

Lotus on the Lake: How Eastern Spirituality Contributes to the Vision of World Peace

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“Oh, East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet”
—Rudyard Kipling, “The Ballad of East and West”

THE Eastern and Western civilizations have traditionally approached the all-important question of peace in fundamentally different ways. The West has been primarily concerned with peace between nations, that is, the avoidance of international war and the reduction of organized, armed violence. Thus, Western efforts have sought to develop international treaties and create international institutions to monitor, promote and enforce those treaties. The Western approach wrestles with the evolving notions of the balance of power, collective security, and international organization. The role of the state remains paramount in order to carry out activities ranging from arms control and disarmament to peacekeeping and conflict resolution. From the terrible lessons of two world wars, there arose two great Wilsonian institutions: the League of Nations, the first international organization of states devoted to international peace in the world, and its successor, the present day United Nations, which sought to build upon the weaknesses and limitations of the League.

In the East, the emphasis on the concept of peace has been different. The Eastern approach has been inner rather than outer. Rather than focus on countries and institutions or even other people, the object is one's self. Rather than change the behaviour of states, the goal is to change the state of consciousness of the individual. Not the legislation of international laws, but the inner discovery and elucidation of spiritual laws was the goal. Instead of stressing the means to prevent aggression between nations, the Eastern approach has sought to reduce the sources of aggression within the individual. The ultimate aim was not to avoid or mitigate the fires of war, but to dampen the fires of anger, desire and ignorance. While the West studied *mediation*, the East strove to explore

meditation. Christians are taught to turn to prayer to achieve outer changes, while Buddhism and Hinduism advocate meditation and chanting, to achieve inner change. Ultimately, I hasten to point out, a pure prayer and a pure meditation should be one and the same experience: an absorption of individual consciousness into a far greater and purer consciousness, as described by both Eastern and Western religions.

While Christians in the West grappled with the concept of a “just war,” Buddhists and Hindus sought to explain the inner causes of conflict. Christians sought the noble goal of “peace on earth.” Eastern spiritual teachers, on the other hand, sought to find the noble path to peace (*Shanti* in Sanskrit) within the individual. While fundamentalist Christians prepared themselves to await indefinitely for the second coming of Christ and the peace that would then be permanently established, the Eastern seekers sought the immediacy of meditation to obtain peace within themselves in the present moment. Not armed force, but inner force was called for. In short, the Western approach was about outer peace and the Eastern one was centered on inner peace.^{1,2}

It would be wrong, however, to say that the Western Christian tradition completely ignored inner peace and that Eastern spiritual traditions paid no attention to outer peace. Indeed, the Holy Bible contains significant references to inner peace, such as “the peace of God that passeth understanding,” “my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you” in addition to the more outward-oriented beatitude “blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.”³ And many prominent Christians who became important world leaders, including US President Woodrow Wilson, the founder of the League of Nations, and US President Franklin Roosevelt, the driving force behind the establishment of United Nations, have recognized the great value of inner and spiritual peace. Still, one can say that Christian civilization has traditionally given much less attention to inner peace as a way of establishing world peace.

Similarly, it would be wrong to say that Eastern spirituality made no effort to deal with outer peace. Buddhist rulers, like Ashok the Great, a king in India in third B.C.E., made great strides in formulating just laws and to form peaceful kingdoms, in addition to the propagation of Buddhist teachings and practice. The *Mahabharata*, the great Indian epic, is full of outer rules and regulations to guide the sovereign in peacemaking (as well as war-fighting). Still, it remains true that peace was primarily seen as an inner quality that had to be gained from within before it could be manifested without.

It would also be wrong to pass judgment on which approach is superior. In fact, inner and outer peace are totally and utterly complementary. One without the other is incomplete; only together, I believe, can one have the basis for a lasting and integral peace. Gradually, this is being recognized.

HOW INNER PEACE FOSTERS WORLD PEACE

“Since wars begin in the mind of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.”—Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

Inner peace is, as we have seen, the sense of peace within the individual person, that is, within you, me or any of our fellow human beings. It is sometimes felt as a calm of the mind, a tranquility of the emotions and satisfaction of the soul. In Eastern religions this is believed to be attained or increased through spiritual practices such as meditation and chanting. The practitioners can thus enter into the awareness of peace that exists within. Some faiths add that inner peace is also gained through spiritual work done in a spirit of selflessness, and in the gathering of people for worship or fellowship for a spiritual goal. Assuming that inner peace is gradually developed through spiritual practices, how does it help produce the long-sought-after goal of world peace? For many the answer is not obvious.

