CHAPTER SIX

INTER-RELIGIOUS/FAITH DIALOGUE IN BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

Prolegomena to Inter-religious/faith Dialogue

The word ‘dialogue’ consists of two terms ‘dia’ and ‘logue’. ‘Dia’ means ‘two’ and ‘logue’ is derived from the Greek – ‘logos’ (Latin ‘logus’), meaning "a (specified kind of) speaking or writing"\(^1\). Thus the word ‘Dialogue’ means two way communications or communication between two persons or party, i.e., speaker to listener to speaker. Thus one can define dialogue in general as (a) a form of communication (b) between two speakers, (c) primarily through language, but assisted by the body, the role of the mind being implicit, (d) within a given socio-cultural context, (e) on the basis of a "values non-significant" content. Likewise the word ‘interfaith’ is also consists of two words ‘inter’ and ‘faith’ which means between two faith or between two religious denominations.

The Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, defines inter-religious/interfaith dialogue in the following words: “The term interfaith dialogue refers to cooperative, constructive and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions (i.e., "faiths") and/or spiritual or humanistic beliefs, at both the individual and institutional levels. It is distinct from syncretism or alternative religion, in that dialogue often involves promoting understanding between different religions to increase acceptance of others, rather than to synthesize new beliefs.”

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\(^1\) Webster's New World Dictionary, 1964.
We do not find any specific term for interfaith dialogue in Buddhism. However, we do find two words for dialogue: kathopakathana\(^2\), lit., "talking/intensive talking," and saṁvāda\(^3\), "speaking together". While kathana\(^4\) (as in kathopakathana) also includes the meaning "conversing", vāda (as in saṁvāda) has developed quite distinctly the specified meaning of an emphatic or formulated speech-assertion doctrine\(^5\). Other associated terms are lapanā (talking), ālapana (addressing), sallāpa (conversation), and vivāda, (dispute, contention). There are two terms for communication - nivedana (lit. making one know) and aññamaññasambhandhā\(^6\) (binding together one and the other).

So far as the history of interfaith dialogue is concerned it is as old as the religions themselves. Since time immemorial when people used to live in peace with their neighbours, they used to have dialogue to understand them, not least because understanding is a strategy for defence, but also because for as long as there is dialogue wars are delayed. There are many recorded history of interfaith initiatives and dialogue throughout the ages.

The earliest recorded history of interfaith understanding and dialogue is of the Mauryan king Asoka (c. 272-231 BCE), in third century BCE India who is said to have converted to Buddhism after a bloody imperial campaign. According to the tradition, from that day onwards, in an


\(^3\) Ibid.


\(^5\) Ibid., p. 608.

almost fatherly way, he exhorted his subjects in how to live in harmony with one another, in spite of their differences. He did this through sending officers throughout his kingdom to propagate religion (Dhamma Mahāmātta), and also through rock and pillar edicts in which he is named as King Piyadassi. However, no reference is made in these edicts to the technical aspects of Buddhism. Their focus is morality and a code of conduct. One of the major rock edicts concerns relationships between religions and beliefs, and contains these words:

But beloved-of-the Gods, King Piyadasi, does not value gifts and honours as much as he values this - that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions. Growth in essentials can be done in different ways, but all of them have as their root restraint in speech, that is, not praising one's own religion or condemning the religions of others without good cause. And if there is cause for criticism, it should be done in a mild way. But it is better to honour other religions for this reason. By so doing, one's own religion benefits and so do other religions, while doing otherwise harms one's own religion and the religions of others.  

This edict goes back to the Buddha who, in a context where acrimonious exchanges took place between different religious groups, encouraged his followers not to feel ill-will when other groups criticized them, but to engage in dialogue, pointing out misunderstandings with reason and courtesy.

In the medieval Indian history we find that the Mughal Emperor Akbar, for example, encouraged the attitude of interfaith understanding with the help of dialogue among the people of different religious denominations, such as Islam, Hinduism etc.

In modern times one of the notable events of the history of interfaith dialogue is the Parliament of the World’s Religions, particularly in the year 1893, the first attempt to create a global dialogue of faiths. The event was celebrated by another conference on its centenary in 1993. This led to a new series of conferences under the official title "Parliament of the World's Religions".

Several such examples could be quoted from the pages of the history. However our main focus would the Buddhist attitude towards Interfaith/inter-religious Dialogue. The interactions between the world religions provide the platform to share each other’s specialties. For instance, many Christian contemplatives are interested to learn methods for concentration and meditation from Buddhism and we find that numerous Catholic priests, abbots, monks and nuns come to Dharamsala, the place where His Holiness the Dalai Lama resides, to learn these skills in order to bring these back to their own traditions. Several Buddhists have taught in Catholic seminaries to teach there on how to meditate, how to develop concentration, and how to develop love. Christianity teaches us to love everybody, but it does not explain in detail how to do it. Buddhism is rich in methods for developing love. The Christian religion on its highest level is open to learning these methods from Buddhism. It does not mean that Christians are all going to become
Buddhists – nobody is converting anyone else. These methods can be adapted within their own religion to help them to be better Christians.

