverse. I take seriously the interpretation of Shmuel Eisenstadt, the sociologist at Hebrew University and a leading scholar in comparative civilizational studies. He claims in his *Japanese Civilization*, published by University of Chicago Press, that a salient feature of Japanese spirituality is the “immanentization” of the transcendent. In other words, Japan’s ability to indigenize all forms of spirituality, such as Buddhist and Confucian spiritualities, into her own distinctive mode of immanence is truly exceptional from a comparative cultural perspective. However, I am wary about some of Eisenstadt’s broad generalizations. I do not believe that anyone can begin to grasp the subtlety and complexity of the Japanese mind without being seasoned in uniquely Japanese sensibilities and sensitivities—*kabuki*, *no*, *sumo*, the hot springs of Nikko, the vicinity of Fuji, and the Sakura season, just to mention a few.

In the last 160 or so years (in Japan, ever since the Meiji Restoration of 1868) because of the impact of the modern West, East Asian countries, Asian countries, indeed all non-Western countries, have changed

profoundly. When President Ikeda spoke about the East-West dialogue, what he had in mind was probably broader than the two sides of the Pacific Ocean. I think that it may not be far-fetched to interpret it as a dialogue between the West and the rest, including Islam. With a view toward the future, we must transcend the mentality of the West and the rest, indeed any limited and limiting forms of dichotomies or tripartite modes of thinking, such as the simplistic notion that the world is now being shaped by three major contenders of wealth and power: North America, the European Union, and East Asia.

In 1998, when the United Nations designated the year 2001 as the year of the dialogue among civilizations, Kofi Annan, through his personal representative, Gianni Picco, organized an international group to facilitate the dialogue. I was privileged to be a member of the so-called "Group of Eminent Persons." I proposed that there are two basic principles necessary for any meaningful dialogue to take place. The first can be characterized as the principle of reciprocity or considerateness, which states, "Do not do to others what you would not want others to do to you." The other principle can be referred to as the principle of humanity: "In order to establish myself, I help others to establish themselves; in order to enlarge myself, I help others to enlarge themselves." This principle in the Confucian *Analects* is in perfect accord with Immanuel Kant's dictum that we should treat the other as an end in itself rather as a means to an end. Hans Kung, also a member of the group, has been advocating the same principles in his pioneering efforts to formulate a code of universal ethics. A possible disagreement between us is whether or not the "golden rule" should be stated in the positive or in the negative. He may find the two compatible, even identical, but I feel that the Confucian (also the Jewish) formulation, unlike the Christian version, "Do unto others what you would like others to do unto you," is more congenial to inter-religious dialogue because it is premised on a spirit of reciprocity, with the critical self-awareness that what is considered by me self-evidently true is not necessarily accepted by my conversation partner. I should ask for his or her permission first before sharing the "good news."

Etymologically the Chinese character *ren* (仁) consists of the radical *ren* (人) and the symbol for two (二) which indicates that a human being is always in companionship. Understandably, the Berkeley Sinologist, Peter Boodberg thoughtfully rendered *ren* as "co-humanity." However, it is intriguing to note that in the newly discovered Guodian material, the character *ren* is invariably written with the word *shen* (身 body) on top of the word *xin* (心 heart-and-mind). This clearly shows that humanity

signifies not only sociality but also the physical and mental qualities that make up a living personality, indeed a unique individuality. Since the material is dated to the fourth century B.C. before the time of Mencius, this definition of humanity was probably widely shared by Confucius' immediate disciples. In the same spirit, the character *shu* (恕 reciprocity) consists of *ru* (如 like) on top of *xin* (心 heart-and-mind). It seems to suggest that the ability to understand someone else is in terms of your own heart-and-mind. This kind of analogical imagination is essential to the Confucian ethic. I would argue that it is also necessary for any authentic dialogue.

We are currently in a marvelous period of intercultural communication. The advent of a new Axial Age provides an occasion for fruitful East-West dialogues focusing on core values. Nowadays, major Enlightenment values are referred to as universal values, such as liberty (freedom), rationality (for example, thinking reasonably and rationally), due process of law (legality), rights consciousness (notably human rights), and the dignity of the individual. Yet, cardinal virtues in the Confucian tradition, such as humanity, rightness, civility, wisdom, and trust, are often characterized as Asian values. Actually, these are not only Asian values, but universal values rooted in the Asian experience. Take the example of humanity as sympathy, empathy, and compassion. It can very well be perceived of as a value complementary to rationality. Responsibility is, in practice, a necessary condition for rights. Legality is compatible with civility.

We should be critically aware that sometimes great values, values we cherish, values that we should internalize, are in tension, even in conflict. For example, liberty and equality or efficiency and solidarity are both highly desirable values, but they cannot be realized simultaneously. If freedom is a high priority in a market economy, the society can become unequal. If too much emphasis is placed on efficiency, social solidarity cannot be easily maintained. There is tension between rationality and sympathy, empathy, and compassion. If you prefer a cool-minded, calculated rationality, you may not have an empathetic understanding of the other. If you are overwhelmed by emotional identification with someone, you may lose the disinterested, impartial, and objective perspective.

