

*The ordinary lankan's
declaration of
independence*

by an ordinary lankan

SPIRITUALITY AND BROTHERHOOD: THE FUNDAMENTALS OF OUR GLORIOUS FUTURE

We wish to assert – on behalf of all of us who call this island our home and who are descendants of those hardy cultivators, craftsmen, traders, plantation workers and the rest who made this their home at some point in our rich history – whether in the north, south, east, west or central provinces – that the fundamentals of our glorious future are no different from those of our glorious past.

Introduction

At the heart of our present crisis lie two extreme reactions. The traditionalists, be they sinhala, tamil or muslim are clinging hard to their religious and racial identities. At the opposite pole are western educated intellectuals and professionals who have taken a big leap into the modern nation state we have not yet become ('we are all sri lankans' type) and who reject or seek to marginalize the roles of religion and race in the search for a solution. This clash between heart and head is unnecessary. Ideally they should support each other. Let us therefore take the middle ground and consider whether solutions to issues thrown up by a misinterpretation and misuse of religion and race are contained within a rational and practical re-interpretation of these approaches and concepts.

We confront the ignoble descent of man to the animal realm when the functional nature of both religion and race is overlooked. Finally we identify the only real position of strength and security from which a lasting peace can be negotiated – compassion, that everyday face of wisdom which at its lowest ensures the functioning of society and at its highest ensures optimum health, happiness and peace for its members.

Function of religion

In the broadest sense the function of religion, ethics, spirituality or values (whatever you may call it) is to provide a framework that enables the holistic or balanced growth of the human being.

'Human rights' is the latest religion that mankind has sought refuge in. Like every religion, this too is a double edged sword. Its efficacy would depend on whether it is used to divide or unite people, to judge rights and wrongs or examine

causes and consequences; and whether it remains trapped within legal justice or used as a vehicle of social justice. If human rights relies on a superficial consensus and seeks to conquer with authority it will simply join the ranks of those misunderstood and discredited religions as another ineffective political instrument of control. If on the other hand it seeks to relate to the context and the human beings with their myriad relationships, not vertically but horizontally, it would conquer the causes of 'human rights violations' with understanding.

Religious texts discern three levels from which truth seekers, depending on their psychological evolution and tendencies, relate to belief systems. The lowest level is the energetic seeker who engages in the service of others. At the middle level is the devotee who relies on the disciplined observance of rituals for spiritual growth. The intellectual seeker occupies the highest level. His or her actions are governed by wisdom sought critically and with openness. Actions when taken are based on this inner light rather than a dogmatic belief in the value of service or ritual for their own sake. As a result the intellectual seeker curbs the likelihood of harm to others as a consequence of his or her actions. The energetic seeker has more devotion and less intellect whilst the devotee inclines more towards knowledge than action. Needless to say these are broad categories.

Every human being irrespective of religious identity adopts a code of living following one of these three approaches. Modern professionals who incline more towards human rights than traditional religions would likewise show a preference for action, ritual or intellect in their relationship with society. For example, doctors, lawyers and other professionals who deal exclusively with individual cases tend to be action oriented or ritualistic and they miss the larger picture. They become mechanical and impersonal, dealing with human beings in the same way that garage technicians deal with vehicle repairs.

Ultimately religion, as a code of life is supposed to do for the human being what the family is supposed to do for the child – enable growing up. The essential quality of a grown up or adult is that he can take care of both himself and others. 'Taking care' is defined in a broad sense as taking care of your physical, emotional and social health and well being. We also call this autonomy, freedom or being self – sufficient.

There are two kinds of autonomy in the world today. One is freedom without responsibility. This is pseudo autonomy. True autonomy is freedom with full responsibility. The former emphasizes independence to the exclusion of inter-dependence; rights to the exclusion of relationships. The latter affirms and includes both by following the higher path of balance and moderation.

The inner core of spirituality in man (his mind) unites with practicality (his body) when he has knowledge born out of experience 'that he should do unto others

what he would others do unto him.' This realization of human inter-dependence is the true basis, not merely of religious life but also of economic security, social harmony and human development. When man is not so united with his fellow beings he becomes alienated from them. It then becomes easy for him to dominate and exploit others.

The function of religion, given this propensity towards selfishness is to humanize man by leading him towards inner unity. A collection of such autonomous individuals and families make up an autonomous community. A number of such autonomous communities become an autonomous nation. A long period of peaceful co-existence as a community or nation is impossible unless it is based on a shared belief or conviction of the mutuality of social risk and the consequent need for social solidarity.

