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A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE ON A GLOBAL ETHIC AND HUMAN RIGHTS

There are two parts to this paper: (1) a response to Buddhist concerns about the notion of human rights; and (2) a discussion of the possibility of a global ethic from a Buddhist perspective. In these remarks I aspire to make a strong Buddhist case for the support of human rights and the articulation and endorsement of a global ethic in harmony with Buddhist principles.¹ I will take each of these points in turn.

First, human rights. Why address human rights in a volume devoted to the topic of "Buddhist Encounter with Other World Religions"? The connection is not difficult to make. It is well known that the notion of human rights originated in the West. Indeed, in the arena of international political relations, Western insistence upon the importance of human rights is often rejected by non-Western countries as an unwelcome imposition of Western values upon cultures or nations which embrace other, and contradictory, values. Moreover, the development of the notion of human rights in the West can clearly be traced through Western liberal political thought, through Protestantism and the Renaissance, and ultimately back to the Biblical concept of human being. Thus, the notion of human rights is closely linked to Judeo-Christian thought and values. There is no reason necessarily to expect that these values will be duplicated in, or compatible with, the values of other religions and cultures. Given the great difference between Buddhist and Judeo-Christian conceptions of human being, it might in particular be reasonable to expect Buddhist rejection of the notion of human rights.

Such an expectation is well founded. As is well known, a number of Buddhists and Buddhist scholars have commented negatively about

1. This paper was first presented at a conference on "The United Nations and the World's Religions: Prospects for a Global Ethic", October 7, 1994, Columbia University, New York, New York.

the very idea of human rights from the point of view of Buddhist concepts and values.² I sympathize very much with their concerns, though I think they can be satisfactorily addressed. What are those concerns? I think their object is well expressed in the following quotation. In 1956 William Ernest Hocking wrote, "free individuals, standing for their rights, are 'the best fruit of modernity'".³ Herein are two problems for a Buddhist.

1. The notion of the autonomous individual, conceived as an isolated and free-standing island, does not fit anywhere within the Buddhist worldview. To a Buddhist, Western emphasis upon the individual is (a) a focus upon something that does not and cannot ever exist; and (b) an active aggravation of the core problem with human beings, namely our self-centeredness and tendency toward egomania.

2. The notion of rights carries a larger contextual connotation of an adversarial stance: me vs. you, me vs. them, me vs. the state, me vs. the world! This is how the Western hero is imagined. Obviously, the first problem - excessive emphasis upon me - is replicated here, but beyond that, the adversarial stance itself is problematic. Given that for Buddhists the basic reality of life is our mutual interdependence, our pervasive interconnectedness, it is unnatural and unproductive in the extreme to draw lines between individuals and groups, pit one against another, and expect anything good, anything workable in the long run, to emerge.

These, in brief, are the problems. My response, again from a Buddhist perspective, is multiple, as follows. 1) Regarding the concern with individualism: human rights, as we discuss them today in the global arena, do not focus exclusively upon the individual. The

2. See, for example: Taitetsu Unno, "Personal Rights and Contemporary Buddhism" in Leroy S. Rouner, ed., *Human Rights and the World's Religions*, Boston University Studies in Philosophy and Religion, Volume 9 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); Santikaro Bhikkhu, "Buddhadasa Bhikkhu: Life and Society Through the Natural Eyes of Voidness" in Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, eds., *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation: Movements in Asia*, forthcoming from SUNY Press (Albany, NY).

3. William Ernest Hocking, *The Coming Civilization*; cited in Leroy S. Rouner, "Introduction", in Leroy S. Rouner, ed., *Human Rights and the World's Religions*, op. cit.

human rights agenda is as concerned with whole societies and with component groups within society as it is with individuals. Thus an excessive focus upon the human individual should not be attributed to this discourse. Insofar as Buddhists readily embrace the notion of a society composed of groups and of individuals, and of individuals and groups that make up a larger society, this acknowledgement should at least partially assuage concerns about Western individualistic atomism distorting and perverting our understanding of human society in this discourse.

2. Regarding the concern with the adversarial stance: it is true that the human rights agenda is, ineluctably, party to an adversarial stance; it is a matter of one group or individual against another group or individual. But let us look more closely. The human rights agenda is all about the protection of groups and individuals from more powerful groups and individuals. With its emphasis on compassion, from its beginnings to today, Buddhism does believe in its very foundation in active compassionate action to protect and help the poor and the weak. The *Metta Sutta* states, "Just as a mother would protect her only child even at the risk of her own life, even so let one cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings".⁴ If human rights is about protecting and aiding those in need, Buddhism can have no objection to this intention.

