Instead of quoting Gandhi, let me begin by quoting John Cobb, the leading American theologian, who started the Buddhist-Christian dialogue with Masao Abe over two decades ago. This is what Cobb wrote:

_If our traditional religious communities are so alienated from the teachings of their founders that they cannot see that American imperialism in the service of global capitalism stands in sharp contradiction to all they have taught, their ability in the future to address any issue of public importance is radically compromised._

Actually, this may be a challenge of apocalyptic dimensions. If the United States proceeds as its leaders now desire, it will lead the world into ecological catastrophe. Since the United States has the military power to suppress all national military opposition, the only effective resistance will be moral, intellectual, and spiritual. To be effective this will, no doubt, have to express itself in nonviolent civil disobedience. If our traditional religious communities do not generate, or at least support, such opposition, it is doubtful that resistance can achieve sufficient strength to block the implementation of disastrous American policies.

Many of us have come to realise that whatever that goes by the name of “western modernity”, often called “development” or “globalisation” is in fact neocolonialism - something that unjustly reaps the benefits away from the people. The Industrial Revolution spread the capitalist system through violence, conquests, ethnic cleansings, and slavery. Even within the heart of the empire the poor are taken advantage of through various means. The more the few of the upper class exploit the many of the lower class, there is an increase in violence. This violence multiplies the more modern technology is introduced, the more powers are vested in multinationals, and the more superpowers lose their moral conscience.

Economic, social and political inequalities, not to mention the exploitation that come in various forms, form the roots of violence: Violence that is inflicted on those from a different class background, those believing in a different religious creed, and those practising different customs. These differences are linked to the unjust social structure, which, in turn, depends on the world economic order operating under the _laissez-faire_ principle.

The stark differences existing in society results in one side enjoying privileges, making the other find various ways of opposition, even perhaps not through the normal means of justice, since the law serves the rich and powerful.

Once one side abuses the other, it is natural that the other would retaliate, hence exacerbating violence. This corresponds with a Buddhist saying that: “Bad deeds cannot be ended through retribution.” If such “bad deeds” as violence keep persisting in our world, then our economies would continue to produce arms, making the superpowers and their defence-related industries profit, at least in the short run. Eventually, such investments would yield no value to society but would only create losses.

How do we then find a way out of violence? The answer lies of course in the pursuit of non-violent means. That is, we need to swim against the mainstream currents of thought. We have to cease developing technology for weaponry. We have to set limits to modern technological developments. We have to make the existing free trade transparent and bounded.

From a Buddhist perspective, all suffering in this world are directly or indirectly linked to the three root causes of suffering, that is, greed, anger and delusion.

In our present-day world, greed is expressed through the creeds of capitalism and consumerism. People are coerced to believe in money and worldly sciences, which includes modern technology which will not let us time to search our true capabilities or the miracle of life. We should realise that the basis of western philosophy lies in René Descartes, whose dictum “cogito ergo sum” or “I think, therefore I am” has become immortal. We learned that Descartes is the Father of Modern Philosophy, but have we ever contemplated where the roots of individualism are? Individualism, expressed by oneself, is in fact a duality: If there exists a “one”, there also exists an “other”. This essence is contrary to the Buddhist principle of interdependence of all beings. In fact, we inter – are.

Today’s world has transformed Decartes’ “I think, therefore I am” to “I buy, therefore I am”, the essence of consumerism. The reason why we study is to be able to get a job and make money. Money for buying goods which are made to intoxicate us through the powers of advertising. It follows that if we lose the power to buy, we lose the purpose of ourselves.

Have we ever realised that we have been misguided by something that is the cause of violence? To achieve peace, Buddhism proposes “I breathe therefore I am.”

Our humanity is not about our thoughts. Thoughts may make us more intelligent, but they certainly do not make us good. Even without thinking, we might be good. But without breathing, we die.

We constantly breathe, without stopping. Yet we do not seem to give any importance to breathing. Our first breaths come when we are conceived, and our last when our bodies are dead. With western education, however, we ignore the importance of breathing. We breathe in
anger, hatred, stress, vengeance, greed, and delusion almost at all times.

Buddhists call the mindfulness of breathing ānāpānasati, we may want to try breathing in love instead of anger. We may be able to overcome the scourges of greed, anger and delusion through our conscious breathing.