Some might even argue that inner peace is an impediment to world peace. If practitioners become totally self-satisfied, they may be unwilling to contribute to the larger humanity, seeking rather a withdrawn or reclusive life with no care for the outer world. According to many important religious traditions, including Nichiren Buddhism, this ignores the truth that inner peace gained through spiritual practice broadens one's concept of self, strengthens the role of morality and increases the sense of responsibility towards the world. The practitioner becomes more devoted to the betterment not only of human brothers and sisters but of all sentient beings that occupy the web of life.

Still, the full contribution of individual peace to world peace is not fully explained. A more elaborate analysis can be made in two logical two parts: first, the positive effect of inner peace on the actions of the practitioner and, second, the effects on the world at large. Using a combination of scriptures, reason and subjective experience, I shall try to explain the reasons for these twin assertions.

People with More Inner Peace Act More Peacefully Outwardly.

When a person feels more peace and satisfaction in life, it is reasonable to expect that his or her selfish desires are lessened, as are the vices of jealousy, envy or ill will to others. Thus, the person feels little or no urge to act violently or interfere in a hostile manner in the affairs of others. If, as Albert Einstein has said, “Force always attracts those of low morality” then greater morality goes hand in hand with an aversion to violence.

For Buddhists and Hindus, the rationale to act peacefully is philosophical as well as moral and emotional. They see spiritual reasons for altruism. The three most relevant here, which are highlighted in the *Lotus Sutra* as well as other Buddhist and Hindu scriptures, are: belief in a higher nature (Buddha-nature or, in Hinduism, the *Atman* or soul containing the divine spark) that exists in all human and sentient beings, the interdependence of all living things (as in the Buddhist teaching of dependent origination or *pratiya samutpada* in Sanskrit) and karma (the belief that all acts will be rewarded in kind, with good acts resulting in good to the doer). Accordingly, the more aware one is of the sacred teachings and the more faithful one is in their practice, the more altruistic one becomes. In a sense, the personal self is expanded through belief in a common underlying consciousness and universal interdependence, so that doing good to others is, in fact, a service to one’s own self. Adherents have reason to exhibit an abundance of good will (*metta*) and compassion (*karuna*) to others. They perform more seemingly selfless acts and will be more likely to work for peace.

Fundamental moral principles easily and immediately flow from these three basic spiritual beliefs. Perceiving an underlying divine nature of all human beings, the adherent easily accepts the essential equality of all. From the triple recognition of divine nature, spiritual interdependence and karma come the need and desire to show respect for the sanctity of life. Buddhists have an exact equivalent to Moses’ Sixth Commandment in the Buddhist phrase “you should not kill others” and some Buddhist scriptures even go further to say that you “must not hate any being and cannot kill a living creature even in thought.”⁷⁴

The assertion that *all* human beings, indeed *all* sentient beings, are endowed with a ‘Buddha-nature’ encourages not only respect for human life but reverence for *all* life. It promotes environmental responsibility and a sense of awe at the interrelation of creation, as well as endorsing the concept of a world family. Moreover it is a duty of the

Buddhist to regard all beings as the children of the Buddha since in the *Lotus Sutra* the Buddha says he is the “Father of all sentient beings.”⁵ Spiritual self-respect goes hand in hand with greater respect for others, as does the desire to share peace and freedom. It was Mahatma Gandhi who said “I love my liberty so much that I would not want to do anything that restricts yours.”

Spirituality also entails a responsibility to influence the actions of others. Regarding the sanctity of life, a Buddhist not only has a responsibility not to kill but also to prevent killing. The *Damapatta* states: “placing yourself in the position of these other living beings, you should know that you must not kill others, *nor must you allow them to kill others.*”⁶ Reverence for life leads to the philosophy of non-violence (*ahimsa*) and a proactive approach to conflict prevention.

For empirical support that inner peace leads to peaceful outer action, I would point out that there are many Nobel Laureates who placed great importance on the inner dimension of their peace work: Presidents Woodrow Wilson, Mikhail Gorbachev and Nelson Mandela, and, of course, religious figures like Mother Theresa and the Dalai Lama. Perhaps the greatest proponent and practitioner of a spiritual and non-violent approach to outer peace and reform was Mahatma Gandhi, who led his country to independence through non-violent means. Gandhi was greatly influenced by and adhered to the spiritual tenet of non-violence (*ahimsa*) and sought to appeal only to the higher nature of the British colonial rulers. Another notable international leader who invoked inner peace was former UN Secretary-General U Thant, a devoted Buddhist who revealed in his autobiography *View from the UN* that before making major decisions he would practice meditation for a few minutes in private, even excusing himself from his VIP visitors and staff.