3. The Buddhist precepts, which we shall shortly discuss, have always enjoined a short list of responsibilities on Buddhists: not to kill or harm living beings, not to steal, not to lie, etc. These responsibilities towards others may well be seen as simply the other side of the coin of human rights. In short, my responsibility not to kill you is (or may be seen as) your right not to be killed by me. Buddhists have always understood their moral responsibilities towards others; this is the foundation of the Buddhist path. It is simply openness to a new way of the discussing the same that can permit Buddhists to embrace the idea of human rights.

4. Most Buddhist thought, of course, was composed in the ancient and medieval worlds. Most Buddhist countries are still, for

4. Translated by Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Revised edition (NYC Grove Press), p. 97.

better or worse, in the process of modernization. As Buddhist thought modernizes, the core concept of interconnectedness takes on added dimensions. In the thought of many contemporary Buddhist leaders, interconnectedness refers not only to the classical connections between, for example, the twelve links on the chain of conditioned genesis driving us from birth to death and on to countless future lives. Modern understandings of interconnectedness indicate a clear understanding that while, for most Buddhist teachers, the spiritual life with the goal of enlightenment remains the most important aspect of human life, this spiritual aspect of life cannot be separated from all the other aspects of life: economic, social, political, psychological, cultural, etc. Thus, Buddhists whose main concern remains the traditional goal of enlightenment are newly motivated to take with the utmost seriousness other aspects of human life that may directly impinge upon the fortunes of an individual's spiritual aspirations and efforts.

Thus, many contemporary Buddhist social activists (of whom I will say more later) recognize an implicit hierarchy of needs. Taking as their model the Buddha, who refused to lecture until a hungry man was fed, Buddhist social activists recognize in their actions a hierarchy of needs in which: (a) the protection and maintenance of life is most basic; (b) second come human physical necessities such as peace and reasonable security, an adequate material base to life, including food, shelter, etc.; (c) third come human psychological and social necessities such as education, the maintenance of dignity, a place in the community, etc.; and (d) finally is spiritual liberation. Spiritual liberation is most difficult to attain, and rests upon an essential base of social, economic, psychological and political requisites. No one attains enlightenment while war is raging all around. The Buddha himself gave up fasting, saying it was a hindrance in his effort to attain enlightenment. Thus Buddhists have a new-found investment in seeking particular human social, economic, and political goods which overlap considerably with the agenda pursued by human rights activists.

5. It is highly significant that those Buddhist leaders who have dealt most extensively with the international community (I am thinking of the Dalai Lama and the Vietnamese monk and activist Thich Nhat Hanh) show no hesitation whatsoever in speaking of human rights:

their speeches and writings frequently draw on this language. These men are spiritual leaders first, social-political leaders second. They clearly do not find "rights" language unusable. They have voted with their tongues and pens: Buddhists can find a way to work with the notion of human rights.

6. Finally, Buddhist social activists in the modern world are already working for human rights by the millions. Let me give you a very brief and necessarily incomplete survey. In India, many millions of ex-Hindu untouchables have converted en masse to Buddhism primarily as a social-political act to renounce the Hindu caste system and repudiate the larger social and political system that allows it to continue. The Buddhism they are constructing is, for the most part, a social way of life and a political challenge first, and a spirituality second. Buddhist organizations from both East and West are working to support these oppressed peoples in their effort to overcome that oppression and its psychological, economic, social and spiritual wounds. In Sri Lanka, Sarvodaya Sramadana has engaged vast numbers of monks and laypersons in work to develop villages throughout the island on a model conceived as an alternative to the Western capitalist model emphasizing industrialization. While they have been very successful in these efforts, they have been less successful in their efforts to mediate and reconcile the Tamil and Sinhala sides in that island's present bloody conflict, but they do persevere. In Thailand, the activist Sulak Sivaraksa has stimulated the development of countless non-government activist organizations and publications, and organized the International Network of Engaged Buddhists. Because of his speeches critical to the government, he is at this moment standing trial for treason. In Burma, in 1988, Buddhist monks and students filled the streets calling for democracy and an end to the repressive rule of the military. Their leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, motivated by a sense of duty to the people together with Buddhist principles, has spent years in house arrest rather than abandon the cause. In Tibet, of course, the Dalai Lama heads the Tibetan Liberation Movement with a tireless effort to gain the freedom of the Tibetan people in a nonviolent manner against seemingly hopeless odds. In Vietnam, during the war, Buddhist monks, nuns and laypeople filled the streets to gain the freedom to practise their Buddhist religion, ultimately bringing down the Diem regime. In subsequent years, as the war ground on, they undertook every