Likewise, Buddhists can learn social service from Christianity. Many Christian traditions emphasize that their monks and nuns be involved in teaching, in hospital work, caring for the elderly, for orphans, and so on. Although some Buddhist countries have developed these social services, not all of them have, for various social and geographical reasons. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is very open to this. It does not mean that the Buddhists are becoming Christians. Rather, there are certain aspects from the Christians' experience that Buddhists can learn from; there are also things from the Buddhists' experience that Christians can learn from. In this way, there is an open forum among the world religions, based on mutual respect.

Often the interaction among religions takes place is at the highest level, where the people are open and do not have prejudices. It is at lower levels that people become insecure and develop a football team mentality: "This is my football team and the other religions are opposing football teams!" With such an attitude, we compete and fight. Lord Buddha himself taught many varied methods and they all work harmoniously to help a wide spectrum of different types of people. Therefore, it is important to respect all traditions, both within Buddhism and outside Buddhism.
Inter-religious/faith Dialogue & Buddhism

Historically Buddhism has been open to other religions. As per Ven. K. Sri Dhammananda⁸ ‘Buddhism is a religion which teaches people to ‘live and let live’. In the history of the world, there is no evidence to show that Buddhists have interfered or done any damage to any other religion in any part of the world for the purpose of introducing their religion. Buddhists do not regard the existence of other religions as a hindrance to worldly progress and peace’.

Before deliberating on the Buddhist perspective on the Inter-religious Dialogue it seems appropriate to present a survey of some of the articles/research papers which helped in formulating the idea contained in this chapter:


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Engaging in dialogue with other religions of the world is no bar at all. As Buddhism is neither a system of dogmas, nor a doctrine of "salvation", as the term salvation is generally understood in theistic religions. The Buddha exhorted his disciples not to take anything on blind faith, not even his words. Rather, they should listen, and then examine the teachings for themselves, so that they might be convinced of its truth. Those who enter into the dialogue with other religious traditions are reminded of the often quoted passages which delineate the incident of Lord Buddha's meeting with the Kalamas of Kesaputta, already quoted in the thesis, in which the Buddha exhorts them in this way:

"It is proper for you, Kalamas, to doubt, to be uncertain, do not be led by reports, or tradition, or hearsay. Do not be led by the authority of religious texts, nor by mere logic or inference, nor by considering appearances; nor by delight in speculative opinions, nor by seeming possibilities, nor by the idea, this ascetic is our teacher. But rather, when you yourselves know
[that] certain things are unwholesome and wrong, [that such] things are censured by the wise, and when undertaken, such things lead to harm, [then] abandon them. And when you yourselves know [that] certain things are unwholesome and good, [that such] things are approved by the wise, and when undertaken such things lead to benefit and happiness, [then] enter on and abide in them."

This particular teaching separates Buddhism from the other religions. The Buddha compared his doctrine, the Dhamma, to a raft which one uses to cross over a lake or stream, but is left behind when one reaches shore. It would make no sense to continue lugging the raft about, once it had served its purpose. So attachment to doctrine for its own sake, be it religious, political, or ideological, is illogical from a Buddhist's point of view. It follows then, that a Buddhist need not fear "losing" his faith by coming into contact with the faiths of others.

The Buddhist, Sila (virtuous conduct), one of the constituents of the Noble Eight Fold Path (Ariyo Aṭṭhaṅgiko Maggo) includes "Right Speech" (sammā vaācā). And in the context of dialogue the practice of the virtue of right speech, we will be setting an example for the larger community to emulate. It has been explained in Pali texts both negatively (to be avoided) and positively (to be practiced with diligence). To be avoided are "false words" (musāvācā), "malicious speech" (pisuṇā vācā), "harsh speech" (pharusā vacā), and "frivolity and nonsense" (samphappalāpa). To be used are "pleasant words" (piya-vacana).

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9 Dīgha Nīkāya 1.4.
This reminds us an old proverb, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all". The Buddha has reminded us, "there never was, there never will be, nor does there exist now, a person who is wholly praised or wholly blamed." The very fact we are here, however, and expressing our willingness to talk to each other, suggests that we -- all of us -- must be doing something right!

Buddha taught various methods to different people as everyone has not the same inclinations and interests. Keeping this in view, His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said that it is wonderful that so many different religions exist in the world. Just as one food will not appeal to everybody, one religion or one set of beliefs will not satisfy everyone's needs. Therefore, it is extremely beneficial that a variety of different religions is available from which to choose. He welcomes and rejoices at this.