Even if we accept the notion that inner peace helps a person to act peacefully, though, we have not yet arrived at the goal, world peace. In fact, the average person may fairly ask: if I feel and act peaceful today in my own neighbourhood, how is that going to help resolve the conflicts in far away lands like the Congo, Kosovo or Tajikistan? What difference will my efforts have on preventing wars and easing the suffering of the people living continents away? Like this, many people feel a sense of individual helplessness and inability to make a difference for world peace. Moreover, they feel totally unable to affect the world at large.⁷ Is there reason for a sense of helplessness and despondency? The materialist and hard-core realist would say, “yes”; the socially active would say “maybe”; the spiritual person says “not at all.” The

spiritual person sees many ways in which inner peace can spread to others, even those far away.

Peace Easily Spreads from the Individual to the World.

Sri Chinmoy, the great Indian spiritual teacher states: “Peace is first an individual achievement. Then it grows into a collective achievement. Finally it becomes a universal achievement.” The Dalai Lama has said much the same thing:

“Through inner peace, genuine world peace can be achieved. In this the importance of individual responsibility is quite clear; an atmosphere of peace must first be created within ourselves, then gradually expanded to include our families, our communities, and ultimately the whole planet.”⁸

This gradual expansion to people near and far is accomplished by individuals in three ways: through the individual’s own actions, through the actions he or she inspires in others and, as Hinduism and Buddhism assert, through spiritual or mystical means.

In the first way, as mentioned above, a spiritual person’s own actions will be to mitigate the suffering of others and to search for outer peace, both in the local community and in the wider world. The second way is through example and social interaction. When individuals feel and act more peaceful, they will influence others by example, by helping build higher and wider social norms (i.e., of greater morality with wider applicability) and through their support for the institutions devoted to peace, local or international (e.g., the United Nations). As the constituency for peace grows, the general awareness in society expands and peaceful action becomes a norm (something we are gradually moving towards).

Over time, a more educated and spiritually-developed population means that there is a larger pool from which to choose leaders who will make enlightened, peace-promoting decisions. It also means that once in office, progressive leaders can advocate larger steps for peace since they will have the approval and respect from those they lead. Leaders like Nelson Mandela, Mikhail Gorbachev, Lester Pearson, Woodrow Wilson, and Martin Luther King, were all admirers of spiritual teachers who had a profound moral or spiritual impact on their lives (including, of course, Shakyamuni Buddha and Jesus Christ) long before they became world leaders.

The third means of influence is a mystical way and is the hardest to explain in scientific terms. Buddhism and Hinduism both hold that

behind and intimately connected with the physical world is a realm of consciousness. Consciousness is both affected by the physical world and itself affects the physical world. Sri Chinmoy has stated:

“It is in the inner world that everything starts. The inner world is where we sow the seed. If we sow the seed of peace and love, naturally it will produce a tree of peace and love when it germinates.”

Feelings like human love and concern can be conveyed over distance in ways that are not currently explained or understood by conventional science. Prayers and aspirations ripple through consciousness to affect others far away. Similarly, it is believed that the dawning of a higher consciousness in an individual leads helps the consciousness of humanity as a whole. The attainment of a higher individual consciousness entails a deeper awareness of self beyond the limited body and the narrow ego to a spiritual nature of the soul and its connection to all creation. The aspiring consciousness automatically extends, in effect, an invitation to higher spiritual forces (what some might call Bodhisattvas, deities or angels) to make themselves felt on earth as a power for peace. Since these beings or forces act in silence, it is not possible to monitor their detailed actions but their power is none-the-less real and effective. Among the qualities assigned to the eternal Buddha are infinite power, peace and compassion.

When an individual taps into this universal consciousness, the aspirant finds it easier to act in harmony with the universal forces for peace. The individual thus becomes an instrument of the noble cause or higher force and can serve in ways that are far beyond his or her imagination. Since spiritual forces work beyond the confines of time and space, they can accomplish seeming miracles.⁹ From the higher consciousness, it is believed possible to send peace and good will, especially when magnified through meditation, chanting or prayer, to others far away to help them to discover their own inner resources. Some individuals have become so closely attuned with the ultimate consciousness (*paramabrahma*) that they themselves become direct vehicles for it. These are the great spiritual masters of both East and West. Their illumination and realization is so great that they themselves are seen by spiritual adherents as the way or vehicle to gain salvation, liberation or realization.