nonviolent act conceivable to bring the war to an end and protect the Vietnamese people. They and the Tibetans, for their efforts, filled the prisons, suffered torture and death. In Japan and elsewhere many millions have joined the Soka Gakkai, a lay Buddhist organization which strives through education, dialogue and cultural exchange to put an end to the constant threat of war, to build international and interreligious understanding, and protect the environment. In the West, not surprisingly, Buddhism has taken a distinctively social activist tenor, with Buddhists working on many fronts and through many organizations to work with AIDS patients, the homeless, the dying, to protect animals and the environment, etc. Finally, the picture would not be complete without mentioning the Buddhist nuns of East and West who have organized themselves to overcome millennia of institutional oppression from Buddhism itself and are actively supported in this by the more progressive wing of Buddhism scattered throughout the world.

With the exception of people working to protect animals and the environment, the actions of all these people fall within the purview of the human rights agenda. They are working for what we would call the freedom of religion, a politically open society, minimum economic justice, human equality, and the like. Millions upon millions of Buddhists have devoted themselves to these efforts, always non-violently, and often at the risk of their lives. Make no mistake: Buddhism has turned a historic corner. Buddhism in the modern world is a force with the proven ability to inspire millions to risk everything in nonviolent efforts to gain human rights.

I conclude this part of the paper by noting that I do not slight the concerns some Buddhist intellectuals have voiced about the concept of human rights. Even so, I am convinced that this kind of concern is simply dwarfed by the millions of Buddhists who are actively working for what the West calls the human rights agenda. There may need to be some adjustment of the term and its attendant concepts, but there is a mountain of Buddhist work, dedication of lives, and risking of lives, which is the more fundamental reality.

I now turn to the second part of this paper: a Buddhist conception of a global ethic.

There is at present in academic, ecumenical, and inter-religious dialogue circles an ongoing effort to find a "global ethic", i.e., a set of ethical principles which could be affirmed in common by all the world's religions. This effort began with a 1991 editorial written by two Western Catholic men, Hans Kung and Leonard Swidler, in which they called for "a global dialogue.... that will lead to the building of a consensus on a 'Global Ethos'."⁵ Their professed motivation for making this call was their revulsion at the spectacle of inter-religious violence in the modern world and their hope that the world's religions might contribute to ending this violence if they could join together to embrace a single ethical vision

Since 1991, each of these men has proffered his own proposal towards a global ethic and invited others to respond. Swidler's was addressed to both religious and non-religious groups and individuals, has circulated privately, and has been the subject of numerous meetings and conferences.⁶ Kung's was proposed at the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions, was embraced by that body as an "initial declaration towards a global ethic", and as such was signed by individual representatives to that body from many world religions.⁷ In my judgment, Kung's proffered version of the global ethic is much more compatible with Buddhist principles than Swidler's. I will occasionally refer to Kung's version in the remarks that follow.

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5. Hans Kung and Leonard Swidler., "Editorial: Toward a 'Universal Declaration of Global Ethos'", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 28:1 (Winter, 1991), 123-124.
 6. This version of the global ethic is available from: Dr. Leonard Swidler, Religion Department, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA 19122 USA.
 7. Itallics mine. See the pamphlet "Towards a Global Ethic (An Initial Declaration)", 1993 Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions, obtainable from the latter at P.O. Box 1630, Chicago, Illinois 60690 USA. Buddhist signatories include: Prof. Masao Abe, Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Preah Maha Ghosananda, Ajahn Phra Maha Surasak Jivanando, Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, Rev. Chung Ok Lee, Rev. Koshin Ogui Sensei, Luang Poh Panyananda, Ven. Achahn Dr. Chuen Phangcham, Ven. Dr. Havanpola Ratanasara, Ven. Seung Sahn, Ven. Samu Sunim, and Ven. Dr. Mapalagama Wipulasara Maha Thero. Non-Buddhist signatories were drawn from Muslim, Christian, Indigenous, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Jewish, Theosophist, Neo-Pagan, Native American, Baha'i, Jain, Brahma Kumaris, Interfaith, Taoist, Sikh, and Unitarian religious traditions. A fuller discussion of this version of the ethic is available in Hans Kung and Karl-Josef Kuschel, *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the Worlds' Religions* (New York: Continuum, 1993).