We find that Inter faith dialogue takes place frequently, based on mutual respect, between Buddhist masters and leaders of other religions. The Dalai Lama, for example, meets the Pope and other religious leaders of the world very frequently. In Assisi, Italy, in October 1986, the Pope invited the leaders of all the world religions to a large assembly. About one hundred and fifty representatives were there. The Dalai Lama was seated next to the Pope and was given the honor of making the first speech. At the conference, the spiritual leaders discussed topics that are common in all religions, such as morality, love and compassion. People were very encouraged by the cooperation, harmony and mutual respect that the various religious leaders felt for each other.

10 Ibid, 3.152.
Of course, if one discusses metaphysics and theology, differences among religions are bound to come up. There is no way to get around the differences. However, that does not mean that we need to argue with the attitude of "My father is stronger than your father." That is very childish. It is more beneficial to look at the things that are in common. All the world religions are seeking to improve the situation of humanity and to make life better by teaching people to follow ethical behavior. They all teach people not to become totally caught up in the material side of life, but at least to strike a balance between seeking material progress and spiritual progress.

**Buddhist Model of Inter-religious Dialogue**

In order to formulate a Buddhist model of Interreligious Dialogue the works of the two scholars which are of utmost importance could be cited here. They are (1) Comparative Methodology toward a Buddhist Model of Inter-religious Dialogue by Sallie B. King\(^\text{11}\) and Spiritual Interaction," Not "Interfaith Dialogue": A Buddhistic Contribution by Suwanda H. J. Sugunasiri.\(^\text{12}\) In order to formulate a Buddhist model of Inter-religious dialogue both the papers are analytically discussed in the following pages.


A brief and succinct paper has been written by Sallie B. King\textsuperscript{13} on the ‘Comparative Methodology toward a Buddhist Model of Inter-religious Dialogue’, published in the Buddhist-Christian Studies. In this paper Sallie has very aptly propounded the Buddhist way of dialogue. In her paper she has raised a question mark on categorizing a dialogue as an authentic dialogue and has argued that “each participant must enter the dialogue from the standpoint of the tradition to which she or he belongs. One must enter as a Christian or as a Buddhist” and puts forth a theory based on the Buddhist principles that “seem to indicate that this view perpetrates an untruth and thereby distorts our perception of what really is going on in dialogue.” She further remarks that “The advice that one must enter dialogue "as a Buddhist" or "as a Christian" strikes me as suspiciously reminiscent of a Western essentialist perspective in which reality is perceived in terms of discrete entities, things, or individual units. From the perspective of the Buddhist teachings of no self (anātman), conditioned genesis (pratityasamutpāda), and emptiness (Śunyatā), though, this perspective comes to seem improbable.’ She goes beyond this and further argues that “To claim "I am a Christian" after one has read or otherwise encountered and been influenced by Buddhist thought and practice is to understate the case. If, as anātman and conditioned genesis indicate, our identity is constructed by our experiences, then a person, however committed to the Christian path, who has nevertheless been exposed in any significant degree to Buddhism, is constructed out of Buddhist as well as Christian elements.

\textsuperscript{13} Sallie B. King on the “Comparative Methodology toward a Buddhist Model of Inter-religious Dialogue”, Buddhist-Christian Studies, Vol. 10. (1990), pp. 121-126.
This would be true in cases in which the individual’s response to Buddhism was either positive or neutral. Perhaps we would want to say that such an individual is 99% Christian and 1% Buddhist, or that she is Christian in a Buddhist kind of way.” Arguing thus she comes to the conclusion that “The point is that in such a case, religious identity should not be understood in black and white, either or terms. If the individual has reacted negatively to the Buddhist experience, those negatively associated experiences still are part of what constructs that individual's thoughts, feelings, actions, and so on, though in such a case religious identity would probably best be understood as anti-Buddhist Christianity. Obviously, the same point holds for a committed Buddhist who has been exposed to Christianity.”

According to Sallie B. King simply entering into dialogue as a Buddhist or as a Christian allows one to “overlook the fact that dialogue must always be simultaneously exterior dialogue - that is, inter-personal or inter-community- and interior dialogue that is, intra-personal dialogue. Ordinarily when one conceives of dialogue, one thinks only of the inter-community or external dialogue in which two or more individuals or groups take up distinctive positions with regard to each other on the basis of the label "Christian" or "Buddhist." We do not, though, give enough attention to the fact that simultaneously each individual who engages in dialogue is undergoing change. Hearing the dialogue, hearing the views of others is itself enough to cause change in each individual's religious identity. But we often fail to acknowledge that this is happening, and as a result fail to recognize the necessity of interior dialogue, that is, the
necessity of consciously attending to the changes going on in one's own individual religious identity in response to the encounter with others.”

