
PEACE EDUCATION: THE NEED OF THE HOUR

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“Zeno the Stoic’s follower lambulus (ca.250 BC) … described a Blessed Isle in the Indian Ocean (perhaps Ceylon): there, he reported, all men were equal, not only in rights but in ability and intelligence; all worked equally, and shared equally in the product; all took equal part, turn by turn, in administering the government; neither wealth nor poverty existed there, nor any war of the classes; nature produced fruit abundantly of her own accord, and men lived in harmony and universal love.” Will Durant: The Story of Civilisation, Vol.2, pp. 563-4

At this historic moment in Sri Lanka, it is relevant to remember that Sri Lanka has from ancient times been an outstanding centre from which messages of harmony, justice and sustainable development have radiated through and illuminated the entire region. References to this abound in world literature, of which the quotation cited is just one. Not without reason did Sri Lanka acquire the image of being a dhamma deepa – an island identified with the practice and teachings of peace. We need now to reconnect ourselves with our rich and many-faceted inheritance of religious harmony, peace education, philosophy, art, architecture, sustainable development and international relations which were outstanding by any standards. As we salute all those who have made this possible, from the President down to the humblest citizen, it becomes imperative for the focus of our national attention to shift towards the great task of winning the peace. The emphasis thus shifts towards the restoration of national unity and the establishment of a reign of justice for all. This task calls for a concentrated and determined effort, not merely by the government but by all sections of society. Against this background we, in Sri Lanka, now have a unique opportunity to win this peace in a manner which will reverberate the world over as one of the outstanding instances in history of peace rising triumphant from the ashes of war. We have the necessary historical and cultural background to achieve this and we must rise to the occasion. At a time when the whole world is weary of war and tension, our example can revive hope in the future. We must not lose sight of the fact that while rehabilitation in a material sense is of the utmost importance, the problems before us need to be addressed also from the psychological and educational point of view. Anger, prejudice, revenge, bitterness, hatred and ignorance need concerned attention, for shattered minds are as much a legacy of war as shattered homes. The challenge of addressing these problems and achieving the victories of peace is now before us. What we need are the will and the determination to achieve this goal. This requires the generation of the necessary attitudes and the communication of the necessary information. The golden route to this result is peace education, for a generation has grown up which has known no environment but war, with all the insecurity, tension, distrust and misunderstanding which accompany it. The cast of mind induced by these factors will not disappear on its own. Its elimination needs active assistance. This necessitates a demonstration of the ways in which this can be achieved and an indication of the glowing results which can emerge if our national energies are directed towards this end. If we sleep upon this task the sacrifices of the war would have been in vain. Peace education is a neglected subject the world over and the world has paid dearly for this neglect. There is an ocean of peace-related knowledge lying untapped by educational systems and waiting to be used. We need to demonstrate to a waiting world that we have it in our national character to use this knowledge and emerge without bitterness from the emotional and physical debris of a thirty year war and become once more a nation that teaches and practises peace. We live in the nuclear age in which we are all doomed to perish unless we make peace the order of the day in the next decade or two. The great religions of the world which are the universal heritage of all humanity can light the way to a bright new future for all. We, in Sri Lanka, are uniquely privileged in having four of the world’s great religions existing side by side in our midst and enriching our mutual environment. We can use this cross-cultural inheritance to chart out a pathway of peace which can be an inspiration to all. We are a country now called upon to provide this example, for our ancient traditions, our recent conflict and our national character all combine to provide us with one of history’s greatest opportunities to show the world how a lasting peace can be snatched from the smouldering debris of war. The reality to be faced is that there are legions of shattered families, avalanches of bitter memories, several millions who have known nothing but a world of war. Even if all these people can be rehabilitated in a material sense, the psychological trauma will remain. There cannot be a peaceful society so long as this emotional and psychological aspect remains unattended. Peace education at all levels holds the key towards restoring these shattered minds and putting them on the road towards constructive participation in the process of rehabilitation and reconstruction of the national psyche. The subject if properly taught can transform the national