



BRAHMA KUMARIS WORLD SPIRITUAL UNIVERSITY

Statement for the

58th Annual DPI/NGO Conference

Our Challenge: Voices for Peace, Partnership and Renewal

United Nations, New York

7th to 9th September 2005

Each period of history has its own distinguishing features. And yet those that mark the present era must surely rank among the most remarkable and extreme. On the one hand humanity is garlanded with a cornucopia of achievements, prosperity and potential while on the other the face of our human family is deeply scarred by deprivation, injustice, violence and suffering. Common to both of these contrasting scenarios is change; in the one situation the process of rapid growth, discovery, invention and development; in the other, the dire need for a radical transformation just to meet basic living requirements, let alone a life of comfort. Change, and the desire to bring it about in one form or another, is everywhere. In some cases, the old is crumbling and falling away unaided, as though knowing it had reached its own expiry date, or unable to resist the allure of the new. In others, long entrenched patterns are stubbornly resisting the call to yield space to more humane, caring and equitable ways. The need for a change in how humanity organises itself, interacts and behaves is apparent and the desired outcome of our efforts to bring about such positive change is clearly described in countless declarations, charters and plans. The issue thus is not what we are trying to achieve so much as what means will enable us to realise these goals: *what* needs to be changed and *how* may such change be brought about. It is by this that we are challenged.

Much good work has been done in recent years to expose injustices, shortcomings and abuses. Meanwhile, the perpetual and instantaneous traffic of the information society, and the reach of technology, bring a new depth of meaning to the idea that “No one is an island”. Thus the facts, images and stories brought to our homes and desks by dedicated researchers and reporters have helped not only prove the need for action but also been a powerful seed for it. Inspiring documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and clear statements of priority areas such as the Millennium Development Goals are based not just on a vision of how things could be but also on the awareness that there is much that is wrong and undesirable in our world.

But it is not enough for us just to be aware of the need for action and to express a desire or promise to change or take action. The focus of our attention must not remain only in the outer world, whether concerning what we want or what we want to be free from; it must also embrace the underlying foundation, the causes, of both good and bad symptoms. We may find this seed of all that happens in our outer world by looking at the inner world of our values, attitudes and ways of thinking. And if we are truly to bring about a shift in the outer world, it follows that there must first be a corresponding shift in our inner world. We need a fresh understanding and awareness that can bring newness, make a difference and help us translate intention into action, ideas into behaviour, words into deeds and promises into practice.

Renewing our Thinking – a Spiritual Perspective

The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University is convinced that the fresh perspective that must be brought to our world view is a spiritual one. We need to move from an overly materialistic approach to one that includes the broader and deeper realities of human life and experience and is grounded in the innate spirituality that is the essence of what it means to be a human being. Spirituality lends itself to a holistic perspective that includes both spirit and matter. It offers us not only a deeper understanding of ourselves but also methodologies to bring such understanding into our experience and awareness and the inner strength to express it in action. The understanding, experience and awareness of our inner being, and the innate positive qualities of the soul, are major stepping stones on the journey of developing the self and laying the foundations of the kind of world society we want.

Such personal change is crucial, as we will not be able to get the outer world in order until we have first learned to get our inner world in order and refresh diluted or wilted values. We must draw on spirituality and a reinvigorated sense of our own integrity to bridge the gap between stated aims and other interests. We will not see the changes we look for in the world around us until we first bring about those changes in ourselves and exemplify the qualities and ways of living that we call for. This surely is a task for each and every one of us.

It is the spirit that is the basis of the worth and dignity of the individual, and spirituality that gives the capacity to recognize and support the worth and dignity of others. The awareness that spirituality constitutes the essence of every human being also brings the recognition that, sharing a common identity, we are truly fellow members of one human family. Such recognition is a further critical factor in strengthening the resolve needed to put intention into practice: Interconnected and interdependent, we share the one home of this planet and also a common future. Cooperation is facilitated when there is the value of solidarity based on the understanding that the world's people are but one family of many sisters and brothers, each of whom should be treated as such.

Over the years, the United Nations, governments, civil society and individuals have created countless worthy plans of actions and intended solutions to world issues, increasingly placing them within binding documents and quantifiable frameworks. However experience shows that, no matter how well-intentioned, a technical or political approach to development cannot alone bring about the desired outcome. Development needs the power of individual commitment, collective or national political will and, most importantly, political action. We must continue to make clear, specific, time-bound action plans, and commit to them, but we must remember that in order for them to be realised each of us must support them with spiritual understanding, awareness and practice.

Likewise, if Governments and the United Nations are to undertake genuine reform, they should include the missing link of moral and spiritual standards and principles and an integrated and holistic view of life in envisioning relationships and structures that involve all concerned and will best enable provision for everyone's security and development.

Freedom from Want

The world largely considers poverty as a condition of material poverty and sickness as physical sickness. It is time to recognize the prevalence and effects of spiritual poverty, spiritual illness and spiritual deprivation, among both the materially poor and the materially rich. Health is not only a physical condition but one that also involves mental, emotional and spiritual well-being, and account must be taken of mental, emotional and spiritual concerns when considering infectious disease and hunger. Longer-term, spiritual poverty must be addressed through education, while a first step in integrating the physical and the spiritual

would be to recognize that action regarding physical want, hunger and sickness should be linked with the provision of spiritual nourishment and support.