As such according the Sallie B. King “Dialogue must be both interior and exterior. Exterior or inter-community dialogue without interior dialogue reinforces the idea that I start from a given position and stay there; I am a Christian or a Buddhist before and after the dialogue- no real change. In such a case can we really speak of dialogue? Dialogue means giving and taking. If someone isn't taking what someone else is giving, giving also has not occurred. But if one is receiving, then one is changing. And if the individual is changing, then we have here, at the individual, a critical locus at which dialogue occurs.”

Further according to Sallie B. King interior dialogue as “Those familiar with Buddhist mindfulness training will note the degree to which this concept of interior dialogue is indebted to such mindfulness practices. Briefly stated, one pays attention to what is happening to oneself. One must primarily observe in such a way that one is able to answer such questions as: What am I receiving? What is my immediate response? Does it conflict with some other principles or beliefs that I cherish? If so, is there a sensation of tension or neutrality of release or something else? Is the idea totally new to me? If so, how do I respond? There is no need to do more than observe and notice. Perhaps one might make an effort to record what is observed. I do not think it is necessary to formally evaluate what one observes as a procedure separate from the observation. Evaluation is already happening in one's spontaneous and, later, more distanced responses to what one has encountered. These natural
evaluations should just be observed, too. I suspect it is in them that the most crucial element of dialogue takes place. After a fairly extensive period of external and interior dialogue, one may want to sum up one's observations for oneself (another stage in interior dialogue) and perhaps share them with others (contributing to the external dialogue).”

She further argues that “Internal dialogue cannot proceed alone. Input has to come from without one's private ruminations or the internal dialogue has no material on which to feed. Without external input there is no need to speak of dialogue at all. Reading books and studying another tradition is part of the external dialogue but face-to-face discussion with others is also extremely useful, as we all know. Perhaps it seems as if it would be impossible to maintain external or inter-community dialogue if we took to heart my remarks on the invalidity of entering dialogue "as a Buddhist" or "as a Christian." Where are the communities that will encounter each other if individuals can't say "I am a Buddhist/Christian" and leave it at that? The situation is not as dire as this scenario suggests. Clearly, someone who has spent thirty years as a Zen master has the authority to speak for that tradition, even if she is willing to acknowledge that exposure to Christianity has made her see things in an altered light. The same applies to someone who has seminary training, ordination, and thirty years in the ministry or someone with a Ph.D. and personal commitment in Christian theology or Buddhism. But there must also be room in the dialogue for the many people who see both Buddhist and Christian elements in their approach to life and for those few who formally belong simultaneously to both a Buddhist and a Christian community.”
While making final point on it she emphasizes “on the fact that change occurs in the individual should not be understood as implying that I have any particular goal in mind for the dialogue. The intent of dialogue, even with the insistence on interior dialogue, is in no way conversion, synthesis, or anything else that is preconceived. The intent is just to pay careful attention to the external dialogue and to observe the interior dialogue with as much clarity as possible.”

To sum up her assertion mentioned above she advocates the ‘acknowledgment of the necessity of interior dialogue as inseparable from external or inter-community dialogue.’ She argues that she ‘would like to see more reflection as to how interior dialogue does and/or should proceed.’ She opines that she would like to explore the consequences of the necessity of interior dialogue, for example, with respect to our ideas of subjectivity and objectivity.

Further she raises question on internal dialogue, if one takes up the issue of the cultural relativity of understanding. She argues that “it is not clear how far, if really at all, one system of thought is translatable into the terms of another system of thought, with the full and non distorted meaning of the words in their original context adequately conveyed in the target language. Any concept implies and is implied by all the other concepts of a given world-view; one cannot isolate the Christian God from Christianity and all that it entails, nor can one isolate emptiness from conditioned genesis and many more other concepts in Buddhism. World-views function as intact packages in which parts are separable.
from the whole only at the cost of more or less distortion. This does not mean that cross-cultural understanding is impossible. One does come to live authentically in an initially alien culture the more one comes to know that culture. History shows us that syntheses can and do occur. Christianity itself is often presented as a synthesis of Hellenistic and Semitic worldviews. Chinese Buddhism is a synthesis of Indian Buddhism and indigenous Chinese worldviews. How do such syntheses occur if a worldview is so self-referential, and in that sense presumably resistant to blending with alien factors?

