

Moving together through Action and Dialogue *Parichart Suwanbubha¹*

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Good morning friends and thank you very much for the creative and important event of the WCC to organize this Critical Movement Conference². I also appreciate very much your invitation to have me sharing my experiences on this topic.

I will talk about interreligious dialogue from my feeling of appreciation of its contributions. My interest covers both the realization of its theoretical importance and its application to respond to co-operative efforts on social justice issues. In other words, I care about the understanding of dialogue of study and dialogue of life. When we talk about dialogue of life, we usually put any problems as the center and cooperate to apply any religious resources such as teachings, and putting and translating them into action. Therefore when we deal with dialogue, it should include action at the same time. In addition, it means that people who are involved with both dialogue and action need to cooperate and make use of the characteristics and conditions of both dialogues (of study and of life). It should be a kind of ‘interconnected working’ instead of ignoring the necessary function of each other. However, there are some facts relating to both kinds of dialogue, which we need to reconsider.

May I share with you my understanding about ‘dialogue’? I think of some key words of it such as ‘different convictions,’ ‘deep listening,’ ‘human activities’ and anything composed to be ‘concrete human,’ ‘two ways of equal communication’ including the understanding it as ‘a process’ not as ‘an absolute answer’.

Different convictions

We understand that dialogue is a form of encounter, which can take place between two individuals or groups who carry different convictions (Mojzes 1989, 199) To repeat, it is related to different convictions! According to my experiences especially in Thailand, most people do not like to pay attention to a term ‘difference’ because they are afraid that it will interrupt and lead to unsuccessful cooperation. They prefer to avoid talking about the differences between both partners in dialogue. There is a saying in Thai, ‘*sawaeng jud roem, sangueng jud taeng*’ meaning ‘search for the common and reserve the difference’

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In the area of intra-religious dialogue between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists, we have been usually told not to talk about the differences of both. Instead, we should pay attention to how we can live together peacefully and cooperate to each other. Yes, it is appropriate as a starting point of the dialogue process but I think it is quite risky and leads to more complicated result. For example, some misunderstanding about holiness of monks in Theravada is compared to the lesser holiness of ordained monks who have family in some Mahayana Buddhist schools. Moreover, the suspect about Mahayana Buddhist teaching of being too far from the authentic teaching of the Buddha and elder teachers has also remained and is hidden in the heart of some Theravadin Buddhists. The feeling of too much individualism and too much conservatism in Theravada Buddhist tradition is observed by some Mahayana Buddhists as well. These points may imply a sense of prejudice and superior and inferior complexity of both partners. Some people may think this is a small point and we should dream more about other important things. In fact, it is crucial how we could make ourselves familiar to welcome the difference of others through learning more information and growing understanding through the process of dialogue before expecting more concrete activities.

I think this idea would be in accordance with both Buddhist teaching and general ground rules of dialogue. That is, 'not having enough information' can be called delusion or *moha* that is one root of mistakes and evils according to Buddhist perspective. Furthermore from the point of dialogue, 'wondering' is close to 'not trusting' or 'not enough confidence.' According to Swidler's ground rules of dialogue, if there is no trust, there is no dialogue.(Swidler 1987, 14) Therefore I think that it would be good to educate our young generation to consider 'differences' of any religious and cultural belief, attitudes and practices as 'normal' things and it is our duty to 'associate with' and 'learn about' such differences. Especially in the process of dialogue, learning and realization of the whole picture of 'difference' is as important as calling for cooperation in social justice activities.

Deep listening and concrete human

In order to be able to accept the differences of others, one needs to practice 'deep listening' (Bohm 1991) and to develop a sense of 'concrete human' in the process of dialogue then the possibility of further cooperative action will follow. I realize clearly the importance of 'deep listening' of David Bohm when I introduced the process of dialogue to a group of villagers at Ban (district) of Tharoe, Kokpho, Pattani, a southern province of Thailand.