Religion or spirituality contributes towards this ideal by indicating that man does not 'live by bread alone.' That his heart and mind also needs nourishment to realize true peace and happiness, that potential inherent in each and every one of us. Consequently every civilized community in the world today sets aside special days or special times to gather in peace, to worship, pray and meditate and affirm faith and confidence in a shared morality or ethic. Social and cultural structures have developed and evolved to enable this sacred communal function. This inner spiritual element which unifies qualities of the heart such as peace, compassion and non-aggression is an indispensable foundation for a sustainable community. Conversely history has demonstrated that communities, nations and even empires that relied exclusively upon force, violence or terror to hold people in subjection have never received the true loyalty of people. In the course of time they have either changed their policies or perished.

If religion helps people unite for a common purpose and provides an essential ethical foundation for a functional society what does race do?

Function of race

Realization of inter – dependence is a marker of the emergence of an autonomous group identity. Different cultures may describe this ethic of co-existence or cooperation in different ways and not all of them will take 'religious' forms. Nevertheless it is essentially a spiritual value in substance, belonging to the realm of heart and mind.

To those who are less spiritually inclined, race provides a strong physical or biological connection between the individual and the group in the form of a blood tie. In this way group loyalty towards a shared morality is doubly reinforced.

Religion is not a concept but an approach. It is an exploration of reality – a search for meaning beyond words and concepts. Race on the other hand is a master concept. The former is a search for truth. It is beyond convention. The latter however is convention and based on human agreement. Whilst religion opens the door to right understanding race seems to shut it. Yet the relationship between them appears to be one of interdependence.

Religion represents spiritual interests whilst race represents temporal interests. Spirituality and good governance are inter-dependent. One cannot survive without the other. The nature of this relationship may be illustrated as follows.

Society may be compared to a clay lamp filled with oil (lay support for spiritual orders) and the lighted wick (genuine monks and religious men). The oil must be used 100% for spiritual practice which consists of burning itself continuously and selflessly to provide illumination to society. The needs of monks are few being the basic needs supplied by the lay community. The lay community on the other hand requires guidance from monks, through example and precept, on the proper conduct of the business of life. When religious orders are filled with rogues who grow fat on lay sustenance without providing the required illumination, both spiritual and temporal interests suffer. As a result society as a whole descends to the physical and racial level – which if not balanced by spiritual insight resembles a nasty, brutal and merciless conflict between animals.

In a functional (as opposed to a dysfunctional) society religion and race combine to safeguard the ethical foundation of the community through appropriate forms of social organization. Race serves religion – not the other way around. Pride of place is thus given to upholding spirituality which in the final analysis enables the community to transcend the notion of race and become part of a modern nation state.

The message for our western educated intellectuals is this. You cannot judge or transcend what you don't know. Unless you know and experience your religion and race – unless you immerse yourself in it 100% you cannot walk towards that desired state of objectivity. Instead you will allow prejudice to take over what you don't know. Race, like suffering must be experienced and understood to be overcome.

The solemn duty of safeguarding the moral core of a race may be explicit or implicit within its tradition. Either way it is a sacred trust which must be discharged to ensure continuity. It is not merely by defending or acquiring territory that a race continues in both form and substance. A modern example is the Tibetan race which continues to uphold their values and traditions though deprived of their land. The point is that a race can continue without land but not without preserving its essential values. Those who uphold values can call the

whole world their home – not just a small part of it. They will be invincible and welcomed everywhere.

The descent from human to animal status

When man becomes alienated from spirituality - which is nothing but his own heart and mind - he stops relating fully to his whole environment and relies upon that part of the environment in which he finds most security. The more separate and threatened he feels the harder he clings to this identity. Only a spiritual re-connection with self and others can alleviate and cure this sense of insecurity.

Terrorism for example involves a complete rejection of religious tradition. When the essential link between religion and race is thus severed the group becomes isolated and must secure its continued existence in perpetual conflict engineered to ensure the confirmation of its identity. An identity which has cut away the ground beneath its feet and an identity sans values must rely on exploitation of human beings and even the ideas of religion and race to bolster its empty claim. It is however a claim devoid of substance – a claim made in effect on behalf of a complete state of ego-hood.

A race or any group of human beings within it who disavow its essential values become nothing less than a herd of cunning animals, governed purely by the law of the jungle – survival and propagation of self at any cost. In spiritual terms they are children awaiting adulthood.