In conclusion Sallie B. King argues that “it seems to me, on the basis of these mostly Buddhist-inspired reflections, that we need to revise our model of dialogue as external or inter-community only, and replace it with one that in a major way incorporates intra-personal or interior dialogue as an essential concomitant of external dialogue. What consequences would follow from such a step? One substantial advantage accruing from the adoption of such a model would be its ability to conceive dialogue in such a way as to satisfy dialoguers' desire to engage in dialogue without the slightest suggestion that the event is a confrontation of two mutually opposed camps. A Buddhist form of dialogue would be non-confrontational instance one could see that it is not so much a matter of "Buddhists" and "Christians" facing each other as it is persons variously in process, in religious identity as in all other ways. Second, a Buddhist form of dialogue incorporating interior dialogue would emphasize the importance of and encourage the cultivation of self-knowledge and mindfulness. Third, the interior dialogue would help ensure that one remain mindful of the hermeneutical
circle and would thus properly relativize the dialogical proceedings. Fourth and finally, interior dialogue would also help ensure that the response of the total person, not only the intellect or only the emotions, would be engaged in the dialogue.”

At the very outset of her paper titled Spiritual Interaction, not Interfaith Dialogue: A Buddhistic Contribution Suwanda H. J. Sugunasiri has made it clear that her paper attempts to discuss the basic problem, i.e., Does the commonly used term interfaith dialogue really do justice to what happens when people of different religions talk? After detailed discussion she comes to the conclusion that it is not so and finds that ‘Dia’ is troublesome on at least two counts. First, it theoretically allows for only a two-way communication, while in reality interfaith dialogue is never that. Second, one can argue that the concept is corporate and ignores the individual. Not only does inter- have the same two-way problematic of dia- in that its outreach is too narrow, but it also excludes the intra- dimension- what happens internally to individuals who become partners in dialogue. Finally, faith is too theistic and drives away not only Buddhists, Jains, and Confucianists but all those others who do not subscribe to a formal religion.

She further explain that “Dialogue, interfaith or other, is primarily an act of communication, which the standard linguistic model well captures as a two-way process, i.e., speaker to listener to speaker. Here, a speaker encodes a message, which is (to be) decoded by the listener, who, switching roles, encodes a response, which is (to be) decoded by the speaker-turned- listener. On the basis of the above one can define
dialogue in general as (a) a form of communication (b) between two speakers, (c) primarily through language, but assisted by the body, the role of the mind being implicit, (d) within a given socio-cultural context, (e) on the basis of a "values non-significant" content.

After explaining the process of dialogue as communication Suwanda H. J. Sugunasiri discusses how interfaith dialogue fares from a Buddhistic perspective. According to her "logue, means "speaking in this context, by first acknowledging the recognition given to and the very important role played by the "word," uaci,"in Buddhist theory." For example, "verbal intimation" is shown as one of the elements that constitute the structure of a sentient being. From an epistemological point of view, it is, for example, recognized as a door (dvāra) to knowledge. From a liberational point of view, it appears (in the form of vācā) as a rung in the Eightfold Path, "excellent language (or speech or word)" (sammā vācā). Linguistic excellence is explained both negatively (to be avoided) and positively (to be practiced with diligence). To be avoided are "false words" (musāvādā), "malicious speech" (pisuna vācā), "harsh speech" (pharusā vācā), and "frivolity and nonsense" (samphappalāpa). To be used are "pleasant words" (piya vacana).

One finds a further related use when the Buddha says that he would make only two types of propositions, those that are "true, useful, and pleasant" and those that are "true, useful, and unpleasant." Finally, we have in the praxic extension vad a cognate of vac when he
says that he "only does as he says" (yathā vādi tathā kāri) and "says only as he does" (yathā kāri tathā vādi)\textsuperscript{14}.”

Further she argues that “the difficulty with the term, from a Buddhistic perspective, is that it is theoretically too limiting—not that it inherently needs be so, but that, by its association with such related terms as individual, person, woman, man, or people, it does not remind us, strongly, constantly enough, or consistently, of the full range of being human. To be fair, for that matter, neither do the Buddhist terms vādi (speaker), puggala (individual, person, etc.), itthi (woman), purisa (man), or manussa ([generic] man, people) in themselves. There is, however, a term that does—sentient being (satta). While it has roughly the same range of meaning as human being or person, sentient being continually reminds us of the fact that the human person (as indeed an animal) is primarily a bundle of senses.

This is still a weak argument at best since the terms human and speaker do not deny sentience. However, neither continually reminds us that the "mind" is our sixth sense. While the analysis implicit in my linguistic model identifies "encoding," a mental activity, as preceding the production of an utterance (and "decoding" in the listener), the psycholinguistic analysis, too, points to the mental process of self-monitoring that goes on simultaneously with speaking. But, as characterized above, the role of the mind is only implicit, the mind playing at best second fiddle to the primary mode, the word.

\textsuperscript{14} Digha Nikaya 2.224.
Indeed, while kinesics, proxemics, and oculistics are said to be paralinguistic, the mind does not even get recognized as a benchmark feature. The theoretical inadequacy of the term speakel; then, stems from two sources: its (implicit) claim of the dominance of the word in communication and its association with an inadequate analysis of humanness.