WORKING FOR A SYNTHESIS OF INNER AND OUTER PEACE

Just as inner peace can enhance outer peace, so outer peace is also important for the development of inner peace. Outer peace creates

opportunities for people to meet their needs, both material and spiritual. In the absence of outer peace, when war is raging, it is much more difficult to find the safety and security, or the time and means to pursue a spiritual practice. War often puts spiritual people in the difficult position of supporting if not engaging in acts that are contrary to the spirit of both inner and outer peace. War inevitably creates pressures to espouse, if not commit, immoral acts. War also leads to shortages of essentials, causing individuals to spend an inordinate amount of time trying to meet the basic needs of life, food, clothing, etc. In addition, the dire and immediate needs for constructive efforts to mitigate the effects of war on others can be overwhelming, not to mention the diversion of resources for the production of arms and the recruitment of soldiers. Armed conflicts also place a great psychological and spiritual burden on the individual. When emotions of fear and thoughts of hatred cloud the mind, it is much harder to find inner peace.¹⁰ Wars are not only detrimental to the physical atmosphere of the planet but also to its spiritual atmosphere.

By contrasting the traditional notions of outer and inner peace, one gains a significant insight. Outer peace is normally seen as the *absence* of war or armed conflict while inner peace is characterized by the *presence* of a deep feeling of harmony and contentment. It is thus possible, with these common definitions, to have outer peace without inner peace. For example, if the people of two nations or groups harbour hatred or feelings of ill will, even if they are not fighting each other, there would not be inner peace, with the possibility that outer peace could soon vanish. It is therefore advisable to expand the definition of outer peace from a negative or passive state to a positive or active one, in which peace is seen as the presence of outer cooperation and common initiative. Similarly, inner peace can be expanded to include the peace of those around oneself.

In so many ways, inner and outer peace are mutually reinforcing. Many modern spiritual groups are active in the bringing about this harmony through both inner and outer activities. Two examples are the work of Soka Gakkai and the Sri Chinmoy Centre. In Soka Gakkai, the Kosen-rufu concept seeks both “a peaceful world” and “happiness for all of humanity.”¹¹ Similarly, the organization sponsors spiritual prayers for world peace in Utshitora Gongyo—“a religious ceremony held each night to pray for world peace and the earliest possible attainment of world-wide propagation of true Buddhism.”¹² Soka Gakkai sponsors events to support human rights, the United Nations and world harmony across the barriers of race, colour, creed or nationality.

The Sri Chinmoy Centre has sponsored a global Peace Run, spanning over 70 countries on a regular (biennial) basis in which participants carry a peace torch in Olympic style to raise awareness of peace and that “world peace is made one step at a time.” The organization has also promoted the Sri Chinmoy Peace Blossoms Program, in which thousands of sites have been dedicated to the cause of peace. Over 70 countries have become Sri Chinmoy Peace-Blossom Nations. Sri Chinmoy himself has conducted weekly meditations at the United Nations for over three decades. He sees a strong link between the great goal of the outer institution and the deep inner experience of peace there. For him the United Nations is “the heart-home of the world body.” He writes:

“The United Nations is not a mere building. It is not a mere concept. It is a reality which is growing, glowing and manifesting its radiance throughout the length and breadth of the world. The United Nations already has established spiritual power along with its political power. Unlike the political power, the spiritual power works in silence. Therefore, it is not noticeable to our human eyes, but it is being constantly felt in the hearts of those who are crying for a better, more illumining, more fulfilling life on earth.”

In movements such as Soka Gakkai and the Sri Chinmoy Centre, we see the synthesis of East and West, and of the inner and outer approaches to peace.

CONCLUSION

The importance of linking inner and outer peace is gaining wider recognition. In his Year 2000 Peace Proposal, Daisaku Ikeda, the President of Soka Gakkai International, writes: “To be maximally effective, legal and structural reforms must be supported by a corresponding revolution in consciousness—the development of the kind of universal humanity that transcends differences from within.”¹³

Without an awareness of the deep inner causes of conflict it will be hard or even impossible to bring about an end to war in the world. Conversely, without international and global institutions to develop and encourage high standards of behaviour, it would be harder to find the means and the personal safety and security to allow people to perform spiritual practices in order to develop their own inner peace and spread it to others.

The East and West are moving towards each other in ways that could not have been seen by the subjects of Rudyard Kipling’s poem. The

people and governments of almost all Eastern nations have placed confidence in the United Nations, which is now a universal organization, and have played a vital role in its development. The governments of the West are now giving more attention to the individual. This is exemplified by the new emphasis on human rights, which are inalienable, and human security, where the safety and security of each and every individual in all their aspects (including spiritual as well as physical and social) is considered an essential goal. These human qualities are universal and inalienable, no matter who, what or where the person is.

