
The Whole World is a Single Flower Conference 1990

It Will Be Hard to Breathe

Keynote Speech in Seoul, Korea

George Bowman, Ji Do Poep Sa Nim



There is an expression in Zen practice, “you can never put your foot in the stream in the same place twice.” We think we can; we sometimes have the illusion that this world is solid and unchanging, or that our lives are something substantial and static. We look into people’s eyes and they sometimes look back with an expression that seems to say they will live forever. But it isn’t

the case. Change is so easy to talk about; there is a way in which the word “impermanence” can roll off our lips, like a drop of dew from a flower petal. It’s another matter to realize it in this moment and to appreciate it in our lives: There is nothing that we can hold.

The whole world is continually changing and moving. Is our understanding of this change superficial and a mask for fear and denial, or is it deep and clear, a wellspring of appreciation for the vividness and fragility of the stream of this moment? We cannot help but be grateful for the path of how to go through life that our practice offers. With care and understanding we can live more harmoniously in constant change, and help direct this movement.

If we look to what the world might be like in the year 2000, look at the changes that are taking place in the environment, it’s quite a remarkable thing. A number of terribly important things are happening that cry out for our attention. Perhaps most important is that there is less air to breathe on this planet; this wonderful air that we so easily breathe in and breathe out is becoming less and less nourishing. Since the industrial revolution, there is 25% more carbon dioxide in the air. On a very simple level what that means is that it’s harder for all of us to breathe. And when I say all of us breathing it means not only humans but the “maha sangha” of all beings, including trees, grasses, snakes and stones.

By the year 2000 it will be even harder to breathe. Sometimes when I run retreats I try and bring this simple fact home. When the retreat becomes alive, still and clear, we simply hold our breath for forty seconds. You may want to try that this evening if you want to see what it is that’s happening to our environment.

With more carbon dioxide in the air not only will it be harder to breathe, it will also be hotter. It will be sticky and we’ll sweat more. With the heat, a lot of changes will take place. We don’t know exactly what they’ll be. We never

know exactly what it is that will happen or where we’ll find ourselves. But we do know that it will be hot and harder to breathe and that our environment is in terrible trouble.

We also know that the population is growing at a tremendous rate. There will be millions more people on the face of the earth in the year 2000. It will be a crowded place; it will be a hot place; and it will be a difficult place to breathe.

Our forests are now being cut down ten times faster than they are being replenished. The forests are the lungs of the planet — do you know anyone without lungs?

We know all this. The reason for this conference, the reason we’ve gathered together from all over the world is to address this issue: to sit with it, really be with it and perceive what it is we can do in our lives, to demonstrate our appreciation for this life that we all share together.

If we take some quiet time and return to the spaciousness before thought, then it is completely clear that we are of one body and that this earth is our home. One body — one single flower. Experiencing and appreciating that it is one life — really seeing it, not just paying lip service to it — then we are called to some kind of action. We have no choice. Just in the same way that a mother who sees her child running out into the street would have no choice but to run and snatch her from the oncoming car. When we look deeply into our nature and really attend, without evaluation or judgement, we see something very clearly. What we see is a world that is completely interconnected. The Avatamsaka Sutra describes it quite beautifully: it’s called “Indra’s Net.” It describes a world in which each moment of existence is likened to a tiny jewel in a net. Hundreds, thousands, millions, an infinite number of tiny jewels that each reflect each other perfectly, one in all and all in one.

So we live in a world that is changing quickly and in a great deal of trouble, and we find that we are completely interconnected — that each thought that we think and everything that we feel has in some small way a ripple effect. It is our job as human beings for each one of us to take responsibility, to find some way in which we can make a difference. Maybe it’s just a matter of conserving water. Maybe it’s not turning on the air conditioner on a hot and uncomfortable day. Maybe, if you have the skills or are in government, you go forward fearlessly to tackle these problems. There are ways in which each one of us can make a difference, can affect the other jewels in the net.

When we were at Su Dok Sah Temple, I went for a walk in the woods and the mountains. I was listening to the birds and

watching the squirrels play, and noticed that a squirrel running across a branch stopped for a moment and looked at us. I don't suppose that the squirrel ever for a moment wondered what it means to be a squirrel, or how he or she might be a better squirrel. She manifested as the perfect squirrel, without thinking. Just a complete squirrel. Somehow we human beings aren't quite as confident about what our job is or what it means to be a human being. We seem to get quite confused. We get lost in our desires, in our anger, in our delusion — looking away from the way things are and getting confused. But our work in this practice is to stop and reflect and look deeply within ourselves; to be silent and attentive and see that in fact we are one body. In realizing this, we can go forward and manifest it in whatever manner we choose.

It is my deepest hope that each one of us can realize that we cannot put our feet in the same place twice. May our realization allow us to live sanely, breathe deeply in gratitude, and fulfill our Bodhisattva vows: Sentient beings are numberless, we vow to be of service, to appreciate, care for and nourish this boundless life that flows through us. Thank you. □

What is World Peace?

Comments from participants at the Whole World conference

Robert Genthner, *Ji Do Poep Sa Nim*, turned into a roving journalist during the "Whole World Is A Single Flower" conference in Korea. He interviewed a number of people from around the globe on world peace.



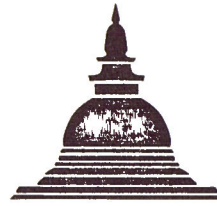
Won Shim Sunim
Sister Paola Kim

Sister Paola Kim, a Korean Christian nun:

RG: Why did you come to this conference?

Sr. Kim: I'm very interested in programs where people are not for themselves. It's interesting for me to hear people who care about the community of the world and not just themselves. This conference is to help people get out of their ego-centered lives. Most people make boundaries for themselves; they make religions. God did not make religion; man did. So I am interested in things God made, not artificially set up by man. This conference seems to be dealing with this.

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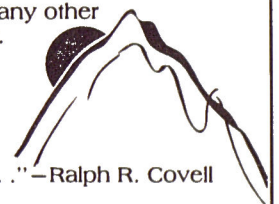
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