CROSS-CULTURAL AWARENESS FOR AUSTRALIANS AND SGI MEMBERS
(a written record of a speech presented for HUMANISM AND CULTURE OPEN DAY at SGI Melbourne Community Centre on 27 September, 1992)

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It is indeed a great honour and pleasure for me to speak in front of you Australian SGI members including so many guests today. The purpose of my visit at Monash University is to do research on multicultural education in Australia.

First, as a poetry lover, let me mention one thing about nature that I have noticed recently. That is cherry-blossoms are still in bloom here in Melbourne. I say they are still in bloom because the ones in Japan are really short-lived. The wind and particularly rain blow away petals of the blossoms easily, thus creating an image and sensitivity that nothing remains the same, nothing lasts long, and nothing is eternal.

Whatever foreign country you are in, or whatever person of a different culture and ethnicity you encounter, you can’t take things for granted. We tend to think that basic good manners and etiquette are universally understood and practised in the same way; we may not realise that what constitutes good manners in one society may have exactly the opposite effect in another. In fact, Eastern etiquette may be bothersome or even inscrutable in a Western culture
and vice versa.

On the day of my arrival in this country someone stole my expensive videocamera. It was so embarrassing, but luckily enough it was insured, so I phoned the insurance company. As there are dishonest people everywhere in the world, I wanted to convince them that I was not telling a lie to extract money from them, and began to say that I'm a visiting scholar in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. Their response was: "What does it have to do with the theft?"

I visited one of my Australian friends in a mental hospital the other day. One of the patients asked me if I was a patient or a doctor. Patients and doctors seem to look alike in this country! Egalitarianism at least on the superficial level is so great that those who put on airs looking and sounding special, rich, and elitist can be easily put down. This kind of attitude has two sides to it. On one hand, it allows you to feel free without so much social pressure that makes you look and behave according to your social rank. On the other hand, it prevents many who are brilliant or could, with a little work be brilliant, from striving for excellence. Immigrants from where hard-work ethics prevail often despise Australians as lazy people. One of the reasons why some Australian-born ethnic groups especially those of Anglo-Celtic origin who came here as convicts or from the lower-classes dislike Asians is because of fear that those people may take over their jobs and accumulate wealth through excessive endeavour.

1. CATEGORIES OF AUSTRALIAN PEOPLE

Australia is a multiethnic and multicultural society. Who constitutes this diversity? Let me categorise some groups.

1. Australian Aborigines

The word "Aborigine(s)" can refer to any group of people indigenous to a
particular country or region when written with a small ‘a’, and it is a term which was imposed on the original inhabitants of Australia by the first British colonisers. They prefer to be known by their specific names—Koorie, Murri, Nyunga and so forth. Here in Victoria together with Southern Queensland, New South Wales and Tasmania the term “Koorie” is used. So when you meet an Aborigine, which itself isn’t a derogatory term, you should call him/her a Koorie.

Australian Aborigines have lived in this country for at least 40,000 years, or over 1,600 generations according to archaeological evidence. In comparison, the two centuries of European occupation of this land are a mere drop in the bucket. Their population at the time of the first European settlement of Australia was approximately 300,000, while today it is approximately 160,000. Over time, government policy concerning the treatment of Aborigines has moved through a range of concepts including “protect and cultivate”, “subdue, civilise and Christianise”, “separate and segregate”, “assimilate”, “integrate” and on to the current policy of “self-determination”. Some white Australians are for signing a treaty with Aborigines to provide a framework for repatriation claims by them for past injustices including land rights. Others claim that a treaty is entirely inappropriate because it assumes that there are two separate legal nations within Australia. Which claim to stand for is none of my business, however, whether to support the economic interest or the human rights would have an impact on every person living in Australia. The land rights issue is also subject to collisions of two different cultures. For example, “an area containing oil-bearing strata may have no value for an Aborigine if it does not contain a sacred site, but would be of considerable importance to a European oil-driller”. (Bullivant, 1984:25)

2. **Immigrants**

Why do the increasing number of immigrants come to Australia? Because here in this country there are pull factors such as more freedom, vast land, better
economic opportunities including more jobs, better education, better health care, amenities, and more houses, as well as push factors in other countries including political and religious oppression, not enough land, crop failure, poverty and natural disasters.

The population of Australia is roughly 17 million and one out of five people was born overseas, out of which half are non-native speakers of English. How many of you migrated to this country?

Let us briefly look at the history of Australian migration and ideologies of pluralism. From the first settlement in 1788 up until pre-World War 2 the ideology was unquestioned assimilationist Anglo-conformism, strong Australian nationalism and White (mono-racial) Australia. The policy of “White Australia” prohibited the immigration of all non-European people. After the war Australia was desperately short of labour. As there was a lack of British immigrants other Europeans were recruited, including German, Dutch, Italian and Baltic people till the 1950s. They were expected to do menial jobs, while the higher posts were dominated by the “Old Australians”. Assimilation was an unchangeable dogma, and racism was widespread. From the 1950s to the 1960s onwards immigration from Southern Europe was growing and the “White Australia Policy” was weakening, which resulted in proto-pluralism.

