

Tapping the Potential for Wisdom in Humankind

Dharma Realm Buddhist University Conference Transcript

Youth-in-Trouble in the World

Dharma Master Heng Chau

Some disturbing trends have been developing in the last several decades among young people. The surveys and statistics paint a bleak picture of widespread discontent, rootlessness, alienation, and a crippling hopelessness which manifests as despair and depression. Drug, alcohol and other "substance abuse" is rampant. Promiscuity has become the norm and opened a Pandora's Box of problems: teenage pregnancies which either end in abortion, or which lead to unwanted and uncared for babies, which in turn leads to child abuse. Each year over one million teens become pregnant—one fourth of them under fifteen years old. There are over six times as many illegitimate children born now than twenty years ago and child abuse has risen nearly 400 percent since 1973. Over 2,500,000 young people are infected each year with sexually transmitted diseases. There is understandably great fear that if this highly susceptible population were to become infected with AIDS, we would witness the greatest tragedy in history.

Even more disturbing is the emergence of a "death-wish" among youth. Violence, both self-directed and directed at others, has soared in the last twenty years. In a brief ten-year period the average age for murderers has gone down from thirty-one to twenty-one years old. The youngest murderer now on record is three. Murder is the fastest-growing cause of death in the United States. About 9,400 people die from gunshot wounds each year in the U.S.

The largest increase in deaths resulting from homicide occurred in the age group of children one to four years old. Over 5,000 young Americans were murdered in 1973; over 4,000 committed suicide, and another 3,000 died in traffic deaths which most observers point out is a form of suicide. (The statistics on violence were compiled by the U.S. Department of Justice and cover the 1970's. They represent a nineteen percent increase of violent deaths since 1960-61. The most recent statistics show the figure is steadily increasing.) Suicide is now the second leading cause of death for the age group fifteen to twenty-four. It has tripled in the last thirty years. One quarter of young men and nearly half of young women seriously contemplate suicide. Ten to twenty percent actually try it. Seventy-seven percent have been in fights each year; sixty-one percent have met some form of violence. Schools have seen a forty percent increase in crime, and pressure is being directed on the nation's Courts to eliminate the protection of minors clauses. This would allow the bench to try young people as adults. The initiative reflects the growing frustration of authorities to stem the out-of-control rise of felonies among young people--crimes such as armed robbery, drug trafficking, sexual assault, manslaughter and child abuse. Unintentional injury on the other hand, now ranks, as the leading cause of death for those between 15 to 25. But "unintentional" does not

necessarily mean unintended, because most of these "accidental" deaths result from flirting with death and living dangerously--in other words not cherishing life and not caring whether one lives or dies. This is the "death-wish".

The title of my talk is "Youth-In-Trouble in the World", but it might be better titled "The Troubled World In Youth," because it is not the world's youth who are in trouble so much as it is a very troubled world that is infecting youth.

Children by nature are good. They are naturally pure, innocent, and wholesome. But this innate disposition is fragile and easily bent. If not protected and nurtured it drifts and flows like water without a container. Children are impressionable; they learn by imitation. They absorb and internalize what they see around them. In large measure children become what they behold. In this way they act as mirrors--they mirror their family, their society, their world. They reflect the true state of society and what everything and everyone in that society has taught them to be. If youth are in trouble it is not because they are abnormal, that is to say children do not depart from the prevailing norm, rather they embody the norm. And that is what is most alarming. Children more and more enter life,

"...a stranger and afraid in a world I never made."

And a world they have little reason to believe will be here tomorrow.

Recently a writer and observer from China described a spiritual crisis occurring among the youth on the mainland--a crisis remarkably similar to that of American youth. He attributed the malaise of the young Chinese to the lack of political participation and economic scarcity they experience. As the government grants more political freedom and raises the standard of living so young people can have televisions, stereos, cars, cycles and fashionable clothes, he argued, the problem with youth would disappear.

The question was then raised: young people in the Western affluent countries enjoy the highest standard of living and greatest political freedom ever known to man, yet they are still messed up and as alienated as their Chinese counterparts who are politically disenfranchised and economically backward.

The speaker saw the contradiction and had no answer. His analysis did not hold water. He, in fact, admitted upon reflection that that overall spirit and disposition of the Chinese people, especially the youth, was better and healthier in traditional Chinese society than today, even though the economic and political conditions were worse then. It would seem the youth of the largest capitalist and largest communist countries of the world have something deeply in common--a shared state of ill-being that transcends politics and economics. The split and the difference between the "free-world" and Communist countries that have traditionally occupied our attention are less to be feared than the similarity of the disease plaguing our main and most vital sector: young people.

