

## **NOT TO ARGUE & WIN BUT TO KNOW & BE KNOWN**

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By Lama Doboomb Tulku

An inscription on the wall of a temple in Kerala says, "Here is a model abode, where men live like brothers, bereft of prejudices of caste or the rancour of religious differences". It was the temple established by Sri Narayana Guru in Kerala in 1888. It was the first such temple that was opened to everyone without any barrier whatsoever.

Sri Narayana Guru encouraged self-respect among those deemed to be of lower castes. He created a parallel system of temples in which he trained and appointed socially deemed "lower caste" people as priests.

As a Buddhist monk, my firm belief is that there is only one race and one caste in society: the human race. Some of them are educated and some are not educated; some are rich and others are poor; but all this is gained or lost over a lifetime. The poor can become rich and the rich can become poor. All people have the potential to become schooled, skilled, prosperous and enlightened. They have the potential to obtain Bodhi.

Gautama the Buddha said that in his system, caste was inconsequential. Action is the criterion that decides the real level of attainment of a person. In Buddha's immediate circle of disciples, there were hundreds of individuals belonging to what were then considered lower social categories. One of the three men who collected and edited the Buddha's teachings was Upali, who belonged to the barber caste, and another monk, Chunda, came from ironsmith caste.

Another keyword in that temple inscription is "model". These days it is extremely difficult to find a model environment or a model conduct. Wherever we go, things are either too glamorous or too bizarre. Whether it is an institution, a system or an individual, there is the need of a role model. Very high, refined ideas and ideals are there to inspire us but without a model that one can look up to, these high philosophies remain empty words.

Sri Narayana Guru started a tradition of pilgrimage which became an annual event. I recently had the opportunity to witness and participate in the 83rd Sivagiri pilgrimage at Varkala in Kerala. In December 2015, hundreds of thousands of devotees and followers, all attired in yellow, thronged the abode of Sri Narayana Gurudev.

The Guru was contemporary of M K Gandhi, and they had met each other. They had profound respect for one another: Sri Narayana Guru suggested Gandhiji to take a relook at the caste system and arranged to offer privileges to member of so-called lower castes so as to build a brotherhood free of prejudices.

The other legacy of Sri Narayana Guru is his efforts to bring about inter-religious harmony. He organized the first-ever All Religions Conference in Asia in 1924 in Alwaye, Kerala. It was only the second in the world after the first Parliament of World Religions held in Chicago, USA, in 1893. Narayana Gurudev delivered the essential message at the Alwaye, "We meet here not to argue and win but to know and be known".

The purpose of religion is to guide us towards harmony and high realization. There is no point being obsessed by a religion. After crossing the river by boat you go ahead on your way; you don't cling to the boat, saying "that is my boat". Narayana Gurudev said: "Religion is a matter of the mind. Nobody should say my religion is true; all other religions are false. There is truth in every religion."