Hans Kung and Karl-Josef Kuschel describe a global ethic as representing "the minimum of what the religions of the world already have in common now in the ethical sphere".⁸ The key word here is "minimum." This project does not seek an exhaustive ethic, but a very minimal statement which will articulate both what the religions have in common and the minimum moral decency required to make our world livable. Insofar as both Kung's and Swidler's proposals for a global ethic were written by Catholics, it seems to me necessary that proposals be written from other, non-Christian, perspectives. Accordingly, I will here attempt to articulate a possible Buddhist proposal for a global ethic, beginning from foundational Buddhist affirmations. Given the diversity among Buddhists, it is certain that very different Buddhist proposals for a global ethic might be written. This is no more than a Buddhist proposal.

The best way to proceed toward a Buddhist articulation of a global ethic is to look to the five lay precepts of Buddhism. These five precepts, taught by the Buddha, form the Buddhist ethical minimum, the minimum standards by which all Buddhists are supposed to live. They have been broadly taught in the Buddhist world from the time of the Buddha until today. Thus they are the most appropriate place to look for Buddhist proposals for minimum ethical standards for a global ethic. These five are simply put, as follows: 1) undertake the precept (1) to abstain from the taking of life; (2) not to take that which is not given; (3) to abstain from misconduct in sensual actions; (4) to abstain from false speech; (5) to abstain from liquor that causes intoxication and indolence.⁹ In other words, no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no lying, no taking of intoxicants.

For present purposes I will say no more about precept 5, abstention from intoxicants. Unless extremely broadly interpreted, it must be seen as a matter for individual conscience without direct bearing on a global ethic. The remaining four precepts have direct and important bearing on our topic. Indeed, they have been discussed for their implications for social ethics by such Buddhist social activists

8. Kung and Kuschel, p.8.

9. Hammalawa Saddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethics: The Path to Nirvana*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1970. Reprint edition London: Wisdom Publication, 1987, p. 73.

as Thich Nhat Hanh and Sulak Sivaraksa, on whose work I draw.¹⁰ I will structure the remainder of this essay around the principles of a Buddhist proposal for a global ethic that the precepts seem to suggest.

The Principles of a Buddhist Proposal for a Global Ethic

1. *Nonviolence to humans and the biosphere.*¹¹ The first Buddhist precept urges us to avoid all violent behavior and actions harmful to sentient beings and, more broadly, to all living things and to life itself. Here I must say a few words on the application of this principle in the human and non-human worlds. Buddhism, classically, sees humans as one category of the larger class "sentient beings", i.e., beings with awareness. Thus, on the one hand, Buddhist non-violence or non-harmfulness appertains to sentient animals as well as human beings.

On the other hand, Buddhists have simultaneously always perceived human beings as belonging to a special class insofar as only humans are in any position to take hold of their destiny, examine their condition and alter themselves in such a way as to free themselves of ignorance. In short, only humans can practice Buddhism and attain enlightenment. Thus to be born human is a precious and rare opportunity. Many later forms of Buddhism developed this notion further and, upon carefully considering the issue, concluded that every human without a single exception has the capacity to attain Buddhahood and indeed is an incipient Buddha-in-the-making right now. From a moral perspective, one can draw from these notions, if one wishes, the following corollaries: (1) every human, as an incipient Buddha,

10. See Sulak Sivaraksa, "Buddhism and the Socio-Political Setting for the future Benefit of Mankind", Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development Occasional papers 3. (Bangkok, Thailand: Santi Pracha Dhamma Institute, undated); and Thich Nhat Hanh, *For a Future to be Possible: Commentaries on the Five Wonderful Precepts* (Berkeley, Ca: Parallax Press, 1993). For their efforts in working for human rights, Thich Nhat Hanh is in exile from Vietnam (the Vietnamese government refuses to grant him a return visa) and Sulak Sivaraksa is at present standing trial for treason.

11. This may be compared to the first "irrevocable directive" of the global ethic proposed by Kung and Kuschel and endorsed by the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions, viz.: "Commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life". Kung and Kuschel, p. 24.

possesses inherent and immeasurable value; and thus (2) every human should be protected and treated in such a way that incipient Buddhahood may be nurtured. Thus, from this perspective, the human focus of the human rights agenda is highly appropriate.

