

DOES RELIGION HELP IN BUILDING A CULTURE OF PEACE?

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March 3, 2008

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I am very happy to participate in this panel discussion on “Does religion help in building a culture of peace in the 21st century?” organized newly formed Shining Network society in KAMLA NEHRU COLLEGE. I am expected to say some thing about “How Buddhism helps in building a culture of peace in the 21st century”. The answer to this title of the panel discussion which is in a question form – Does Religion help in building a Culture of Peace is “YES” provided the followers of each religion is truly sincere to the essential of their own religion.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama always points out that all the religions of the world are basically methods for turning the living beings towards positive, creative ways. Each religion has its own particular characteristics, and therefore it is important for all of us to learn from each other.

Religion is not something to be taken for granted and practiced as a cultural relic. Our practice has to have more conscious direction. When this is lost, there is no point following a religious tradition. Religion exists in the temple of our mind; external temples are there only to help us for activating the positive qualities of our mind. The external traditions and practices which some times look so glamorous and some times bizarre, are not essential, what is important for us is to understand and follow the basic messages of the main teachers of the religions.

The purpose of religion is not only to liberate the mind of humankind and set on the path that leads to spiritual realization, but also to foster amity and fraternity among all human beings. Therefore, the very word for religion in Sanskrit “dharma” means to bind together, in a sense, shows us where the key to unity and harmony lies.

The common enemy of all religious disciplines, the target of all the moral precepts laid down by the great teachers of mankind, is selfish instinct of mind. It is again ignorance that leads to selfishness, anger and passion, which lie at the root of all the troubles of man and the world. The great teachers wanted to wean their followers away from the path of negative deeds caused by ignorance, and to introduce them to the path of righteousness.

They all agreed that the prime necessity for this is to discipline the mind which harbours selfishness which is the origin of all evil. Selfishness, on the one hand,

leads us to the thoughtlessness and self-defeating pursuits of fruitless indulgences; on the other hand, it leads to aggressiveness in our social relations. Aggressiveness in turn leads to suspicion, tension and conflict.

Neither the individual nor society can therefore find peace and harmony as long as we do not rise above the baser elements in ourselves. In other words, we must rise above those traits that are based on ego-clinging, the negative syndrome that produces meaningless hedonism and rank materialism.

This is not to say that there are no differences between one religious tradition and another. There are differences. But when we look at dogmas, interpretations, the rituals that are prescribed, or the authorities that are cited, we can see that these disparities are the reflection of the particular conditions prevalent in the time, place, culture, language and traditions of the historical setting in which each tradition was born and fostered.

It is important that we remember what is essential, and to appreciate the fact that these differences in approach are positive, enriching factors of human culture rather than being points of disparity. We do not need or want one single approach to the spiritual situation of man. Diversity is both useful and necessary. When we look at the various religious traditions as instruments for developing a good heart, love for others, respect for others, and a true sense of brotherhood, then all is seen as equally useful and valid. The most important thing is to focus upon this common purpose in our dealings with those who follow other paths.

One has often heard it said that they who are true to the essentials of their own religion are also true to the essentials of all religions. By concentrating on the earnest practice of our individual tradition, we shall discover that all religions share the same sublime aim.

For many centuries human beings have been talking about peace and harmony. In these days of material abundance and advancement in science and technology, it seems that the more sophisticated our lives become the less we are conscious of these ideals. Yet there is no doubt about the need for these values. Without them the very survival of humanity is placed at risk.

The world has shrunk and has become more inter-dependent than ever before. All of us, individuals as well as nations, therefore must become concerned with the welfare of others. This is not only true from the spiritual perspective, or because universal altruism, but also because of self-interest.

Buddhism is one of the religions which teaches us to be less selfish and more compassionate. It teaches us to be humane and altruistic, and to think of others in the way we think of ourselves. It directs us to dedicate our thoughts and actions toward things that are mutually beneficial to ourselves and others.

Buddhism is said to have two aspects: Hinayana and Mahayana. The Hinayana doctrine teaches us the principles of not harming others, and the Mahayana advocates self-sacrifice in the interest of others. The essential purpose of Buddhism therefore is two-fold: not to harm others under any circumstances; and to help others as much as possible.

The ultimate purpose of all religions is to benefit and uplift humanity. It is important for us to ensure that we are always aware of this purpose. Our aim should not be to convert others to one's own religion or to harm follower of other religions.

All those concerned with spiritual ways must be deeply concerned today about the restlessness that is afflicting the mind of man everywhere. Improvements in standards of living and the power that scientific technology has placed at the disposal of man do not seem to have succeeded in improving our peace of mind nor in enabling nations to live together on peace. Man seems to be becoming increasingly materialistic, and driven by an insatiable desire for power and possessions. We seem to be wandering further away from inward peace and happiness of the mind, rather than coming closer to it.

We have to cultivate an appreciation of the role that spirituality plays in our life as an individual. In short, it is mandatory that we understand the life of the spirit to be the only firm basis upon which humanity can achieve stable, durable happiness and peace.

Generally speaking, spirituality need not necessarily be associated with the practice of an established religion. Another word for spirituality is inner science. His Holiness the Dalai Lama said in His most well-known book “**The Universe in a Single Atom**”: *Spirituality is journey into our internal resources, with the aim of understanding ‘who’ we are in the deepest sense and of discovering how to live according to the highest possible idea.*