The root cause of this disease is to be found in a deep disturbance of the human spirit. Since the Middle Ages and especially in the last few hundred years there has been a major shift in thinking and in values away from the spiritual towards embracing materialism as a preferred way of life. We have come more and more to believe that the purpose, meaning and most important aspect of life lies in the pursuit and acquisition of material things. Beginning in the Western countries, this world-view has gained nearly worldwide acceptance. Greed for material objects and pleasures has infected every leading institution and culture in the modern world and has come to dominate and afflict the very depths of the human psyche.

This shift in thinking and values is a more significant determining factor in human history than the discovery and harnessing of atomic power, than both World Wars, and ever the exploration of space. It is a "root event"--a fundamental, pivotal phenomenon occurring in the human mind and profoundly affecting the human spirit. Youth represents the branch tip of this root phenomena. Youth are in trouble because the world they are inheriting is in trouble; and, the world is in trouble because people's minds are troubled and at odds with their own nature. So it is said, "When the root is well-tended all the branches flourish; but, when the root is neglected the entire plant withers."

The world has gone collectively mad with material greed, and children are the mirrors of that madness--they reflect the loss of soul and foreshadow the imminent disaster of mankind. For if children have lost the will to live, then the world will soon be unlivable. In turning our backs on the roots of humanity to embrace all that is material, we teach young people that life has no superior purpose. This debasement of human nature cripples the spirit and renders life so cheap and hollow that children lose respect for and sense of anything sacred--since life itself is not sacred (as science daily informs us with its progressively cruel and bizarre toying with life), why should it be cherished? What makes it worth living especially as children watch world leaders and scientists playing nuclear Russian roulette with the whole of mankind. We have fashioned with our polluted thinking a world so fearful and alien that an alarming and growing number of children prefer suicide to living within it.

This is not to say that there was some Golden Age in the distant past free of greed and folly, but that there was an awareness of this fatal inclination and weakness in human nature and the desirability, even the need, to control it. Prior to this historical shift that glorifies materialism, it was generally acknowledged that restraining one's avarice and moderating the lower passions and instincts was the sine qua non for securing good people and a sane society. Life was a constant struggle between good and evil, between virtue and desire, between the spirit and the flesh, and personal well-being as well as cultural achievements owed their success to wrestling with this eternal tension and conquering the lust nature. Yielding to these base appetites could only lead to personal tragedy and social decay.

Only relatively recently have we made a radical and perhaps fatal departure from this moderating normative vision. What was once vice now reigns as virtue. We exalt the lower passions and worship the objects of their craving. Selfishness and self-seeking now

take it for granted that each person selfishly pursuing his own interests will somehow promote the general welfare. The perhaps once lofty rights of man to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" that heralded this shift to materialism, have sunken to grabbing all the gusto you can get.

The traditional religious and ethical systems that once challenged and channelled human greed have been slowly dismantled or "reformed" almost beyond recognition. Few major religions today resemble or conform to the original intent of their founders. Most now accommodate and rationalize the unbridled quest for wealth and the good life. The combined onslaught of economics, politics and science have proved too much for most religions to withstand. In the Communist countries religion was/is forcefully and systematically squelched as the "opium of the people" and as a barrier to economic progress and modernization. In the more open societies and progressive countries the old gods were quietly allowed to die, replaced by Enlightened Humanism and Science--both of which place man at the center of things and feed his pride and self-importance.

In this race for progress and the good life we have overlooked something basic: the essential meaning and worth of being human. The constant pleasure, and the frantic struggle and competition to obtain all of this deeply unsettles the human spirit, polluting not only the air, water and earth, but our very nature. Endless seeking outside impoverishes and occludes our innate goodness and wisdom, turning us into mere shells and shadows of our true selves. Our true humanity and noble potential waxes with each successive generation.

Ancient sages and saints of all religions clearly recognized and warned of the danger, both to the individual and to society, involved in pursuing things and indulging desires;

"By reducing desires one finds contentment...Of all the pleasures in the world, none are not suffering"

—the Buddha

"What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but suffers the loss of his soul...It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven"

—the Bible

"No disaster is greater than not to be content with what one has; there's no greater sign of evil than people should be always wanting more...To fill life to the brim invites disaster"

—Lao Tzu

The three major institutions responsible for instilling virtue and moral standards in young people have lost their hold. Religion has let slip its ability to impart basic values to the

young. This is partly due to the erosion of credibility the churches suffered with the ascendancy of modern science. But their declining influence results in no small measure from falling prey themselves to the lure of Mammon. In accumulating wealth, relaxing the precepts against married clergy, building financial empires rife with sex and tax scandals, much of modern religion has forfeited its once lofty and honored status.