At the same time, however, we recall that Buddhists feel that the principle of nonharmfulness to humans cannot be separated from a principle of nonharmfulness to animals and indeed from a general attitude of nonharmfulness, based on respect and appreciation, for all life forms and for life itself. Out of this kind of concern, protection of the environment has emerged as a prominent component of Buddhist social activism in such groups and individuals as the Dalai Lama in Tibet, Sulak Sivaraksa in Thailand, Sarvodaya Sramadana in Sri Lanka, the Soka Gakkai in Japan and elsewhere, and Thich Nhat Hanh, now in the West.

Thus, I think Buddhists will be happy to have it both ways. In the context of the human rights agenda, Buddhists do have long-standing and important reasons for regarding humans as especially important. But in the context of a global ethic, I believe that Buddhists would need to see the principle of nonviolence apply not only to humans but also to the planet which sustains all the life we know. I believe Buddhists would not push their principle of nonviolence toward non-human animals in the context of a global ethic; they have long lived in peace with the knowledge that theirs is a minority view on this subject. However, the protection of the matrix of life itself, the planet, the biosphere is much too crucial to waive. Hence, a minimum ethical standard for Buddhist would be non-violence to humans and the biosphere. An ethic that proposed less might be difficult for Buddhists to embrace.

2. *Economic justice*.¹² The second Buddhist precept prohibits stealing. Originally, of course, this was a personal ethic – "I will not steal". But in modern times, contemporary Buddhist activists have expanded the meaning of this precept in such a way that it speaks against the stealing that one group or society may practice

12. Compare to the second "irrevocable directive" proposed by Kung and Kuschel and endorsed by the World Parliament, viz.: "Commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order". Kung and Kuschel, p. 26.

against another. For example, Thich Nhat Hanh rewords this precept to read, in part,

Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I vow to cultivate loving kindness and learn ways to work for the well-being of people, animals, plants, and minerals . . . I will respect the property of others, but I will prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.¹³

Traditionally, individual stealing was censured because of the knowledge that it causes suffering. It takes only the perspective of modernity to enlarge this traditional understanding to a modern understanding that the stealing which a powerful group or society practices against a less powerful group or society similarly causes massive suffering and thus is antithetical to the most basic Buddhist principles.

Some rough equity in sharing the world's resources is a necessity from a Buddhist perspective, for the following reasons: (1) People must have enough. With vast inequities, some simply do not have enough and they suffer greatly. Buddhism is not asceticism; Buddhism is the Middle Path between luxury and need; all people must have enough for health and well-being and in order to support efforts to fulfill higher need. (2) Vast inequity fuels resentment, anger and, ultimately, violence. In order to prevent violence, people must have enough and there must be rough equity.

Some might raise the question of whether economic justice is truly a "minimalist" ethic and thus has a place in a global ethic which attempts to articulate the ethical minimum upon which all religions could agree.¹⁴ I would argue that economic justice is, indeed, a minimalist ethic, and that it emerges out of a minimalist sense of justice. Everyone feels immediately that it is not right for some to feast while many starve; we all know that this is not right. Traditionally, most societies had unwritten laws of

13. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Future*, p. 20.

14. Sissela Bok raised this issue in her presentation to the October 7, 1994 conference on "The United Nations and the World's Religions: Prospects for a Global Ethic".

hospitality; even now, no one eats without offering food to others who happen to be present. The difference between our world and traditional societies in this regard is that with modern communications, we are all present in each other's homes. We all sit down to one big meal; only some of us have food on our plates and others of us do not. Economic justice-for all to have enough food-is a minimalist ethic and it belongs in a global ethic.

3. *Human rights and human equality.*¹⁵ I have discussed human rights above. That entire discussion should be inserted (but will not be repeated) here. Human rights are a major and an essential component of a Buddhist proposed global ethic.

A few more words may be said on human equality. I indicated above that in the Buddhist view all humans are equal insofar as all have the ability to become Buddha. Views, entertained for a while, that perhaps some had Buddha potential and some did not die out. Buddhism is committed in principle to human equality. Moreover, Buddhists today are struggling to win human equality in practice, from the ex-Hindu untouchables who have converted to Buddhism precisely because of the promise of equality, to Buddhist nuns and laywomen working for an end to institutional sexism within Buddhism.