The associations of the term vādi in Buddhism, by contrast, better account for reality. Its association is with satta, "being," made of six senses. While verbal intimation is one of the elements, intimation is also "bodily" (kāya viññatti). Further, the word is not the only door to knowledge, communication, and dialogue; it shares the conceptual space with two other doors as equal partners, the body (kāya) and the mind (citta, mano, viññā). To this extent, then, the word is not primary. If anything is primary, it is the mind. In the Noble Eightfold Path, "excellent conceptualization" (samma sañkappa) immediately precedes "excellent word" (samma vācā). This primacy, in communication and dialogue as in every other human activity, is well contained in the Dhammapada lines "the mind is the forerunner, the foremost" (mano pubbaṅgamā dhammā, mano seṭṭhā manomaya). The Path, however, goes further. It shows how the quality of language is enhanced by even what precedes conceptualization, namely, "excellent view" (or "insight") (sammā diṭṭhi), itself preceded by "excellent concentration" (sammā samādhi, preceded by "excellent

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15 Samyutta Nikaya 1.12.
16 Dhammapada 1.1.
mindfulness" (samma sati)\textsuperscript{17}.

If that is so from the viewpoint of the speaking sentient being, a similar complex process can also be seen to take place in the listening sentient being. The phonemic sounds produced by the former, as well as recognized in the linguistic model, must be decoded, converted into concepts, and placed within the frame of one's own cognitive structure. Even though the Buddha was not speaking specifically within a context of linguistic communication, the Path allows for this reverse order when initiates are advised to test out the validity of their experience of going from excellent conceptualization to excellent language, for example, by reversing the process, to see for themselves how excellent speech serves as a condition for excellent conceptualization and for excellent view, concentration, and mindfulness" thereafter.

One final link, relevant to my discussion, between the word and the mind in Buddhism is one that can be abstracted only from the concept of "tongue consciousness", under which would fall speaking. Buddhist psychology posits four primary conditions for a sense to be active, namely, "stimulus", "sensitive element", "state of attention", and "facilitating condition".

From a Buddhist perspective, it does not. Interfaith dialogue places undue emphasis on the "word," whereas a Buddhist "view of communication" places much more emphasis on all six senses,

\textsuperscript{17} Samyutta Nikāya 2.17
particularly the mind. Therefore, from a Buddhist perspective, a more accurate and helpful term might be spiritual interaction.

Among the modern followers of Lord Buddha’s teachings who have been very active in promoting inter-religious understanding and have extensively lectured on it the name of Ajahn Buddhadasa stands foremost. Ajahn Buddhadasa Bhikkhu was one of the most influential figures in Thai Buddhism during the last century. His progressive and reformist character, as well as his profound but extremely straight forward Dhamma teachings made a lasting impact on Theravada Buddhism. For many decades, he was the leading Buddhist voice in Thailand speaking for mutual understanding and cooperation among religions.

According to Ajahn Buddhadasa in inter-religious dialogue, it is important to be mindful of our terminology. He is of the opinion that the Pali word “sasana” is commonly used to translate the English word “religion” though they are not actually equivalent. Concerning “sasana,” Ajahn Buddhadasa wrote: ‘Sasana’ is not merely teaching (it’s basic meaning), but refers to activity that brings about survival (or salvation). Religion comes from roots meaning both ‘to observe’ and ‘to bind’. Combining these two meanings results in ‘the action in line with divine teaching that bears the fruit of unifying humanity with heaven or God.’ Thus, religion is about action. In Buddhism, the Buddha called this Dhamma and Brahmacariya, not Sasana, because he stressed action.
Later Ajahn Buddhadasa came to speak about “universal sasana” or “universal religion.” From his reading of the Koran, the Bible, the Upanishads, and other great texts, and from meeting with followers of different religions, he came to believe that at heart all religions perform the same basic function of saving us from selfishness and suffering. Sasana is action that leads to salvation. It’s based in the instincts of fear and wanting to survive. The basic activity or struggle is the same in all forms of life, only differing in the level on which it operates. For this reason, all people are the same people; all religions are the same single religion.

At other times Ajahn Buddhadasa focused increasingly on what he liked to call the heart of all religions — unselfishness. He would point out, for example, that Christian teachings and practices were for the sake of unselfishness. If one really takes on the belief that God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son and obeys the commandment to “love thy neighbor as thyself,” it is impossible to be selfish. He also described the discipline and effort of Islam as a way to restrain and overcome selfishness. In Buddhism he stressed how the teaching that all phenomena are not-self and that there is nothing worth clinging to as ‘me’ or ‘mine’ leads to the realization of selflessness. In all the different traditions, he saw the common element of overcoming selfishness.