When values that hold a society together break down, grievances of the masses are exploited by social forces that turn destructive and anti – social due to a strong perception of powerlessness and despair and organize themselves to achieve political or economic ends as an alternative to the established state. In their psychological state they cannot believe that democratic methods will work as they only see them as 'institutional lies'. The result is to close the channels of communication between them and the state. The latter resorts to suppression and responds to terrorism with counter terrorism – crimes with counter crimes, sometimes cloaked in legalese as punishment. Both sides do not see that in turning away from the value system they also turn away from the truth of inter-dependence, the only guarantee of a peaceful and harmonious human co-existence.

Both political and economic crime have carved themselves a niche within the lankan state, currently in a state of flux pending the emergence of a modern nation state. We would be deceiving ourselves if we think that only those officially labeled as terrorists and organized criminals are responsible for this phenomenon. Those 'within' the state are also part of this malevolent network

forming an 'alternative criminal state'. All these forces are essentially opportunistic and sustained by hatred. Overtly they don different labels and colours and subscribe to different agenda's. Their point of convergence is self interest – ultimately destructive to themselves and others.

Terrorism and organized crime are manifestations or end products of an underlying disease which has become institutionalized through a mechanism of exploitation that keeps the common man in subjection. This mechanism has been in operation ever since the British transformed the political, economic and social landscape of this island starting with the Colebrooke Cameron Reforms in 1833. The sum total of this transformation was to rob the people of their sovereignty, human rights and dignity – a reality which was not affected by the transfer of power to the local elite in 1948. President Premadasa (1989 – 1992) was one leader who sought to develop an effective counter – challenge to this reality.

This mechanism of exploitation is symbolized by a triad consisting of the selfish, egoistic and acquisitive politician, priest and professional. Their method is to hold out through political, religious and professional rhetoric that they hold the vital keys to the good material and spiritual life the people desire. These modern salesmen are constantly engaged in a process of negotiating and re-negotiating what is always a hierarchical, dependent and disempowering relationship with their clients – a formerly sovereign people who are now in a state of utter confusion. The more confused and insecure the people become the more vulnerable they are to the deceitful rhetoric of the egoistic politician, priest and professional.¹ All of them have mastered the art of gross deceit and self promotion – contrary to the co-operative norms of our ancient culture.

The media is the key facilitator of this vertical process of communication. In it the 3 P's and their utterances enjoy a pre-eminent position – however lacking in substance and sound reasoning. To break out of this vicious cycle it is the experience and wisdom of ordinary Lankans, shorn of their labels and institutional trappings that must be given pride of place in a new liberative and compassionate discourse.

The lessons these exploiters or half grown adults have learned – that might is right and that deceit and violence works – must be disconfirmed. What they indicate is a collective failure of the indigenous value system – consisting not merely of the four great religions but also of cultural traditions and norms developed by the inhabitants of Lanka over two millennia. This value system must be re-claimed and revived in the hearts of the people.

¹ The challenge to this 'unholy' triad must be mounted from within by the enlightened politician, priest and professional. It is almost impossible to reform these mechanisms from without.

In order to do this we have no option but to develop a position of inner strength and confidence following the footsteps of Buddha, Jesus Christ, Mohamed, Mahatma Gandhi and others who from time to time illuminated this dark ignorant world.

In the words of Scholar Saint Shantideva,

Just as a flash of lightning on a dark, cloudy night
For an instant brightly illuminates all ...

... virtue is perpetually feeble
The great strength of immorality being extremely intense,
And except for a Fully Awakening Mind
By what other virtue will it be overcome?

Why do we follow a host of contemporary pigmies when there are giants to inspire and guide us? This challenge of dealing with inhumanity amongst us must be squarely faced without any further indulgence in self – deception, vacillation and moral cowardice.

Great compassion – the only way

The admonition of Arahant Mahinda to King Devanampiyatissa to desist from taking the life of an innocent deer was responsible for civilizing and humanizing the ruler of this land 2500 years ago. Humanizing our rulers and ending their isolation is also the challenge we face today. The advice of Arahant Mahinda was an application of the general principle that we owe a duty of kindness to all beings – human or animal – weaker than us in mind, body or spirit. This is the uncompromising standard from which we must approach all our worldly problems.

People who are pre-occupied with externals (words, actions and manifestations) and neglect internals (thoughts, feelings and emotions – the true causes) fail to unravel causes and are condemned to run from one 'solution' to another without ever really understanding the problem.

It is our lack of compassion that blinds us and prevents us from developing a holistic and dynamic awareness of our essential situation – the pre-condition for working towards true peace and amity for ordinary human beings on this island.