Education: like religion has either lost its relevance or become the handmaiden of science and worldly philosophy, instead of a counter-balance. Since the turn of the century education has gradually abandoned its historical role of building the character of its students. Educating for goodness has degenerated into getting a good education--i.e. education for the "goodies". Institutions of learning, except for a very few, no longer foster moral discernment and shape character.

Family: is at an all-time low. Only a minority nuclear grow up in a stable, two-parent family. The traditional nuclear family is either split by divorce or fragmented by both parents working. For the children, however, the result is the same: the actual time spent with adults has been steadily declining for several decades.

Thus the three major countervailing forces that could offset this erosion of human dignity and spiritual values have all but ceased their critical function. The result is a gaping moral void which left unfilled has invited an insidious "ethical relativism" to set in--an attitude that makes any course of action or behavior plausible. Conscience blurs and bottoms-out at, "If it feels good, do it."

A final note on television: It would not be an exaggeration to say that TV has replaced the parents, religion, and the school as the primary teacher and supplier of moral values for the young. Look at the following figures that document the predominance of TV in the highly formative period of a child's life. (Also, note the correlation of these figures with the earlier statistics on violence, promiscuity and crime among the same TV generation).

- 96 percent of American homes have at least one TV
- the average TV set is on six hours a day
- during ordinary viewing one watches 8 violent episodes per hour; and, over 500 per week
- the average American child between the ages of five and fifteen has watched the killing of 13,000 people. By age eighteen he or she will have watched over 15,000 hours of this stuff and taken in over 20,000 acts of violence
- by age 16, a child spends as much time watching TV as he does in school
- by the time this child goes to college, he will have watched the equivalent of 5 years of education at an institution of higher learning
- 97 percent of children's cartoons include acts of violence; on a typical Saturday morning cartoon showing, the child sees one act of violence on the average of every 3 1/2 minutes

- in a typical year of viewing prime time TV a youngster will witness:
 - *5,000 murders, rapes, beatings, stabbings
 - *13,000 acts of adultery
 - *2,700 sexually aggressive comments
- in a prison survey 90 percent of the inmates said they improved their criminal talents from watching TV; 40 percent stated that actually committed crimes they had first seen on TV.

Perhaps far worse than the actual TV shows themselves in perverting the values and character of young people are the advertisements that bombard and violate the viewers' consciousness. Advertising technology employs the most sophisticated psychological techniques to manipulate the viewer into wanting, craving, buying and consuming an endless array of products--most of which are unneeded, unwanted, and useless. The ads excite an insatiable greed. They are designed to penetrate all of our conscious moral defenses and rational filters. Aimed, and aimed skillfully, at our weakest, basest and most vulnerable urges they are guided only by the marketplace ethic: whatever can be bought and sold is good; however you can buy and sell it is ok. The inescapable message that gets hammered into the young impressionable psyches of youth is: "Go ahead. Indulge, enjoy yourself. Grab all the pleasure you can get. You only live once. Smoke, drink, get high! Let go! If it feels good, do it".

Children are practically brainwashed into giving themselves over to greed and desire even when they know it is clearly harmful, fatal (as with cigarettes and alcohol). Where would they get the moral strength and wisdom to say "no"? Only from their parents, their religion, their teachers--all of which are vanishing influences in the world of a child.

When Mencius was a child his family lived next to a butcher shop. His mother noticed how the little Mencius began to imitate the actions, speech, and manners of the butcher. He would dissect and cut up small animals and so forth. Realizing this behavior would harm his compassionate sensibilities, his mother moved house. They next located adjacent to a cemetery. But again Mencius began to acquire the habits and ways of morticians--playing games of digging graves, building burial mounds and funeral pyres--and becoming morbid. So once again his mother moved. This time they found a house next to a good school where the children came every day neatly groomed, bowed respectfully to their teachers, studied the classics and learned to be virtuous, upright and wise. There they stayed. One day Mencius came home from school and announced to his mother that he was tired and bored with school and intended to drop out. His mother was weaving at her loom. She said nothing, but took the scissors and cut the main thread of the fabric on the loom. Mencius was shocked and exclaimed, "Mother, why did you cut the main thread? You will ruin the entire fabric!" His mother turned to him and replied, "In the same way, if you do not finish school you will cut off your very foundation and come to nothing in life." Mencius understood and felt ashamed. He returned to school, finished his studies and went on to become one of the greatest teachers and sages in history.