He expressed his own intention regarding religion in terms of three vows. He vowed to do everything in his power:

1. To help others to realize the heart of their own religion.
2. To work for mutual good understanding among the religions.
3. To cooperate in dragging the world out from under the power of materialism.

People must understand the core of their own tradition in order to have inter-religious exchange and cooperation. Only when we can speak from our own deep experiences of our respective traditions will there be a basis for understanding the religions of others.

Ajahn Buddhadasa felt that all the religions have a common enemy – materialism. Political materialism, hedonistic materialism, and spiritual materialism all perpetuate selfishness. They provide justifications for selfishness. Nationalism in many of its forms is also a justification for self-centeredness. Modern individualism is a justification for self-centeredness. Ajahn Buddhadasa believed that Sasana, when it is true to its primary mission, is humanity's most effective way to free us from selfishness.

Ajahn Buddhadasa wasn’t an activist in the sense of organizing inter-religious conferences; however, people who were influenced by him did just that. In Thailand, one prominent lay Buddhist strongly influenced by Ajahn Buddhadasa is Sulak Sivaraksa, who founded many NGOs. One of them is called the Thai Inter-Religious Commission on Development. This was one of various groups that worked to promote inter-religious understanding within Thailand. Sulak, myself, and other students of Ajahn Buddhadasa were also involved in the Asian Cultural Forum on Development (ACFOD) which had a strong inter-religious component. At Suan Mokkh,
Christian groups would come for retreats. The Catholic meditation teacher, Father Laurence Freeman and I led a retreat there that brought together Christians and Buddhists, both Asians and Westerners.

Ajahn Buddhadasa was not uncritical of the various religions. Just as he had an ongoing critique of Buddhism, he at times would critique other religions as well. He could be critical of what was sometimes called “Hindus swallowing up Buddhism.” In Suan Mokkh’s Spiritual Theater, a building covered inside and out with carvings and paintings expressing Buddhist themes, there is a picture of a Brahmin priest swallowing a Buddhist monk. On the other hand, he pointed out that the main reason for this swallowing is the inability of Buddhists, and especially Buddhist teachers and leaders, to be clear about what Buddhism is and is not. Buddhism in India became overly involved in ritualism, priestly hierarchies, and tantra, none of which were true to the Buddha’s original teaching. Even worse, they lost track of liberation in this life by overemphasizing rebirth moralism. Because Buddhism wasn’t able to stick to its original inspiration, it became in many ways indistinguishable from Hinduism.

He was critical of attempts by Christians to buy converts. One of his journals noted of Christian missionaries: “If you buy our stupid ones, we’ll get your smart ones.” When a religion stoops so low as to use either force or bribes to gain converts, it loses the very people who see through such manipulation.
He was critical of Buddhism and other traditions when he felt they were behaving superficially, such as giving too much importance to rituals or individual teachers. In his understanding, even the founder, the Buddha himself, should never be put above the Dhamma.

Ajahn Buddhadasa spoke of seven misperceptions concerning ‘sasana’ or ‘religion’:

1. The attitude that religion is not necessary in the modern world. That we have somehow advanced beyond the need for religion.

2. The attitude that non-religious phenomena such as psychic powers and emotional exuberance are religious or spiritual.

3. The attitude that denies true religiosity. For example, to claim that freedom from greed, hatred, and delusion is not the basis of liberation, or that such defilements somehow make us stronger.

4. The attitude that religion is about ‘getting something’ such as material security, merit, and the answers to our prayers.

5. The attitude that religion is the enemy of socio-economic development.

6. The attitude that religion provides a competitive advantage in worldly matters, e.g., in countries where religious majorities use religion to monopolize power and resources.

7. The final and most dangerous is the attitude that other religions are opposed to our own.

Ajahn Buddhadasa felt that as long as we hold these attitudes, especially the last, religion will never be powerful enough to do its job - to bring us salvation and peace. The fighting, competing, and arguing
that ensue from such attitudes make world peace impossible. Teachers like Ajahn Buddhadasa, with their valiant friendliness towards others and untiring efforts to understand the great variety of religions in the world are true peacemakers to be studied and emulated. May we take him as our inspiration to work for cooperation and understanding for the benefit of all.