If a set of human beings are driven by hatred and we also surrender to the temptation of hating them, are we not joining them albeit under a different banner or piece of cloth?

No. We must uproot hatred from within. Unity in compassion is more powerful than unity in hate. Therein lies our true victory – a victory that no foe can

deprive us of in external battles to which situations may call us. All significant battles are fought within the self.

Let us not forget that great cruelty is the result of great internal suffering, not fully understood and overcome. Great compassion is the result of great internal suffering, fully understood and overcome. Understanding will only dawn if suffering is used to let go of the self or ego – not strengthen it.

We have not understood our **connection** to each other. Do we realize as we go to work every morning that we are all working to keep each other alive? Are we grateful to those seen and unseen hands that ensure our daily survival? Are we not dependent 100% on others for our survival and development?

In any progressive society compassion is the true fundamental principle of enlightened action at all levels – family, society and state.

The attitude of compassion and confidence that will bring us all true freedom and maintain it is summed up in the following golden words of the Lebanese Poet Khalil Gibran:

'Of the good in you I will speak
but not of the evil
for what is evil,
but good tortured by its own hunger and thirst?'

How can we develop compassion? We must be present and open. Even if we are absent and closed to seeing things as they are we must bridge this gap with patience and discipline. When we are open we can see the good and evil within and without and learn that we are all fallible and all strugglers in this learning process called life. Without this basic honesty we cannot see the falsehood that surrounds all of us. You need to see the falsehood before you see the truth. This is because the truth is plain, ordinary, simple and direct; utterly free of all the superficial rubbish we have covered it with.

This is well demonstrated by the disappearance of the connected quality of heart – equanimity – in facing the vicissitudes of life. The wise do not proclaim their joy or grief, raise banners and turn it into a public spectacle. Instead they meet the ups and downs of life with peace of heart and understanding.

Being open, honest and compassionate is being positive and emotionally rich. This is the opposite of being negative and emotionally poor. Material poverty is not our problem as much as emotional poverty.

Huxley once said that rolling in the muck is not the best way of getting clean. Our fault finding mania has got the whole nation rolling in muck. It does not

matter where the muck originates from. We make it ours anyway by writing, reading, talking and listening to it.

Let us not waste precious time on those parts of the media that only mirror the conflict and confusion in society. The only way to move away from this vicious cycle is to clean ourselves first and then help others to become clean.

We can only assert standards if we ourselves are upholding them – not otherwise.

Responsibility and the personal journey

You can be good and virtuous. But people will ignore you unless you also have some power. Thus in order to have power many educated, public spirited and well meaning citizens seek either high office, promotions or take the path of politics.

We have seen this phenomenon since independence in 1948. Politicians from different walks of life have come and gone. Much has been done and some development has taken place. But has our society changed? Has the relationship between those who speak English and go in cars and those who speak Sinhala and Tamil and go in buses and trains changed? Is the dignity of a human being and respect we give to him or her defined by what they *possess* in terms of status, rank and wealth or by what they *are* in terms of human qualities? These are questions we must ask. Most importantly – what is power?

We have seen the exercise of political power in these 60 years. In the last 30 years we have also seen the exercise of military power. We have seen revolts from the South and from the North. These were successfully put down. If politicians and generals held all the keys to all the powers that we need as a society I would gladly rest my pen immediately. But this is not the case. There is another kind of power that we need to create if our ultimate goal is a peaceful society. That is **responsibility**.

Responsibility begins with taking charge of one's own self and personal journey. This journey is the source of collective freedom.

Since 1948 we have looked up to institutions (including religious ones) to take responsibility and give us moral direction and leadership. They have all failed. No institution has withstood the unceasing waves of violence, deceit, self promotion and corruption that swept through our society. The time has now come for us to understand that institutions that claim to stand for democracy are in fact standing for its opposite; that institutions that claim to stand for impartiality and

justice are in fact standing for partiality and injustice; that institutions that claim to stand for serving others are in fact only serving themselves. It is true that the institution like the company is just a device and a fiction that individuals use to achieve some end. In Sri Lanka it has become the perfect devices for perpetuating greed, perpetuating hatred and perpetuating blindness and ignorance. These are all moral failures and we seem to be unable get any institution to stand up and fight them.