Steps to ensure environmental sustainability must also transcend its immediate physical aspects and be concerned with the extent to which our relationship with the world around us is affected by the values that communities share and live by. Material poverty and environmental crises are closely connected with poverty of the spirit and values. A lasting solution to physical wants is dependent on resolving the poverty of values and spiritual deficit that is increasingly undermining societies and their habitats around the world. For their part, the international institutions working to alleviate poverty and want must, by their own example, set standards of values such as justice, respect, transparency, honesty, cooperation, gender equality, inclusion and sharing if these are to become part of the daily life of their intended beneficiaries.

Freedom from Fear

As the pace and pressure of change has picked up, new dimensions have been brought to the relationships amongst people and between people and their environment. While nothing is truly constant, and few things can be taken for granted, insecurity and fear, paranoia and suspicion, stalk the world as never before. Faced with the very real issues of not just international war but also terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, State collapse, organized crime, civil conflict, poverty, disease and environmental destruction, achieving a sense of security may seem elusive, or even illusory. Yet perhaps we can be inspired by the notion that “there is nothing to fear but fear itself” and therefore that our search for security is as much about disarming ourselves of fear as it is countering the threats we see outside.

A spiritual response to fear inspires us to combine action at the outer level with the recognition that the experience of fear arises from within – that it is our perception and interpretation of the outside world that engenders insecurity, fear and mistrust. Just as our hearts and minds can create and harbour fear and insecurity, they are also the fertile land in which we can plant and sustain thoughts of peace, hope and strength. Spirituality reminds us that it is peace, non-violence, love, self-mastery and courage that are inherent to the soul and the foundation of building personal security. In order to bring about peace in our families and communities, we must each begin with ourselves and ensure that our own actions do not contribute to insecurity, or give rise to fear within ourselves, remembering also that we have the capacity to give comfort and solace to others as well as to fear.

Likewise, in looking at the external threats to our well-being, we must address their root causes and so we should not forget that global conflicts and wars originate from individual decisions and actions. So also, an irresponsible and exploitative relationship with nature will only prompt into action nature’s own self-correcting mechanisms and disruptive forces. Injustices, oppression and abuse fuel fires of violence and cycles of hatred and revenge, and these can only be ended through individual and collective efforts that incorporate a spiritual approach in restoration, forgiveness, peace-building and reconciliation. Education for a culture of values in all aspects of our behaviour and relationships is thus of critical importance.

Freedom to Live in Dignity

Freedom is a concept that takes many guises but surely the greatest of these is freedom of spirit and freedom from one’s own shortcomings and limitations. Indeed, there are many examples of people living lives of dignity in the midst of deprivations while others, who have much, dishonour themselves. In a world of words and things, we must remember that worth and dignity are not something conferred by declaration or material possessions. A life of real dignity finds its origins in the awareness of the worth of the self, of the meaning and purpose of life and the sacredness of the soul. The capacity to recognize the fundamental rights and fundamental freedoms of others largely depends on an individual first truly respecting and appreciating himself or herself. This is the first step and it does not mean an egotistical mind-set or an obsession with the

self but rather the realization that in each human being resides a human soul, that sacred light that is the source of our worth and repository of our values. It is hard to recognize this in others, and recognize and support their dignity, rights and responsibility, without first developing such an awareness in the self. Freedom and responsibility go hand in hand and we must each fulfil our responsibilities in order to win our freedom. Similarly, as a world society, we must include in our education systems content and pedagogy to support development of the larger principles and values that underpin the rule of law, the democratic participation of people in affairs and decisions that concern them and the notion of governance as a form of service.

Time for Change

Awareness of the awful circumstances that blight the lives of so many people has led to inspiring statements of intent and plans of action and we stand at the threshold of achieving a long-cherished dream of peace and well-being in a world of plenty. But if this is to become a reality, it is more than just incremental or external change that is required. For at the root of all that keeps us from achieving stated aims lie entrenched ways of thinking and so we must include the inner world of our thoughts, attitudes and values in that which we wish to see changed. The need to incorporate a more spiritual and moral perspective in our thinking and behaving is more evident than ever. Can this highest common denominator that links all humanity not be the basis of a revitalized consensus with which to usher in a new chapter in effective multilateralism? The United Nations must be in the forefront of such a global partnership for holistic and far-reaching change in which the material, political, legal, cultural, moral and spiritual must be blended and balanced. Politicians and diplomats can take the lead in educating themselves in ways of peace, self-respect and non-violence while measures of human welfare and progress must be extended to embrace a culture of values, spirituality and non-violence as legitimate standards for nations to seek to achieve.

It is clear that there will be no lasting positive change in the state of human affairs without there first being such a change in human hearts. It is time for each of us to speak with our actions and self-change instead of just words. The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University envisions a society of peace, dignity, joy and fulfilment for all people. In cooperation with the United Nations, Member States, civil society actors, the private sector and individuals, the University will keep working to help realise this vision through its continuing commitment to offering an education in spirituality and the development of values within the self and our institutions, systems and societies.

Contributions to this statement were made by Leticia Shahani, Former Senator, Philippines.

Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University

The BKWSU is a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and in consultative status with UNICEF. The University was founded in India in 1937 and has some 7,000 branches in 90 countries worldwide.

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