We must also recognize that sometimes there is inevitable tension between legality and civility. In China, law (often understood as punishment) and ritual are considered in conflict. If you put too much emphasis on legal constraints, you inevitably undermine civility. If you stress the importance of politeness, considerateness, and harmony of human

relationships, you may relegate legality to the background. By implication, there is tension between rights, human rights, and responsibility or obligation. There is also tension between the dignity, independence, and autonomy of the individual and social solidarity or communal integration. However, there is no reason to doubt, as I have already alluded to, that seemingly contradictory values can be combined or, at least, there is the possibility of a fruitful interaction between them. We may even attain a higher level of integration if we work toward a dynamic equilibrium. Liberty and justice are both necessary. Arrangements can be made so as to reduce the tensions, and even to develop a virtuous circle between them.

Let me use an example in Japanese culture, an example, I am sure, thoroughly familiar to you. I am afraid I have yet to grasp the subtlety entailed, the so-called *giri-ninjo* (righteous principle and human feeling). In Japanese ethics, both righteous principle and human feeling are essential and it is imperative that we attain a dynamic equilibrium between them. Without righteous principle, social stability is impossible and without human feeling, social harmony cannot be sustained.

The conflict of values between East and West, at least the conflict in the interpretation of Eastern and Western values, compels us to recognize the importance of inter-civilizational dialogue. Tolerance is a minimum condition, but it is not enough. We must also recognize the existence of the other. Without the recognition that the other exists as an irreducible reality, it is difficult to cultivate an attitude of respect. I am told that the late French philosopher Derrida, who passed away last year, taught a seminar on forgiveness several times toward the end of his life. I suppose that his commitment to this particular virtue may have been rooted in his Jewish heritage. I would like to mention also that Levinas' insistence on care for the other as a precondition for authentic self-identity may also be a reflection of his Jewish experience in the contemporary world.

With tolerance, recognition, and respect, there is the possibility for the two dialogical partners to take the other as reference. I understand myself through you and you understand yourself through me. The other serves as a mirror for one's self-knowledge. With such mutual reference, we will be able to engage ourselves in mutual learning. Only then can we consider the otherness of our dialogical partner as a celebratory occasion, indeed a blessing for personal growth. It is in this sense that dialogue is not an opportunity for conversion. We should refrain from using it instrumentally as a chance to impose our will on the other. The principle of reciprocity demands that what we consider to be beneficial

to ourselves is not necessarily beneficial to the other. We should exercise utmost self-constraint in converting the other to our belief or faith. This is not to say that we should not share our cherished ideas and experiences. It is only a warning that in the actual practice of reciprocity we should try to understand the other empathetically as a precondition for any true dialogue.

The purpose of dialogue is not to convert, to influence, or to persuade. It is not to state the correctness of one's doctrine or to clarify one's position. Rather, it is to listen, to appreciate, and to learn. It is an opportunity for extending one's intellectual horizons and enhancing one's self-reflexivity. Of course, as two-way traffic, it will also help the other to be a better listener and learner. The principle of humanity—"In order to establish ourselves, we help others to establish themselves; in order to enlarge themselves, I help others to enlarge themselves"—is relevant here. Strictly speaking, humanity is not merely a form of altruism. It is, in essence, rooted in the depth of self-knowledge and self-understanding.

At this particular juncture of human history, dialogue as a way of life is the spirit of the times. The perceived danger of the clash of civilizations makes the dialogue among civilizations even more compelling. A defining characteristic of the emergence of the Second Axial Age is the dialogical mode of existence. Economic globalization indicates that standardization and homogenization in trade, finance, investment, and banking are taking place all over the world, giving the impression that the world is being compressed into a single market economy. However, paradoxically, cultural diversity is a salient feature of the human community. It is suggestive that Peter Berger and Samuel Huntington, in their edited study of cultural globalization, entitle their book *Many Globalizations: Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World*. Indeed, globalization enhances localization. All the primordial ties that define who we are as concrete living human beings are sites of contention in the globalizing world. It may not be far-fetched to note that one of the most powerful and explosive forces in the contemporary world is identity politics. Ethnicity, gender, language, age, place, class, and faith can also assert a shaping influence on the "global village."

Nevertheless, from an ecological point of view, the globalizing process enables us to understand that we are all fellow-travelers in the same lifeboat. We are inevitably intertwined in the same web of life. What we do in the privacy of our homes may have grave consequences for society, nation, and the world. We may not share the same fortune, but we are likely to suffer from the same natural or man-made catastro-

phes. All members of the human family, from the poorest to the richest, feel vulnerable. Even the strongest and wealthiest nation, with the most advanced national defense and technology, falls short of maintaining a general sense of security among its citizens. We wish that we could be interconnected by the same aspiration for human flourishing, but, in reality, we are often bound by a common fear of destruction. All the major religions are confronted by a new reality unprecedented in human history: the viability of the human species.