From the late 1960s to early 1970s Australian migration became diversified with the intake of people from Eastern Europe like Yugoslavia, Poland and Hungary, and restricted Asian entry was permitted. In 1973, the “White Australia” policy was abolished and the policy of non-discrimination on the grounds of race, colour or nationality in the selection of migrants was adopted. It also meant the adoption of interactionism and integration as a matter of political expediency. The Asian component of the total migrant intake continued to be fairly small due to the imposition of occupational skills for all migrants other than immediate family reunion and refugees. The period from the late 1970s to the 80s witnessed a very diversified immigration intake, whose dominant countries of
origin in the late seventies were Vietnam, the UK, and New Zealand. However, in spite of the large number of migrants from some Asian countries like the Philippines (10,427), Malaysia (6,265) and Vietnam (5,981) in 1987/88, these figures are still small compared with the past annual intakes from some countries in some periods: an average net migration of 51,940 from the UK in the years 1966-71 for example or 17,147 from Poland in the period 1947-51.

Speaking of the ideological aspect, the old policy of assimilation gave way to a policy of multiculturalism, which became the official policy of the ALP (Australian Labour Party) and Liberal parties. The nature of the policy was to recognise "a commitment to the preservation and development of a culturally diversified but socially cohesive Australian society, free of racial tensions and offering security, well-being and equality of opportunity to all those living here". (the Office of Multicultural Affairs 1992: 8) Today in the 1990s OMA admits the existence of discrimination against Southern European migrants and that over recent years, discriminatory behaviour has been aimed increasingly at the new wave of migrants from Vietnam, Cambodia and other areas of South East Asia and the Middle East. This behaviour varies from verbal abuse to job discrimination.

3. Australian-Born Ethnics

This group includes the second generation of people or those born in the new country. How many of you belong to this category? One or both parents would have been born overseas and the spoken language in the home would be one other than English. There is often a conflict between the parents who have carried their home culture and are stubborn to maintain it and their children who live in different circumstances which have affected their own thought-patterns. The former culture is often called a fossilised culture because of its old-fashioned way while in their home countries their societies have gone through transformations and have adapted to the new world.
4. Sojourners

These are the people who opt for short term stays in the new country e.g. students, diplomats. They lack a commitment to knowledge about the new environments because of their short term purpose. They don’t have any real need to learn the language of the receiving society although they need to make minimal changes.

5. Refugees

These people flock in mass usually to escape upheaval in their country of origin. Their cyclic action is often a closed process in that they lack an option to return to the country of their roots. They are usually forced to leave their homeland to seek political freedom. There are so many fallacies about this group of people such as “Refugees are taking jobs away from the Aussies who deserve them”, and “Australia is accepting far too many refugees”. But the fact is the unemployment rate for refugees, especially in their first years of settlement is higher than the Australian average, and even among those who are employed, refugees often do “menial” jobs that Australians choose not to do. Another fact is that refugees make up only a tiny percentage of new settler arrivals in this country even though there are currently twelve million in the world. Statistically, only 5.5 per cent of 330,000 immigrants to Australia between 1985 and 1988 were refugees. This proportion has decreased sharply from 8.5 per cent in 1985-86 to 3.7 per cent in 1987-88.

II. HOW TO SUCCEED IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

“People are basically the same”. So say many people. In a sense they have such common feelings of happiness and unhappiness, comfort and discomfort, pleasure and anger, and satisfaction and dissatisfaction, people are the same. But how many times have you wondered why other people, especially of different
generations, sex, social class, education, upbringings, ethnicity and culture don't act in accordance with your value system? You wanted to be polite, but felt your courtesy was abused. Your politeness was regarded as either too friendly and therefore impolite or too formal therefore resulting in giving an image of excessive social distance. You meant to say “No”, but your counterpart took it as “Yes”, and vice versa.

Now let me read this poem which I found in Ann Lander's column. (Ann Landers is an American life advice columnist in newspapers.)

A SHORT COURSE IN HUMAN RELATIONS
The six most important words in the English language are:
I WAS WRONG—PLEASE FORGIVE ME.
The five most important words: YOU DID A GOOD JOB.
The four most important words: WHAT IS YOUR OPINION?
The three most important words: CAN I HELP?
The two most important words: THANK YOU.
The one most important word: YOU
The one least important word: I

The other day I showed this to a different audience and got responses asking me if it was applicable to all different cultures. My answer was both “Yes” and “No”. “Yes” in a sense that everywhere in the world people want to, or wish they could live in harmony, which is based on good interpersonal relationships with concern for others. “No” in a sense that although in some societies, particularly in the West, you should demonstrate your opinions for self-interest with an assertive manner, in many other societies including that of Asia you should make much of your group harmony first and then express your opinions with a soft tone either hiding or subduing your egotism. Let me illustrate some of the guidelines that I think are clues to successful cross-cultural communica-
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1. Westerners should avoid speaking with a raised voice, shouting, swearing and violent displays of temper. Such habits are considered inexcusable by many Asians. The latter should also be aware that the former are free to express their emotions, and usually no harm is done.