After all how can the sick heal the sick? How can the in-disciplined discipline others? Our police and judicial systems are the perfect examples. There is nothing to be done except to understand our starting point. That is our own weak, hypocritical and double dealing selves. This is the logical point for re-generating moral strength and moral power. This is the power that remains unrecognized, un-developed and un-utilized. In India it was this kind of responsibility or moral power that stood up to the mighty British Empire to challenge it. If the challenge was merely physical the British Empire would have crushed it with superior force. This is indeed what happened to both the JVP and LTTE in Sri Lanka. No. The British Empire was effectively challenged as a moral entity, with moral obligations to discharge. And India succeeded because of one man who realized the futility of seeking political solutions for what was ultimately a personal and moral problem – the moral weakness and moral cowardice of the Indian. This man was Gandhi and he was honest enough to see and confront his own moral weakness and cowardice first. He evolved a moral and personal solution to a political problem, generated a change in the consciousness of the Indian People and made them fit to govern themselves. In this way his personal journey became the journey of a nation – and his honesty, compassion and wisdom became values that permeated a whole nation. His was a truly holistic approach and he taught us that the holistic approach starts with yourself, your values and principles.

Like the ordinary selfless Indians who followed Gandhi, we must be what we are – ordinary lankans. Ordinariness, humanness and our fundamental need to give and receive compassion unites us. Everything else divides us. To realize our true nature we need to ask ourselves the questions – what is the function of religion and race in human society? What must we do to transform our present situation? What is the best place to start this transformation? If we can stay on this path of basic sanity we shall be citizens of the world – grounded, at home and in place everywhere. If not we will, in the name of peace, freedom, justice or independence simply exchange one kind of prison for another and continue to be subject to domination – without liberating ourselves. We need to believe in ourselves and light the torch of freedom within so that one day – many years from now it will shine brightly in every part of this glorious land. Let us connect with the spirit of one young refugee woman who returned from India and said.

We lost everything except our lives, but many people kissed the land when we reached Sri Lanka

Sva-dharma and Sva-rajya

Appearances of democracy aside, this country has remained a **dependency** for 200 years since 1815. Such a state of affairs does not befit any set of human beings blessed as they are with a divine spirit and intellect. If we do intend to attain self-governance or '*sva-rajya*' we must first look clearly into our '*sva-dharma*' or the nature of our individual self and understand this double life we lead; shame inside and respectability on the outside. They are both necessary conditions for each other. The arrogance and lack of humility of all our leaders – both secular and spiritual is based on this dynamic. Once a person looks through and works through the totality of his character there cannot be any more 'charismas', airs and heroics for the outside world – just the unconditional embrace of all human nature both within and outside in one seamless grip that is naturally humble and compassionate. I dream of the day that we will have an abundance of such leaders and I commit my own life to that ideal day in, day out.

Without the process of realizing self nature or *sva-dharma* we will be caught in the schemes and designs of others or ***para – dharma***. We were trapped in the ***para – dharma*** of the British first and then our own politicians as we struggled to find the fundamental basis of self rule, autonomy and independence. This is a secret that lies forgotten in Rajarata where the Lankans were governed from their own capitals and not from an agency house of a global capitalized order which Colombo is today.

Our road to freedom is therefore long and arduous. The suffering and shame of 200 years must strengthen our resolve not to leave this solemn duty to yet another generation. We hold the blood of our youth who paid the supreme sacrifice from 1971 to 2009 in all our hands. It will not be washed off until we finish our task.

Invocation

We call upon all the mighty and benevolent powers that be throughout this timeless and limitless universe to bear witness to the purity and clarity of our intentions and for moral strength that we may complete, together with those brothers and sisters who have joined us, our long and arduous journey back to sovereignty and independence we re-commenced with the drift to the south west upon the break up of our ancient irrigation civilization in the 13th century.

Shower forth ye heaven sweet rains in seasons due
That earth's rich harvest swells in ample stream
Hold fast O' people the path of righteousness
That world on world may rise to bliss supreme²

Note from ordinary lankan

This pamphlet was written in 2005, provoked by the threatened Unilateral Declaration of Independence of the LTTE. The text seemed not to lose any relevance in the post war years of 2009-2014. Some additions have been made to the all important section on "personal journey" and the idea of "responsibility" included. It seems a good idea to disseminate this to the readers not only to mark the Independence Day but also to anticipate 200 years of ignominy ushered by the rule of Colombo since 1815. Colombo, is a capital I refer to as the agency house of a globalized capitalist order. Independence as such remains a promise – a hunger that continues to burn us and which is not quenched by the false arrivals celebrated by the politicians who colonize us today.

² Adapted from the translation by Scholar Saint Shantideva. The word 'king' in the third line is replaced by 'people' to reflect the ancient principle of sovereignty of this land – *Mahasammata* or the great consensus.