The Lotus on the Lake, the title of the paper, is an appropriate analogy for the message of the paper: the integral nature of peace in both its inner and outer dimensions. The blossom of the lotus plant lies on the surface of the water but the roots reach deep down to the soil of the ground well beneath the surface of the lake. Outer peace is like the beautiful lotus flower that adorns the lake and the outer life. Inner peace is the submerged stem and roots deep in the inner consciousness. The flower produces wonderful blossoms whose fragrance then spreads far and wide for the glorification of life and the betterment of the world.

World peace is an unfolding dream. The coming together of East and West, as well as inner and outer peace, is helping to make this dream a growing reality.

Notes

¹ I must admit (speaking as a Christian) that Buddhism has had far fewer embarrassments in its long history to apologize for when it comes to supporting aggressive wars, not to mention holy or religious wars. There is nothing comparable to the Christian crusades or the great series of Catholic/Protestant wars in Europe or the sanctioned slaughter of indigenous people during colonial religious campaigns. In fact, it is difficult to identify any major wars started by Buddhist countries throughout history, much less wars fought in the name of Buddhism. Though some Buddhists supported the aggressive acts of Imperial Japan before and during the Second World War, it was State Shintoism that served as the main religious foundation for the aggression and military expansion. Today's Myanmar, a Buddhist-oriented state run by a military dictatorship, commits many human rights violations internally but has not caused wars with its neighbours. The actions of the Sri Lankan government, with a Sinhalese Buddhist majority, is similarly criticized for its human rights violations against the Tamils, a people from a different ethnic group and religion who employ widespread terrorism and frequent assassinations in an effort to violently break away from Sri Lanka. But these two examples may be "exceptions proving the rule" that Buddhist societies do not resort to organized violence to achieve their ends.

² In the two distinct approaches to peace, we see the broader outward and inward orientations of West and East, respectively, and the emphasis on matter (and materialism) and the spirit (and spirituality). The West has primarily sought outer change, through the industrial revolutions and now rapid technological innovation, using objective

empirical inquiry and modern science as tools, while the East traditionally sought inner evolution through introspective inquiry and an intuitive approach.

³ These three bible quotes are from the King James version of the Bible: Philippians 4:7, John 14:27, Matthew 5:9.

⁴ Dasabhumika Sutra, in Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature*, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., London, 1931, p. 199, as cited in Kenneth Kraft, (ed.), *Inner Peace, World Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Nonviolence*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1992, p. 9.

⁵ In the Lotus Sutra, Sakyamuni is said to have proclaimed, "Now this threefold world is all my domain; all beings in it are my children; I am the only person who can rescue and protect others." See NSIC, *Lectures on the Sutra: The Hoben and Juryo Chapters*, NSIC, Tokyo, 1974, p. 163.

⁶ Excerpt from the *Damapatta*, as quoted in Yoichi Kawada, "Mahayana Buddhism and Bioethics," paper presented to ICANAS, Montreal, August 29, 2000 (emphasis added).

⁷ Is it ironic that most people feel that they cannot affect change without assuming a high position of political leadership and those who actually are in leadership positions feel that they are severely limited by what the society, that is, these same individuals, want. Without the approval of the population, politicians tend to feel that any bold or innovative moves could be dangerous for them in future elections!

⁸ The Dalai Lama, Address in San Jose, Costa Rica, June 1989, published in *Buddhist Peace Fellowship Newsletter* (Fall 1989), p.4, as quoted in the Introduction of Kenneth Kraft (ed.), op. cit.

⁹ A further mystical concept, embraced by Soka Gakkai, is *ichinen sanzen*, in which each moment or thought has the potential to express the entirety of conditions in the three thousand worlds, which covers all the realms of existence. Thus, in the small, most insignificant act is contained the potential for revolutionary changes in consciousness and expression.

¹⁰ U Thant described his efforts to meditate during his visit to Cuba at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis in his autobiography, *View From the UN*, Doubleday, New York, 1978.

¹¹ NSIC, *Lectures on the Sutra: The Hoben and Juryo Chapters*, NSIC, Tokyo, 1974, p. 89.

¹² Daisaku Ikeda, *The Human Revolution*, Vol. 4, Weatherhill, New York and Tokyo, p. 204 (Glossary).

¹³ Daisaku Ikeda, "Peace Through Dialogue: A Time to Talk, Thoughts on a Culture of Peace", January 26, 2000, available at <www.sgi.org>.