2. Even when you feel nervous or irritated, try to relax yourself as quickly as possible, and make your tone quiet and modulated.

3. Eastern Modesty and Reserve vs Western Pride and Reserve should be understood. When they invite their guests to dinner the Japanese often say, “There is nothing delicious to eat, but please start eating”. The Chinese also pay respect to their guests and say nothing is good enough for the honourable people who are being entertained. The Western tendency to brag about themselves or their children should not be despised, either. They often have a warm heart to praise the food others cook, the clothes you or your spouse is wearing, the English you speak, and the speech I’m making! Self-centredness is not their virtue, either. No matter what your or other’s ethnicity is, try to say, “You did a good job”, as was seen before in the poem, and even add “You’ll be able to do even better next time”.

4. Do not underestimate yourself. Certainly you shouldn’t lie, but tell more often what you can do than what you can’t do. If you aren’t a native speaker of English and lack confidence in your English, it has nothing to do with your intelligence. If you’re a native speaker of English or your English command is great never look down upon people because of their poor skills or accent as it does not necessarily reflect intelligence.
5. Do not take anything for granted. This is true even in the intracultural context, but it is more so in intercultural settings. Try to make sure of things by saying, “Is this what you mean...?” “Will you tell me what you mean by saying...?” etc. patiently without feeling irritated.

6. Try to get rid of ethnocentricity, the idea that your culture is superior to others’. You also have preconceptions about the characteristics and behaviour of people you see as different from yourself. It is normal, but our preconceptions about other people, our preconceptions about people of different ethnicity, nearly always include negative views. Some might say, “Australians are friendly, but are often impolite or too direct when talking to people”, “Aussies do not show much concern for other people”, or “The Asians are hardworking but cunning, and are a threat to social cohesion”. Both sides are going to have problems establishing a meaningful relationship when their preconceptions are creating barriers to understanding. I think creating a relationship of mutual understanding with someone from a different culture is a deeply rewarding and enriching experience. Don’t you?

III. CONCLUSION

Each culture has its own unique aspects, so that one cannot simply rank them as superior or inferior. When we look at the world we find so many cultures destroyed by dominant cultures. A Papua New Guinean teacher in his speech explained the destruction of their indigenous culture as follows. He said he wasn’t allowed to use his name at a mission school once he was baptised because of the heathen background. He was forbidden to speak his indigenous language but forced to speak English at a government school. Folk dances and music were forbidden and their heritage which had been handed down for generations was allowed to die. The chewing of betel nut was disallowed being
considered by European teachers a filthy, disgusting habit while they themselves blew their cigarette smoke into faces of his group of people. (Giraure, 1974)

By now I hope you have come to understand that the most destructive type of preconception in cross-cultural communication is ethnocentricity and racism. Every baby born with automatic privileges such as possessing the dominant culture, skin colour and racial characteristics enjoy benefits at the expense of others who belong to different categories, because racism equals racial prejudice plus institutional power. These people need to be “antiracist racists”. At the same time people in Australia who originally came from overseas and who were members of the dominant culture need to examine and change the “Back home, we do it this way” attitude, as they tend to view their own customs as superior while seeing all other customs as inferior. There is a principle in Buddhism called zuiho bini, which allows you to adapt practices to the local customs and traditions, provided the fundamental teaching of Buddhism is not violated. The major world religions such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam have a notion of God Almighty. Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism emphasises the supreme being called Buddhahood inherent in all living-beings. I do not have to mention the details of Buddhist philosophy as it isn’t the purpose of my speech today.

I have already met so many Australians who have broken their ties with established religions but are still searching for spirituality. By spirituality they mean a better way or quality of life without sticking to the material and consumer-oriented world. True Buddhism does not deny the importance of physical and material wealth but puts spiritual wealth as the first priority. What we do need is the basic principle of dignity of life and the most humanistic way to maintain it.

The other day I met an AIDS victim who together with other victims was caught by the police as they had stopped a flower clock and demolished the flowers. It was a symbolic act meaning that the time for them is stopped. The
purpose was to demand the release of certain AIDS cure vaccine which the Ministry of Health had been withholding since there was a lack of enough evidence of safety. What does it really matter? Which is more important, legal processes or human life?

The world needs so much fixing. Those who merely preach the name of God or Buddha often ignore social elements. Nichiren Daishonin was not only propagating the spread of his religion but was also a social reformer who attacked the then feudalistic government that was only interested in maintaining power, neglecting the welfare of common people. Truly the mission of SGI is based on each member’s quality and attitude of life as well as struggle for social justice. To do this they need to inform themselves of different cultures. In the treatise “Rissho Ankoku Ron” (On Securing the Peace of the Land through the Propagation of True Buddhism), Nichiren Daishonin writes, “If you live in a country that knows no decline or diminution, in a land that suffers no harm or disruption, then your body will find peace and security and your mind will be calm and untroubled”. All the best for you and let me pray for happiness of both SGI members and non-members alike and equally.

References