An extra word needs to be said regarding equality of the sexes. The third Buddhist precept calls for responsible sexual behaviour. Contemporary Buddhist activists have again expanded this personal ethic to include injunctions to eliminate the social institutions that trap women in second class status and permit inhumane treatment of women.¹⁶ Buddhist institutions themselves have had severe failings in their treatment of women. However, Buddhism also has resources for healing itself in this regard. The Buddha made it clear that women are as spiritually capable as men. He established the nuns' and the laywomen's orders in order to give them support in the development of their potential and worked into the rules of the

15. This is comparable in part to the fourth "irrevocable directive" in the global ethic proposed by Kung and KuscheI and endorsed by the World Parliament, viz.: "Commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women". Kung and KuscheI, p. 32.

16. See Sulak Sivaraksa, "Buddhism and the Socio-Political Setting", pp. 5-6.

nuns' order various protections from potential demands on them by the monks (such as forbidding them to sew for the monks). Throughout Buddhist history, Buddhist nunneries have often been the only places of refuge for women attempting to escape miserable conditions in the secular world. I believe that Buddhism, with all its shortcomings in this regard, stands strongly behind the protection of women, the respect of women as men's spiritual equals, and the support of women's potential through nurturant social and economic conditions. Thus an important component of human equality in a global ethic, for a Buddhist, must be strong support for the equality of men and women. This will be a challenge for Buddhists, as well as others, to realize in practice.

4. *Truth and the free flow of information.*¹⁷ The fourth Buddhist precept calls for truthful language. Amplifying this, the "Right Speech" component of the Buddhist Noble Path has always been understood to call for language that is constructive, healing and conducive to social harmony.

First and foremost among the implications of this precept for a global ethic is freedom of religion. From a Buddhist point of view, it is imperative that one be able freely to draw on the available information about religion(s) and freely to contribute to that body of information by the free expression of one's religious affirmations. Such a free exchange is natural to Buddhism; Buddhism was born and developed in a society in which many religions and philosophies freely and publicly debated among themselves. In the modern world Buddhists have died and continue to die today in the effort to secure the freedom to practise their religion; others suffer imprisonment or exile for this same freedom.

Second, Buddhism has always proclaimed the importance of truthful speech. If governments and other powerful groups and individuals cannot always be relied upon to speak freely and truthfully about themselves, then freedom of the press becomes crucial - a press devoted to the publication of the truth. And in order for freedom

17. Compare to the third "irrevocable directive" proposed by Kung and Kuschel and endorsed by the World Parliament, viz.: "Commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness." Kung and Kuschel, p. 29.

of the press to function effectively, other freedoms become necessary, viz., free access to information, freedom of movement, freedom of assembly, free speech. Indeed, truth and the free flow of information are two sides of the same coin. One's access to truth and reality should not be artificially blocked. In the long run, the peace and harmony of society depends upon truthful relationships, based upon accurate knowledge, among society's members.

Conclusion

In my view, Buddhists support human rights and will support the attempt to formulate a global ethic of the world's religions. Why?

While some object to the "human" focus of "human rights" discourse, it is necessary from a Buddhist perspective to speak extensively of humans because of human agency – humans intentionally do things to each other, to other life forms and to the planet. All the principles of my suggested Buddhist proposal for a global ethic amount to no more than the protection by humans of the weak and of those lacking in agency from the predations of powerful humans, in order to prevent suffering. The five precepts of Buddhism ask Buddhists to place limitations on themselves in order to prevent suffering. Is it possible for the human community to embrace a global ethic to the same end? I believe Buddhists would happily welcome a global ethic in which the human community pledged self-restraint in order to prevent suffering. Indeed, it seems an extension of Buddhism itself to seek and embrace such a global ethic.

In this light, I am aware that the ethic I have proffered as a Buddhist proposal for a global ethic is similar to the global ethic proposed by Hans Kung and Karl-Josef Kuschel, especially with respect to the four principles we each have chosen to emphasize. I note that a number of the most distinguished and beloved leaders of the Buddhist world have signed that declaration: His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet, Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne of Sri Lanka, and Preah Maha Ghosananda of Cambodia.

I believe that Buddhists will see an appropriately worded global ethic as an *upaya*, a skillful means. It has the potential to teach humankind some of their commonality and thus to partially undercut our human enmity towards those who are not "me" and "mine". If in this way it helps to any degree to reduce suffering, then it will fulfill the single most basic purpose of Buddhism. As such, it will be natural to Buddhists to support it.