Lastly, the third great anomaly and contradiction is the phenomenon of inter-religious dialogue, call for mutual tolerance and understanding between different Faiths, frequent and numerous multi-religious conferences in numerous countries on the one side while on the other side the contemporary world situation is plagued numerous inter-religious conflicts and clashes and even fierce war fares with deadly hatred. Sometimes these fierce currents are covert and seething beneath the surface of society in a multi-racial or multi-religious nation. Sometime it is violently manifested as in present day India, Sri Lanka, the Middle East, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Ireland etc., to mention but a few of such centres of conflict where religion apparently forms the basis of such clashes. This is an irony and a blot on the true religious spirit which is Love, Brotherhood and Unity in the Divine Spirit. The one Truth that all the world's religions assert and proclaim is the Omnipresence of God. This omnipresence means and indicates that the Supreme Spirit is present in all beings and things in this world. Therefore, real religion means living on the basis of this Truth. God is manifest in His creation. To recognize this fact and reverently engaging yourself in loving service of His manifestation would constitute the essence of the real religion. We verily worship God through service of His creation.
Buddha taught various methods to different people. Citing this example, His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said that it is wonderful that so many different religions exist in the world. Just as one food will not appeal to everybody, one religion or one set of beliefs will not satisfy everyone's needs. Therefore, it is extremely beneficial that a variety of different religions is available from which to choose. He welcomes and rejoices at this.

Nowadays, there is a growing dialogue, based on mutual respect, between Buddhist masters and leaders of other religions. The Dalai Lama, for example, meets the Pope frequently. In Assisi, Italy, in October 1986, the Pope invited the leaders of all the world religions to a large assembly. About one hundred and fifty representatives were there. The Dalai Lama was seated next to the Pope and was given the honor of making the first speech. At the conference, the spiritual leaders discussed topics that are common in all religions, such as morality, love and compassion. People were very encouraged by the cooperation, harmony and mutual respect that the various religious leaders felt for each other.

Of course, if we discuss metaphysics and theology, there are differences. There is no way to get around the differences. However, that does not mean that we need to argue with the attitude of "My daddy is stronger than your daddy." That is very childish. It is more beneficial to look at the things that are in common. All the world religions are seeking to improve the situation of humanity and to make life better by teaching people to follow ethical behavior. They all teach people not to become totally caught up in the material side of life, but at least to strike a balance between seeking material progress and spiritual progress.
It is very helpful if all religions work together to improve the situation of the world. We need not only material progress, but spiritual progress as well. If we only emphasize the material aspect of life, then to make a better bomb to kill everyone would be a desirable goal. If, on the other hand, we think in a humanistic or spiritual way, we are aware of the fear and other problems that come from the further buildup of weapons of mass destruction. If we only develop spiritually and do not take care of the material side then people go hungry, and that is not very good either. We need a balance.

Buddhism is a "universal" religion, in the sense that it is concerned with the fundamental human condition, and thus with the problem of suffering, first and foremost. The Buddha said, "it is suffering I teach, and the cessation of suffering." But in this respect it is like other religions, and Christianity in particular. For it too, is concerned with the problem of suffering. As the Pope himself reminds us, "Stat crux dum volvit orbis." ("The cross remains constant while the world turns.") For Christians (as well as other theistic religions), this observation has at once led philosophers and theologians to seek an answer to a most perplexing question: since there is obviously evil in the world, how can God permit it? The Buddhist is no less aware of, and concerned about, the reality of evil and suffering. But for us, the question is not how God can permit it, but rather, what are we going to do about it?

In any case, the corollary of the universality of suffering is not that we claim that everyone should be a Buddhist, but rather that, with respect to the fundamental problem with which Buddhism is concerned, everyone already is a "Buddhist," whether he accepts that name or not. Referring to
Hinduism and Buddhism, the Holy Father states that "[t]he Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. The Church has a high regard for their conduct and way of life, for those precepts and doctrines which, although differing on many points from that which the Church believes and propounds, often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men." On this point, I must mention a comment by Francis Cardinal Arinze, President of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. In one of the most gracious gestures of the Church in our memory, a letter sent this year to the Buddhist community, the Cardinal extended his wishes for a "Happy feast of Vesakh." Vesakh is the day on which Buddhists commemorate the birth, Enlightenment, and death of the Buddha. True to the spirit of its founder, Buddhism has been renowned throughout its history for its tolerance of other beliefs and values. But as the Cardinal reminds us, this is not enough. He points out that "the pluralistic society in which we live demands more than mere tolerance. Tolerance is usually thought of as putting up with the other, or at best as a code of polite conduct. Yet this resigned, lukewarm attitude does not create the right atmosphere for a [truly] harmonious existence. The spirit of our religions challenges us to go beyond this. We are commanded in fact love our neighbors as ourselves." And in the Dhammapada the Buddha exhorts us: "Conquer anger by love, conquer evil by good; conquer avarice by giving; conquer the liar by truth."

Now, it seems to me that since we are so ready to embrace each other, and claim that we are already honorary members of each other's religion, there is really no reason why we cannot continue talking. We are alike in that we all suffer, and our primary concern is the end of suffering; this is
what we call liberation. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama has put it: "I am interested not in converting other people to Buddhism but in how we Buddhists can contribute to human society, according to our own ideas."
And I have always maintained, and maintain today, that if we had enough in common thirty years ago to begin talking to each other, then we have enough in common to continue.