

The Buddha's Teachings for Healing

Hatred is not appeased by hatred.

Hatred is appeased by loving kindness

This is an Eternal Truth

The Gotama Buddha (Dhammapada)

Members of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, Aboriginal Elders, and guests, thank you for inviting me to participate in the healing of those affected by the Residential School System in Canada. I sincerely hope that the teachings of the Buddha, offers new hope and peace for all who were involved in this dark tragedy of our Canadian history.

As a parent I can say that my most treasured 'belonging' is my children. I can still remember the research and care we took when selecting the schools that they would attend. I can still remember how hard it was to let them go to school for the very first time. We sent our children first to a Montessori school and later to a private school in Winnipeg. Both our children attended day schools.

As a new emigrant and a parent I entrusted the education and wellbeing of my beloved children to the people whom I trusted the most; the educators in Canada, the Church (synagogue, temple/mosque) and the Government of Canada.

Over hundred and fifty years ago the Aboriginal community too made a similar decision. With humility and great trust they handed their most treasured belonging, their children, to the educators, Church and the Government of Canada. The aboriginal Canadians at that time were not as fortunate as us. We had a choice. We could change the school we had selected if we were not happy. In fact we did change the school midway for our son. The aboriginal community had no such choice. They were forced to place their children who were very young (between 5 and 15 years) in residential schools. And the Educators, Church and the Government of Canada betrayed their trust. These residential schools were not designed to educate the children to be respected productive citizens of Canada. *A Healing Journey Final Report* states, "At its, core the Indian residential school system was an organized effort to kill the Indian in the child". Historian J.R Miller (1996) *Shingwauk's Vision*, A history of Canadian Residential Schools states, "Their (residential schools) primary roles were to convert Indigenous children to Christianity and to civilize them¹".

Dr Anna Snyder, members of the Manitoba Interfaith Committee of TRC, and guests. Thank you for inviting me to speak about the use of the Buddhist approach for healing and reconciliation.

¹ J.R Miller (1996) *Shingwauk's Vision*, A history of Canadian residential schools, University of Toronto Press

I can truthfully say that the research I did for this presentation changed my outlook about the Aboriginal Community and changed my life. I was not aware of the abuse that had taken place in the residential schools and the injustice that was done to the Aboriginal Canadians. And to my surprise neither were the majority of my friends at work and in my community.

The abuse and systematic destruction of the identity of the Aboriginal Canadians over more than 150 years and the resulting effects are deep rooted. At a press conference in Ottawa, in November 2005, former Justice Minister and one of Canada's leading human rights activists, Irwin Cotler called the decision to house young Canadians in church-run schools, "The single most harmful, disgraceful and racist act in our history². It is not easy to overturn the effects of more than 150 years of abuse on generations of children. Just imagine, in different circumstances this could easily have been your child, or your grand child crying for help. Would you have ignored their cry for help or would you have felt their pain and cried with them. Would you not have done everything in your power to right this wrong.

While there is much that we can do to assist the Aboriginal Canadians through love, compassion and service such as through the Aboriginal Healing Foundation and monetary compensation I will only address Buddhist healing techniques that the Aboriginal community can use to help themselves. First of all, I will not ask the Aboriginal community to forget. One way of ensuring that this type of human rights violation never happens again is through public awareness. Forgetting is not the solution. Instead I will use a three step approach as taught by the Buddha that leads to peace of mind. This is a teaching that can be practiced while retaining the heritage and spirituality of the Aboriginal Canadians.

1. I would teach the Aboriginal Canadians meditation on loving kindness and direct it towards them. This technique which acknowledges the hurt and anger, in a non judgemental manner, softens the heart, reduces the hurt, and overtime, eliminates anger and resentment. This is the start to forgiveness.
2. I would teach them meditation on concentration and insight that leads to serenity and letting go. This form of meditation calms the mind and brings peace. It also leads to the letting go of the mental burden that they are carrying; it leads to the letting go of the unspeakable abuse.
3. I would encourage emulating the great survivors of residential schools who despite the odds survived this horror and rose to the challenge by beating the system.

Begin the practice of loving kindness by bringing to mind a happy occasion when you brought joy to the life of another. Savour the satisfaction and joy of this simple deed. Then concentrate on the words and repeat very softly almost in your mind.

May I be free from suffering. May I be well.

May I be happy. May I be at peace.

² Native Canadians to get 1.6 billion for school abuse - Howard Williams

This is your wish for yourself and it is the wish of all of us who care and want to make a difference in your life. You are not asking God or anyone else for help and assistance. You are, with great compassion and love just stating your wish for yourself. Form a circle of friends who care and meditate daily. I would combine this technique with the spirituality of the Aboriginal people. I would encourage the Aboriginal community to go back to their roots and draw from the respect, love and compassion that is integral to their teaching and culture. I would incorporate the teaching of their elders in their way of life.

See this metal rod that I am holding. It is heavy, very heavy. But it is heavy only when I am holding it in my hand. When I let go and put it down the metal rod is no longer heavy. Many Aboriginal persons are carrying a heavy load as a result of this unfortunate event. But they are not carrying it in their hand like I was. They are carrying it in their mind. They need to let go and put down this heavy load so that they can be released from this mental burden. When they let go it will no longer be a weight on their mind.