scene, for ethical issues flood into every department of it and youth is an age of idealism which is greatly responsive to such concepts. We must not permit the pressure of bread and butter subjects to crowd out from the curriculum the necessary teachings on peace, with all the strong idealisms they embody. Peace teaching can in fact help to mould a stronger and more caring national character for the Sri Lanka of the future. Peace education draws its materials from every subject taught in school – history, geography, literature, drama, physics, chemistry, biology, sociology and whatever subject one may care to name. We need to generate the necessary skills for peace related aspects to be drawn into teaching in every subject and at every level. One of the first peace lessons should be drawn from world history, which is full of examples from the earliest times to the present day of the sacrifices of hard-won wars being negated by inattention to the demands of peace. For example, after World War I there were eloquent debates at Versailles when the smaller nations criticized the great powers for throwing away the opportunities of building a just world order by still pursuing their imperial interests and neglecting the cause for which so many millions sacrificed their lives. There are important lessons in these historical examples and we must not neglect the task of ascertaining what the causes were of the conflict that has just ended. We must as one nation address those cause and eliminate them. The range of topics to be covered in peace education is vast but some indication can be given of them to people at all levels from the schoolroom upwards, so that we can build up a culture of peace and togetherness rather than of war and separateness. Peace education consists of three main facets. These are the generation of : The necessary knowledge and awareness The necessary attitudes The necessary

skills These three areas have been much researched internationally and there is a vast amount of accumulated experience which can be used by our teaching profession. In the area of knowledge, children must be taught how conflicts and problems arise, how they can be solved, what institutions and human rights principles can be invoked and what each individual can contribute. We must have knowledge of the successes and failures of the past, how obstacles to peace were overcome and how the seemingly impossible was achieved by great figures such as Wilberforce, Gandhi and Martin Luther King. All of this would be highly inspirational material. "Zeno the Stoic's follower lambulus (ca.250 BC) … described a Blessed Isle in the Indian Ocean (perhaps Ceylon): there, he reported, all men were equal, not only in rights but in ability and intelligence; all worked equally, and shared equally in the product; all took equal part, turn by turn, in administering the government; neither wealth nor poverty existed there, nor any war of the classes; nature produced fruit abundantly of her own accord, and men lived in harmony and universal love." Will Durant: *The Story of Civilisation*, Vol.2, pp. 563-4 In the field of attitudes, children should be imbued with a duty of care, a sense of responsibility, a resolve not to cause harm, an instinctive affirmation of human rights and a sense of respect for human dignity of every individual. The necessary attitudes to be generated are concern for others, a desire to help and be of service, concepts of honesty, trustworthiness and fairness, tolerance, generosity and compassion and a respect for other cultures and religions. They should be asked to recall and appreciate "the little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love" which they have received from people of all communities at various times, thus imposing on themselves a duty to act similarly towards others. In the field of skills, they should be trained to understand how problems and conflicts arise in their neighbourhood and to consider positive ways in which they could help to avoid them before they occur and resolve them when they have occurred. They must also be shown ways in which they can transform anger into understanding, conflict into cooperation, social indifference into assistance to those in need and inactivity into active participation in whatever way one can. All these can be the subject of essays, discussions, debates and workshops in the classroom. Children should be taught that the process of establishing peace is a process to which each individual can and indeed has a duty to contribute something every day. An important route to all these ends is cross-cultural education, for it is imperative in this day and age for every child not to be boxed in within the culture to which he or she is born, but to have some awareness of other religions and cultures as well. While every child needs to be exposed in depth to his or her religion, this does not mean that they should grow up in total ignorance of all others. Consequently, it is imperative in every school that some perspectives be imparted of the teachings of the major religions. In Sri Lanka, this means Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Every one of them teaches peace, understanding, human dignity, peaceful settlement of disputes, protection of the environment, care for future generations and other basic principles essential to a sustainable peace. Many children under our educational system grow up with an implied