



BRAHMA KUMARIS WORLD SPIRITUAL UNIVERSITY

Igniting the Spirit of Human Dignity: Human Rights and Human Values

Statement in celebration of the

50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948-1998)

The 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights comes at a most appropriate moment to remind us of the fundamental human standards which we all want, and need, to live by. Created in the aftermath of the barbarity and abuses of World War II, it remains one of the most inspiring documents written this century, and its simple truths constitute a basic blueprint for daily life. The Declaration not only reminds us of our rights but also of the responsibilities that we have towards ourselves and our fellow human beings. Recognition of these rights and responsibilities is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. Yet fifty years after their proclamation by the United Nations General Assembly, and their widespread endorsement, human rights continue to be violated on an international, social, professional and interpersonal level.

The vision of what we want to achieve - the universal observance of these fundamental rights and freedoms - is clear. It is a vision that has now been endorsed by governments, championed by organizations and claimed by individuals worldwide. And yet notwithstanding the universality of the Declaration, its standards are often relegated to the back seat of social progress, leaving exploitation, violence and injustice to prevail in one form or another. It is as if the link between aspiration and action, between principle and practice, has been severed, exposing a gap between what we believe and accept as correct and what we actually do.

This raises the question of why we are unable to do that which we want to do: to implement clear and cherished aspirations that make for a better quality of life for all. The aspirations may be high, but are they really beyond our reach? They are certainly not physically or financially impossible and they have widespread political acceptance; they embody a way of life and values which we all believe in and identify with. So how can we implement the values that make up the common standards of achievement set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?

The first step is to clarify the foundation on which such values are based. This is not stated in the Declaration, although there was discussion about it at the time the Declaration was being drafted. The reason why human beings are entitled to rights and values such as life, liberty and security of person, freedom of thought and belief is because the human person has worth - because the human form is the vessel within which resides the human spirit. It

is not matter itself, mere flesh and bones, which gives rise to such rights but the soul that animates such matter and without which the human body is little more than an empty shell. The physical elements themselves that make up the human body also exist elsewhere and are not themselves worthy of such rights. Only the soul, that sacred spark of divine light, the origin of our consciousness, personality and will power, can lay claim to such rights. Thus we need to understand and accept our own spirituality - understand the essentially spiritual nature of our own identity - before we can understand why we have such rights, and their corresponding responsibilities. Once we understand why we should have such rights and responsibilities we will be in a far better position to acknowledge their existence and respect and observe them.

Secondly, we need to look at our motivation or attitude when we choose to implement, or ignore, the values that make up these rights and responsibilities. Generally, we fail to respect others' rights because we wish to put our own desires and ourselves or perceived well being before others. While I should remain conscious of my own worth and rights, I must not forget the worth and rights of others and the impact that the expression or fulfilment of my rights may have on others and their rights. My rights carry with them a responsibility as to the way in which I exercise such rights. Sometimes the way in which I enjoy my rights can prevent another from enjoying his or hers. Exercising my rights irresponsibly, or putting my own selfish desires before another's human rights, must be challenged insofar as it accords greater importance to the fulfilment of my desire or selfish greed than to another's need or sacred right. We may have to sacrifice some of our desires to ensure that the needs and fundamental rights of others can be fulfilled, but the right to fulfilment of a need carries a higher moral authority than the right to fulfilment of a desire, especially when the fulfilment of that desire will curtail the fulfilment of another's basic need. We have to see humanity as one human family and put fulfilment of our collective needs and rights before fulfilment of non-essential desires. Understanding the moral force of this approach can help give us the commitment to hold to it when it involves some sacrifice or putting others first.

We must also understand that denying another's freedom for the sake of my own is ultimately self-defeating and misguided; if I deny or limit another's freedom then sooner or later my own freedom will be diminished. One of life's natural laws also states that I can never hope to keep receiving without first giving. Further, I have no right to deprive another of a right that that person has because of who he or she is - a fellow human soul and child of God.

Socially responsible behaviour that leads to people's human rights being respected requires that we make the right choices. In this regard, we should remember that our attitudes and actions find their roots in, or are derived from, our understanding. With no understanding our actions are often directionless or liable to be pulled by a passing whim rather than a conscious and committed choice. With some sense of understanding we can at least be guided by our conscience. However with a clear understanding firmly rooted within, we can be empowered by our conscience: it will drive us and give us the strength to act notwithstanding that some personal sacrifice may be involved. We will be happy to make that sacrifice for the sake of fulfilling a higher goal. An active conscience that is a crystallization of clear understanding will not lie down and sleep but must speak and find expression in action.

Thoughts and desires may at times be strong, but they do not exist in a moral vacuum such

that if they merely seem to be or at that moment feel right, they should be expressed. Their quality must also be assessed, and this involves assessing the quality of the understanding or perception on which they are based. To ensure that they are of the highest quality, we should ensure that our desires flow from a high, clear source - that of spiritual understanding. Then they will be constructive, purposeful desires, the wish to do good. We must allow our conscience to be imbued with the truth of spiritual awareness and our thoughts, attitudes and actions to be rooted in the understanding of the ultimately spiritual nature of our identity. Then we will not just be doing what we can do but what we must do, not just what we have an externally arising responsibility to do but what we experience as an internal obligation to do. Instead of doing what is right, we will be being right.

Recent years have seen erosion of some of the political and geographical walls behind which human rights have been abused, but in their place we have often encountered cultural and ethnic differences which are exploited to justify abuses. Awareness of our common spirituality and shared human identity can help us transcend the next level of boundaries - those arising from a heightened consciousness of our bodies - and recognise and respect the universality of human rights. To reaffirm faith in the dignity and worth of the human person we must first understand why we have such worth and then experience it. Spirituality will enable each of us to find our soul, the only aspect of our identity which is common to all humanity, and which gives rise to the universal rights of the Declaration. It is only when we have a spiritual perspective that we can be free and equal and can truly act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood as the Declaration urges us to.

Human rights are derived from the worth of the individual, and that worth can be seen in the exercise of reason and conscience and the expression by the individual of values such as respect, freedom and justice. We must bring those human values back into our personal, professional and societal relationships to reaffirm the worth of the individual. When we do so, human rights will be the unwritten laws, which will be upheld and followed naturally by everyone, everywhere, as a way of life.

Each individual and all of us collectively, determine the future of humankind. The more we accept the personal challenge and responsibility of bringing these values back into our daily lives, the more certain and secure the future will be. The method is to develop a greater awareness of our own spirituality and inner goodness.

The choice, and the consequences, are ours.

Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University

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The University was founded in India in 1937 and has branches in over 100 countries worldwide.

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