So it is said:

"If you rub against coal, you will turn black;
"If you touch rouge, you will turn red"

The solution to the problems with youth lies in education--in providing the proper environment for them to grow up in and rub against. The central responsibility of educators is to build the character and shape the moral sensibilities of students. Education must provide an inner and outer space that nurtures and protects a child's inherent goodness and wisdom. Children need to be taught ethical literacy--a kind of spiritual self-defense that enables them to avoid the inward desires and outward seductions that pervert their intrinsic humaneness and wisdom. Ultimately everything stems from the mind alone. The world is good or bad in direct proportion to the good and bad within our own minds. The outside environment that has become so threatening to young people is overwhelming only because they are so undernourished inside. They lack the moral self-discipline that provides the mental concentration and will-power so essential to the development of genuine wisdom. And it is the duty and responsibility of education to provide children with that foundation.

My point is this: once society sanctions and glorifies greed, there is no way to stop its excesses, because greed is like a bottomless pit--the more you give it, the more it wants. It is the inevitable frustration stemming from this insatiable craving that turns into anger, violence, and the deep spiritual malaise we are now seeing in young people the world over.

The goal of education is not to prepare young people merely to survive or succeed in the real world, but rather to strengthen their character and activate their wisdom so that they might transform themselves and the world into something far better than it is--into what it could be.

This is not a new concept in education, nor is it limited to East or West. Plato remarked,

"The goal of education is that education makes men good and that good men act virtuously."

The Chinese sage, Confucius, noted,

"The aim of higher education is to radiate with virtue; to care for mankind; and, to abide in the highest goodness."

We have gone down a wrong road in neglecting these fundamental goals and principles. The solution is to simply turn back, to have enough sense and courage to "move house" as did the mother of Mencius.

Dharma Master Heng Chau obtained his M.A. in History from the University of Wisconsin, and his Ph.D. in Buddhist Study and Practice from Dharma Realm Buddhist

University. He teaches at Instilling Goodness Elementary School and Developing Virtue High School at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. He is also a Professor of Buddhist Study and Practice and a Professor of Letters and Science at Dharma Realm Buddhist University.

The Reason the World Has Gone Bad *Venerable Master Hua*

Some people say that the world has gone bad. Actually the world has not gone bad. What has gone bad? People's minds. Because people's minds have gone bad, nobody is happy. We should recognize this point. How did people's minds go bad? It is because they are greedy, they fight, they seek, they are selfish, they strive for personal advantage, and they lie. Because they engage in these improper activities, they bring chaos to the world. As a result, the world is fast approaching the brink of destruction.

There is a very simple way to save the world from destruction. How? All government officials, religious leaders, and parents should personally act as good models. Government officials should not be greedy for money and sex. On top of that, they should live frugally and modestly, work hard to serve the people and not be looking out for their own benefits. If they do not take bribes, do not deal in corruption or resort to underhanded transactions, they will exert a tremendous uplifting effect on the declining social situation.

As for religious leaders, they should open their doors to all, but they should not use trickery to recruit converts to their own religion. Everybody should be allowed freedom of faith. If religions do not use schemes to recruit believers, there will be no more religious wars. Why are there wars among religions? It is because each tries to win over converts, and each tries to undermine the other religions. This kind of strife happens even among the different sects of the same religion. If religious leaders fight to get converts, they have lost the essential spirit of their own creeds.

And it is not the case that there is strife only among religious people. Professors also bicker and compete, each trying to outdo the other by setting up a strange and unusual style. They curry the favor of their students, encourage partisanship, and engage in mutual attacks and slander. They fail to embody the spirit of the righteousness of the Way. Their constant competition for power and profit is a major reason for the deterioration of social mores.

Parents are also not doing their job. While away from home they strive for power and money and engage in all sorts of improper action. Then they bring home that vile energy and corrupt the children, causing them to take devious and crooked paths. All of this has something to do with the rapid deterioration of the world. I am speaking not only about one country. I am speaking about the global situation. We should try our best to avert this disaster.

Nowadays couples engage in serial marriages. This happens in both Eastern and Western society. Couples get married and then file for divorce, get divorced and quickly get married again. Like this they do over and over again. It's not known how many marriages, how many divorces, and how many children these people have. After they bring their children into the world, they refuse to teach them. If people abstain from these repeated marriages and divorces, there won't be so many problem children. And then the world won't be destroyed so quickly. Basically there is no end to the ramifications of this problem. One could never finish talking about all its aspects.

—END—