A distinctive feature of the Second Axial Age is the emergence of a new pattern of interaction among all world religions. It is inconceivable that, in our spiritual journeys, we will not encounter people who subscribe to different faiths and belong to different religious communities. Most likely we will also meet people who are secularists at heart and in practice. A Christian may have a Buddhist as a colleague, a Jew as a neighbor, a Muslim as a friend, and a Hindu as a partner. The convergence of seemingly incompatible spiritual paths and the confluence of seemingly divergent religious currents make the spiritual and religious landscape of the modern world rich and complex. It is difficult to imagine that members of a faith community do not have a chance of meeting members of other faith communities face-to-face. The former prime minister of the Netherlands, Ruud Lubbers, once told me that he grew up in a Catholic community. He could not remember ever meeting anyone who was not Catholic. The shocking experience of meeting a fellow student who was Protestant occurred only when he was already 17 years old. Nowadays, the likelihood of a faith community totally sealed off from the rest of the world is quite slim. People of different faiths must learn to live together. Either out of necessity or by default we must try to understand religions different from our own. Even for secularist leaders, it is vitally important to try to learn to be religiously musical. Failure to understand religion is a blind spot that conscientious leaders of the twenty-first century cannot afford to have.

I have already noted that globalization enhances localization in connection with identity politics. Since economic globalization threatens all primordial ties that are essential for our existence as concrete human beings, we respond to it by taking seriously who we are and how we should live our lives. As a result, for some of us, our sense of race, ethnic background, gender, place of birth, mother tongue, and religious affiliation has become greatly heightened. In the cultural sphere, the interplay between globalization and localization is so complex and so intense that an awkward English adjective “glocal” has been coined to capture this paradoxical phenomenon.

This may be the reason that pluralism is readily observable throughout the world. Ecologists have convincingly demonstrated that geodiversity and biodiversity are essential for sustaining the web of life that is prerequisite for human survival. Scholars in the humanities generally believe that cultural diversity is congenial to human flourishing. Linguists worry that linguistic diversity has been seriously undermined by Westernization, modernization, and globalization. Natural languages are being lost at an alarming rate. Several hundred languages disappear on a yearly basis. Some fear that eventually the human world will become monolingual, believing that in the foreseeable future, English will be the Esperanto of the world. Ironically, in America, scholars such as Samuel Huntington worry that English as a national language is being undermined by Spanish in California, Texas, Florida, and New Mexico. Even if we can imagine that English will triumph as the only international language in the future, it seems inevitable that English as a language will diversify. The scholarly journal, *World Englishes*, published by University of Illinois reminds me of Winston Churchill's statement that the United States and England are forever separated by the same language. Although American English and British English are not two distinct languages, they are significantly different. Indeed, there are many different kinds of English. Some of them are even mutually unintelligible.

In a pluralistic world, we should cultivate our cultural competence and ethical intelligence to tolerate, recognize, and respect difference. Clifford Geertz's idea of "radical otherness" is highly suggestive. Surely, it is difficult to imagine that confronting radical otherness is always a liberating experience, but the willingness to suspend judgment prematurely is necessary and desirable for learning to listen deeply in order to expand our sense of what is normal, reasonable, and appropriate. Habermas' theory of "communicative rationality" requires a great deal of practice to make it a method of human interaction and a virtue of human understanding. Globalization in trade, finance, tourism, migration, science, and technology is inevitably homogenizing. Since it also heightens self-consciousness in ethnicity, gender, language, place, class, age, and faith, it simultaneously enhances all primordial ties as sites of contention. The importance of religion and the prevalence of identity politics in the twenty-first century are clear evidence that, unlike the spatial concept of Westernization or the temporal concept of modernization, globalization collapses space and time in a sense that is unprecedented and unpredictable.

Since globalization paradoxically intensifies local awareness, no project will work if it fails to understand difference as potentially cele-

bratory. It is natural to fear difference. Often, difference is perceived as a challenge to the established order. Despite Geertz's wise counsel, radical otherness is threatening. Only through dialogue can we gradually transform the fear of the threatening presence of the other as a dangerous enemy into an upright, caring, and informative friend. The culture of peace is diametrically opposed to exclusivism. Any attempt to exclude those who are perceived to fail to meet the requirements of conformism is detrimental to the peaceful coexistence of diverse ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural groups. It inevitably leads to tension, conflict, confrontation, and violence. Abstract universalism does not work either. The strategy of inclusion that intends to incorporate differences into a holistic structure based upon a comprehensive vision of one particular vision, no matter how all-encompassing, is likely to lead to an unintended hegemonic control. Pluralism, rather than abstract universalism or closed particularism, is most congenial to human flourishing in the New Axial Age.

While we recognize pluralism, we are committed to the core values of humanity as authentic rather than relativistic, values worth pursuing as idealistic goals but also as practicable ends, for we believe that human beings are co-creators of the cosmic process, guardians of the evolutionary process, aesthetic appreciators of nature, and responsible agents of world peace. We look forward to the emergence of a dialogical civilization for human survival and flourishing, not merely as interested observers but also as active participants. As committed religious and spiritual persons, we endeavor to make our own faith communities healthy and wholesome. At the same time, we are critically aware of our roles as global citizens. We are concerned about the human condition not only as Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Sikhs, Jains, Daoists, Shintos, Maoris, Hopis, or Confucians, but also as evolving human beings.