Let me share with you our project of Mahidol University Research Center for Peace Building in applying 'dialogue' to promote harmony, security and justice to our people in the South. That is, villagers of more than 4-5 districts, especially district of Tharoe, will not be able to utilize a public forest which is full of various kinds of valuable herb plants any more due to the government project of using this land for the registered poor. This is an example of different standpoints and different sets of reasons among people. The problem is both villagers and government officers never meet and talk about the reasons and conditions. Both never share and listen to the troublesome, ecological loss from the side of villagers and the benefit of the poor from the side of government project after changing this forest as a residential area for the poor. Our center was asked to propose the

process of dialogue and made an appointment for Tharoe's villagers and government officers. We prepared the villagers by telling them the starting points and ground rules of dialogue such as being open minded to listen to different reasons of government officers, not entering the dialogue with inferior complexity, instead encouraging the feeling brave to share the villagers' trouble after the lost forest. Only one government officer arrived at the meeting very late and looked so serious because he might guess that he would be a target of attacking from the villagers. What we experienced was the cooperation from the villagers to pursue the dialogue by telling and sharing how important this herbal forest was although we needed to persuade and cheer them up to speak. Then that government officer told them the story why and how related to a process of giving this piece of forest to the poor. We found out that villagers listened attentively and reacted humanly to the only one officer. It was an atmosphere of authentic, deep listening to the meaning, reasons and conditions of such related issue. In additions, they did not treatment that officer as an enemy. The dialogue needs to go on more than one meeting but our realization about dialogue is not only an idea encountering with an idea. It is really the human activities and concrete human anxiety about their destiny to involve with each other whether they belong to any religions. In this case, both Muslims and Buddhists joined and shared their voices across religious boundaries to call for more explanation and better understanding and treatment from the government officers. To repeat, an index of successful dialogue is the treatment and reaction of each side as brothers, as sisters, as junior and as senior, above all, as human beings, who encounter the general effort of survival best.

Furthermore, the proper attitude and behavior towards 'the difference' in the process of dialogue is already implied in most of the world religion, such as the saying of Muhammad 'no one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.' (Imam Nawawi's collection of Forty Hadith). The same implication appears in Christianity, 'whatever you wish that others do to you, do so to them'. (Matthew 7, 12) According to Buddhist scripture, 'a state that is not pleasant or delightful to me must be so for him also; and a state which is not pleasant or delightful for me, how could I inflict that on another?' (Samyutta Nikaya, V, 353.35-354.2) Therefore, in our case the only one officer experienced the human treatment from his partners in dialogue, the villagers who followed the ground rules of dialogue, in a more comfortable atmosphere than he might have expected.

Two ways of equal communication

Moreover, in doing, talking and walking in dialogue, the partners in the process are 'equal with equal' (Swidler 1987, 15) and need to learn from each other by identifying their own position clearly. This meeting point in dialogue can be seen from the real event in the south of Thailand to confirm us that action and dialogue can go hand in hand. Some of us may hear about the unrest and violence situation in the deep South, Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat provinces. A lot of innocent people both Buddhists and Muslims have been murdered by insurgents whom we don't know clearly who they are. Militants are sent in the far South to tackle this unrest situation. In addition, even the report from the centre for International Development and conflict Management, University of

Maryland considers our country as follows: ‘ *Thailand earned a red icon in the report for the renewal of the ‘high level hostilities’ of the southern insurgency. “Peace and Conflict’ sees some (yellow) chances of peace in the near future, but for now the South is one of the world’s most dangerous wars.*’ (Dawson 2005, 12) Very sorry to hear and too far to imagine and accept the fact that in our country is one of the world’s most dangerous wars! More or less, it is a part of truth. We know only that it is our duty to try hard to restore peace in this troubled region.

For our center of peace building, we introduce a process of dialogue as one among other means to respond to the situation. We try hard to get together many groups of people. For example, once the first group of 30 was composed of some teachers, government officers, militants and policemen both Buddhists and Muslims. The religious leaders, student leaders and community leaders from Islam, Buddhism and Christianity were in the second groups. We trained each group about the nature, process and the proper ground rules of dialogue. Then another time we encouraged both groups to do dialogue on the theme of promoting peace in their community. The point is we realized the difficulty of letting the groups of people who may not understand each other well came to talk and describe the inner feeling without any boundaries, in accordance with the rules of dialogue. We tried hard to maintain the equal opportunity to share and learn. We recommended them to conduct the two ways communication, not a parallel monologue. We tried hard to remind them of applying the suggested ground rules of dialogue in their dialogue process. For example, one of our students shared his terrible experience when militants entered his house without notice to search for guns and other violent weapons. Some students in the group agreed that if the militants had applied the rule of dialogue in declaring their position who they were and why they came clearly, the feeling and attitudes towards militants would have been much better. At the same time, in the process of dialogue, some militants had a chance to explain how they feel danger and their idea to use immediate and sudden tactics to search for hidden weapons in the house. Again, it was *a real human encounter* with various kinds of emotions such as fear, anxiety, anger, sympathy and a moment of better understanding. The point I like to share with all of us here is it is necessary to prepare the groups of people who carry different standpoints before they enter into the process of dialogue. Then the theory and talking about dialogue can work well by putting it into action.