So, in the next stage, we use a combination of concentration and insight meditation that leads to mindfulness to assist with letting go. The concentration meditation that we use is known as Breathing Awareness Meditation. The insight meditation we use is known as Vipassana. These techniques of mindfulness results in calm, serenity and the letting go of the mental baggage that we carry in our mind by being in the present moment. Daily practice under the guidance of a qualified teacher will slowly lighten the load. The mind will be calm and at peace. Programs developed by Dr. Kabat-Zin at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre are now available nationwide. These programs have successfully used mindfulness meditation to reduce symptoms of stress, anxiety, depression and pain.

Finally I would encourage emulating the success stories such as that of Shirley I. Williams from the Wikwemikong Reserve. Shirley speaks candidly of her confusion about her identity. She was trying to merge into main stream society and cover her brown skin with makeup. Shirley says that she had no sense that she had a right to have an opinion. She was like a zombie³.

Following her father's advice Shirley preserved her heritage by speaking her language softly to herself under the bed sheets at night. She used to dream about the life she had with her family before residential school and kept it in memory. In 1979 at the age of 40 she undertook the challenge of entering Trent University and kept her promise to her father. When she graduated in 1983 she decided to be a teacher and to bring back the language, culture and identity that the Aboriginal Canadians had lost. Education is also a way out of this cycle of pain.

I often marvel at how the Jewish community rose above the atrocities of the holocaust. The root cause for both is similar but the outcome is different. The root cause is one group of people thinking that they are better than the rest. The Jewish people kept the memory alive to ensure that it would never happen again and they worked together to overcome this horror. Learn from the success of other communities that have lived through torment and horror. Use every resource made available by the system, educate your children and turn this tragedy to success. Others have succeeded. So can you.

To complete this talk I have to address the Church Groups that contributed to this disaster and many other such disasters such as the Spanish Inquisition through proselytising. They too need help and

³ A Healing Journey Final Report summary points

assistance. Those who have contributed to this deed have passed away. The new generation of the four Church Groups have a heavy burden to bear. I do not have much time and as such I will focus my presentation on just identifying and using the Buddha's teaching to eliminating the root cause of this abuse. The Buddha said that people perform unskillful acts due to false view, ignorance and not knowing. Christ too used similar words when he was crucified. He said "forgive them father for they do not know what they are doing".

The root cause for this tragedy is the false view that exists in some Christian Churches. It is the misguided belief that they are superior to others and that their religion and faith is the only way to salvation and heaven. It is also fear of that which is different and unknown. I would with compassion educate and enlighten such missionaries to the suffering that they have brought to the world throughout history. The spread of Christianity to many countries has been accomplished through suffering and bloodshed. I often wonder how these other first generation converted Christians felt when they were forced to give up their identity. Who helped them in their time of need? Would this modern day tragedy, the results of which we are still experiencing, have been avoided if the forced conversions and atrocities of the past had been better documented and preserved as done by the Jewish community?

I would begin by educating the Church groups on the spirituality and goodness found in other religions and other ways of life. This will help to ease the fear of the unknown. The heavens according to the compassionate teachings of the Buddha are open to all. Entrance to the heavens is based on your inner purity not your birth religion. The Buddha's Path advocates purity of mind, speech and action for rebirth in heaven. You will not find a God who will only save Buddhists in the Buddha's teachings. Neither will you find a God who will place all others persons of other faiths in eternal hell. In fact you will not find any God who punishes, maims, kills or causes suffering through floods, plagues, earthquakes, volcanoes or any other means in the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha's Path is a way of life that leads to purity of mind, speech and action that can be practiced by persons of all religious traditions with no fear of a God that punishes. The Buddha was a teacher of Gods and men. The Gods according to the teachings of the Buddha are compassionate beings.

The Buddha said that it is not by birth that one is an outcaste. It is not by birth that one is noble. It is by deed that one is an outcast. By deed that one is noble (*Vasala Sutta*). He then defined an outcaste as one who performed unskillful deeds of cruelty that brought suffering to others. The examples he gave of an outcast includes those that are prone to violent anger, those that have base desires, and those that are selfish, deceitful, shameless and fearless in doing evil. Any person of any religious tradition including those that do not subscribe to any religion are noble persons if they lead a life of purity, compassion and kindness. The civilized, according to the teachings of the Buddha, are not based on any religious tradition. It is based on ones civility or ones kindness and compassion to others.

Then I would encourage the Church groups to question, investigate and reflect on their scriptures that lead directly or indirectly to human suffering. There is so much love and compassion in the teachings of Christ. How is it possible that such events are repeated in history? The Buddha encouraged question before acceptance. He said, "Do not accept anything based on emotional faith. One should use one's common sense, reasoning and understanding before accepting anything". In the Kalama Sutta the Buddha encouraged his followers to investigate his teachings by saying "Do not accept anything based on hearsay, tradition, rumours, and preconceived notions or because it is in the scriptures. Do not accept anything just because you respect the teacher. The Buddha encouraged careful examination to see if the teaching is moral, blameless and leads to the well being and happiness of others and yourself. If it did then he encouraged repeated practice. If it did not he

asked us to reject the teachings. The Buddha also said “If you find Truth in any religion accept that Truth”.

I would like to conclude my presentation with this teaching of the Great Spirit, Christ and the Buddha. Gichi Manitou the Great Spirit said “All life must be respected”. Christ said, “Love thy neighbour as yourself” and the Buddha said, “Even as a mother protects with her life, her child her only child so with boundless heart should one cherish all living beings”. According to Buddhist teachings true healing for persons who perform unskilful deeds begins after apology and reflection, when one ensures that what has happened in the past never happens again. The best way to ensure this is to reflect on these words of the Great Spirit, Christ and the Buddha before one speaks or acts.

Radhika Abeysekera

Winnipeg, Manitoba

Canada