understanding that other religions are different from one's own in their teachings on these aspects. The converse is the truth and each child's desire for peace and contribution towards it would be enormously increased by an awareness of the congruence of all religious teachings on these fundamental aspects so vital to the preservation of peace. The Hague Appeal for Peace has worked out programmes for peace education at all levels ranging from the kindergarten to the highest school levels and has produced the documentation necessary for teachers. Likewise, UNESCO has produced a range of materials on this topic and all these need to be brought together for the benefit of the teaching profession in Sri Lanka. Much work has also been done on this by such institutions as the Peace Foundation of New Zealand. There have also been great educational peace projects such as that conducted by the City Montessori School, Lucknow, the biggest secondary school in the world and one whose peace programmes have won for it the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education. This institution has produced practical studies showing how peace perspectives can be drawn into practically every subject taught in the curriculum. All this knowledge and experience needs to be brought together and made available to the teaching profession in Sri Lanka. This points to the need for a training course to be established immediately for teachers in relation to peace studies, ranging from historical and philosophical perspectives to the lives of great historical, literary and spiritual personalities connected with peace. The subjects taught should also enter the area of practical activities such as studying the causes of conflict and devising ways of solving them. There should also be some references to the history and current standing of international law and human rights, which are all too often an area totally unknown to the average citizen. It is for lack of this knowledge on the part of citizens that rulers are sometimes able to violate international law and human rights with impunity. All of these resources need to be harnessed into one central repository of knowledge and teaching which needs to be established immediately. Indeed, this can prove the foundation eventually for a university of peace, which can collect and diffuse this knowledge, not only in Sri Lanka, but in the region and throughout the world. We have the capacity to give global leadership in this project and we can use this opportunity to initiate the moves necessary towards this end, which can establish Sri Lanka as an international centre of peace studies. The establishment of a peace university in Sri Lanka can make this country a foremost resource for cross cultural and inter-religious perspectives and understanding, and the time is perhaps opportune for the establishment of such an institution. Another aspect that needs to be cultivated is the generation of practical awareness of each other's conditions and life-styles and to this end, it is essential that all students in Sri Lanka be required as part of their education to live for even a month or two in different geographical areas acquiring an understanding of how similar the problems, aspirations and attitudes of people are, whatever their cultural or geographical background. Putting students of all levels from school children to undergraduates, drawn from all parts of the country to live together for a few days has invariably resulted in seeing them emerge from such residential workshops with a resolve to be friends for life. This is the way in which we can make Sri Lanka one country with one people, sharing a set of common aspirations and values and taking a pride in their nation. An important suggestion which may be implemented in Sri Lanka is to institute a week designated as "Peace Week" during which various peace-related activities can be intensively conducted in every school. They include the production of a peace newsletter, the performance of peace related plays, class and inter-class debates on peace-related subjects, invitations to local

members of parliament, lawyers, town councillors and others to speak on relevant topics, organizing peace concerts, contacting peace organizations overseas, watching peace related videos, holding a model UN General Assembly and having speech contests and peace essays. There is a vast amount of material that can be gathered on these matters from bodies such as the Global Campaign for Peace Education, the Peace Foundation of New Zealand, the International Peace Bureau, UNESCO and other organisations. Let us take some action now and not lose this opportunity for establishing beyond the shadow of a doubt that Sri Lanka intends to make this a lasting peace which will be an example and an inspiration for all. This way we can once again attain an honoured place among the community of nations and be worthy successors of our past traditions which enabled us, in ancient times, to have ambassadors in the imperial courts of Rome and China. “Peace hath her victories no less renowned than war.” So have the poets written and so have the thinkers philosophized from the beginnings of recorded history. This is a thought that must be uppermost in our minds in these critical days when war is ended and peace begins. The writer is former Vice President of the International Court of Justice. Courtesy: Dailymirror.lk dailymirror.lk