Moreover, our center makes a plan to train the group of radio DJs in the South who produces the programs on air by letting people share their different idea related to the conflict and violence in the South. Most of the time, these people express their unpleasant and violent emotions and attack each side as an antagonistic confrontation on air through radio program due to their various experiences as the lost and the suffering. For example, some Buddhist victims of violence would condemn the Muslim insurgents negatively. At the same time some Muslim groups who used to experience the unrighteousness and injustice from some government officers would scold and express their anger violently. Through the process of dialogue training, we hope that these radio DJs will apply the ground rules and be able to manage and make people of different points of view become much calmer and more respectful reacting.

A process of learning, not an absolute answer

Some Thai people who have suffered from the violent events in the South may think that the process of dialogue does not work well because their expectation of peace is not met yet. Even some think that dialogue offers ‘a certificate’ for the work of those insurgents in the name of calling for peace and reconciliation instead of fighting back violently in order to end the southern unrest more efficiently. In fact, dialogue is a process of learning, understanding and preventing any injustice before it steps more to become any liberative violences. May I share with you an example of dialogue as a tool and action for learning from each other and for better understanding due to rediscover latent or recessive dimensions in one’s own tradition. This is what Paul Tillich calls ‘dynamic typology.’ (Migliore 1991, 162) This story I already shared with some of you, however, in order to make a point of dialogue as a process of learning, I will repeat it here. Eight years ago, I was in Germany and had a chance to join ‘the midnight bus program’ to help the homeless improve their self-esteem and their basic needs in daily life. I joined this program with some Christian friends called *Diakonie*. Our team was composed of three volunteers, a driver of the van and two women sitting in the back of van. We prepared pots of boiling hot water, paper cups, tea, coffee and instant soup. We began our volunteer job at 7 p.m. until midnight by collecting cakes and bread from the bakery. These cakes and bread were going to be thrown away because they wanted to sell things fresh each day. These foods are valuable to the poor. We were in the van driving around in downtown Hamburg. Here we could meet many homeless people, who stood in front of pubs and bars in order to beg for some money from people who enjoyed nightlife. Some of them slept close to heaters of department stores, some of them slept under the bridge, at the corner of the building. We woke them up and gave them food.

This is an example of ‘dynamic typology’ of which a Buddhist could learn about the authentic and clear meaning of ‘empty oneself’ and ‘carry the cross’ of the Christian friends. Our Christian friends explained these two concepts to a Buddhist through their actions in spite of the realization of their tiresome devotion, the danger and the risk. This interreligious dialogue of life and action reminds me of much clearer understanding of Buddhist teaching of detachment and loving kindness including compassion beyond any boundaries immensely. Therefore dialogue is not only talking in ‘the ivory tower’ but also a kind of ‘global responsibility action’ for the whole. By fulfilling a whole process of any learning, one needs to be able to apply its content into practice. By way of action, we are sure that dialogue has really lived up to its potential.

However, it would be very challenging to enter into the process of dialogue with a group of people who have a tendency to be the opposite pole to us such as some fundamentalists in every religion. It would make a process of dialogue become more spiritually meaningful because one may need more patience, more tolerance, and a more secure mind to experience more or less unpleasant responses. Once in the process of dialogue with people in the South of Thailand, I experienced the valuable spiritual test. That is, I suggested people of different faiths to try to understand others by ‘sympathetic imagination’ and even by trying John Dune’s ‘passing over’ to learn such religious

practices of others. Put in another way, it means that we stop following our own religious teaching, attitudes and practices for a while and intend sincerely to follow other practices of our friends seriously until we understand, sympathize and realize how precious, great effort and faith exist in the whole devotion, then we 'pass back' to our own traditions. I believe that we will get various responses both good and bad from people in this trying. For example, one person may say that our religious belief is not a thing could be tried by anyone and so on. The more we endure some unpleasant responses and continue honestly and sincerely learning others through the process of dialogue, the more we exercise inner work in light of spiritual development.

Up to this point, I like to maintain my belief that dialogue of study needs to cooperate with action and dialogue of life. Dialogue could be a way of making choices and resolving conflict related to social justice issues. Action and dialogue, in fact depend on each other. As long as people still search for understanding of truth, identity and personal faith affirmation, people should deeply involve themselves with dialogue. The crucial necessity is we should move together by learning and preparing properly ourselves in accordance with the nature and ground rules of dialogue and taking them into action.

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