Breathing meditation renders you intimately aware of a primal rhythm of your physical existence. Rather than imaginatively dissecting the body to examine it from without, one feels one’s way inside to explore it from within. Having found a stable posture in which the back is upright, bring the totality of attention to the physical sensation of the breath as it enters the nostrils, fills the lungs, pauses, contracts the lungs, is exhaled, pauses, and so on. Do not control the breath; just rest with calm curiosity in an awareness of the body breathing. If the breath is short and shallow, then notice it to be short and shallow. If it is long and deep, notice to be long and deep. There is no right or wrong way to breathe.

Breathing is a self-regulating motor function of the body. For the most part we draw and exhale breath as effortlessly as a plant turns toward the light of the sun. This natural process happens of its own accord. But as soon as one pays attention to it, its free flow tends to be inhibited by the grip of self-consciousness. Even though you try not to control the breath, the very act of paying attention to it seems to impose a degree of control. The trick is to learn how to remain fully aware of the breath without that awareness impeding its natural ebb and flow.

When we are conscious, we are able to understand the essence of mindfulness, which is the key to life. To understand life means more than knowing the sum of its mechanical parts, which is what we have been preached by materialistic science. At least we should come to realise that we should not be living our lives for our self-glorification, for climbing the social ladder—which is abound with injustices, but we should rather recognise that the downtrodden and exploited members of our society are no less important than us. We should also realise that we share a responsibility in protecting our natural environment, which is being incessantly destroyed. We should also learn how not to hate even those who are exploiting us, but we should instead overcome the unjust social structure which is full of violence.

The core teachings of Buddhism are the Four Noble Truths. If we do not confront suffering, we do not know the essence of suffering. Suffering that is both individual and social.

What we call globalisation or modern development does not have an understanding of the essence of suffering. One escapes from suffering using intoxicating means of consumerism and globalisation as the civilisation of the new generation. However, globalisation does not acknowledge the essence and meaning of life at all. Globalisation might be argued to improve the livelihood of people, but in fact it denies the true path towards true happiness, which is peace.

From a Buddhist perspective, man can enjoy happiness when man has three levels of freedom (1) Freedom to have a decent livelihood, which needs material and natural environments. In other words, man should not be taken advantage of in the pursuit of a good life. His environment should not be destroyed so that it drifts away from its natural equilibrium. Man should also be aware of the dangers lurking in nature and hence adapt himself to such dangers. (2) Freedom to enjoy a good life with others. This means freedom from being exploited by fellow men, be it from the state, theft, or dangers from capitalism and consumerism. Both freedoms are factors which foster man to achieve (3) freedom of the mind, which is supreme happiness. Man would be content in living simply, be compassionate towards others and should safeguard the environment. From a theological perspective, man must be able to experience God.

Once man is able to be with God, or recognise the supreme Dharma, his ego would diminish and peace would consequently be an important basis of his life and his society.

In order to achieve peace in a society, contemporaries who already have the seeds of peace embedded in them need to analyse the structure of society in order to understand how greed, anger, and delusion are expressed. It is fortunate that this idea has widely spread lately, beginning from Schumacher’s writings on Buddhist Economics some 30 years ago to the works of the Venerable Bhikkhu Payuttō in Siam. There is even a school of political science which denounces violence i.e. that of Glenn Paige, which has considerably gained interests in various educational establishments.

With the Buddhist perspectives on greed and hatred, true understanding of delusion becomes even more important. At last, there are some in institutions of learning who are yearning for contemplative education, which is closely associated with study of morals. In doing so, society would return to normalcy and peace would be achieved, ultimately resulting in mindfulness to achieve the highest freedom – wisdom, the essence of peace.

I sincerely hope that what I have said would make you contemplate and perhaps would even make you act by challenging the status quo—the intellectual subservience to the West which people in other parts of the world have been naively following for too long. Perhaps you could achieve peace in society and in the world through achieving peace within yourselves. Perhaps you could spread your individual state of peace through a culture of awakening and non-violence, replacing the evil and violence existing in today’s societies.

We may be a small group of people. However, the British sociologist, Margaret Meade, put it beautifully: never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, dedicated citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has. To put it stronger, let me end my talk by quoting Gandhi who said a small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history.