

Living in Peace

Every January people wish each other a peaceful New Year and express the deep felt human hope that it will indeed be one. And then come the whispers, the insistent, quiet calls to hostility, to hatred, to war. All humans seem to want peace, but still there are those who wish to divide our human family into warring sects. They seek to accentuate what divides us, rather than our common heritage as human beings. Usually this is done for utterly cynical reasons; for political power or for the making of money. Much of this concerns the dividing of people into different groups according to religion and their associated cultures. Yet these are really all false divisions.

All the world's major religions developed at the same stage in human development, a time commonly known as the Axial Age. They often arose out of similar situations whereby humans were responding to the chaos and suffering of violence around them. Unsurprisingly these faiths, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Hinduism, Jainism, Islam and Christianity actually share an enormous amount of common characteristics. It is well argued that at their core the Axial faiths all share a respect for others, sympathy and universal concern.

They grew out of violent situations and therefore at their core they seek to channel human energies against aggression. It really is very sad that so many people down the lonely centuries have died or killed in the name of these faiths. Perhaps this is because too many times people have just paid lip service to what these faiths offer at their hearts. Clearly words are not enough; to really see the peace in faith, the practice has to be through actions.

The key to all these faiths and what made them revolutionary was the Golden Rule; do unto others as you would have done to you. This quality of empathy gave the early practitioners 'ekstasis' – a stepping out from self. This ability to see others points of view, so at odds with the damaging fundamentalism and self-righteous arrogance of those whose faith is about seeking supremacy over others or punishing those who are not like them, can lead to peace in our communities and in the world at large. I know from my own experience that when in the middle of a confrontation I reach out to someone and show some empathy towards them, then the situation can be quickly diffused and resolved, Sadly, I am sorry to say that I don't always seem able to do this. Who is?

The Axial sages put the abandonment of selfishness and compassion at the top of their agenda. They looked to help people to a place of transcendence and rather than worry about where this would lead people, they made a point of concentrating on what people were supposed to transcend from – greed, egotism, hatred and violence. It can be argued that once people can get away from these kind of self-defeating emotions then they can reach that point of transcendence where the divine spark in each of us is lit. All the world's great faiths teach of the need to strive for this.

Similarly it can be said that real faith means reaching out to others. Surely if people's beliefs make them belligerent, intolerant and unkind about those of others, they are being

as Buddhists would say ‘unskillful’. Rather their own beliefs should impel them to act compassionately and to honour the stranger. Indeed it can also be added that we can all learn so much from each other and our different experiences that it would be foolish in the extreme to believe that we have all the answers. It would also be extremely arrogant and humility is another feature common to all the great Axial faiths.

Of course we have seen down the years how faith can lead to war, destruction misery and enormous human suffering. If seen in isolation from the tradition as a whole individual texts in the Hebrew Bible, New Testament or Qur’an can be used to sanction immoral violence or cruelty. All the great faiths have been prone to having their sacred texts manipulated. To avoid this kind of nightmare there must be self-criticism – remember the words of Jesus to take the mote out of one’s own eye, before worrying about the speck in somebody else’s and look at one’s own faults first. If we return to the Golden Rule then perhaps we can avoid holy scripture being used to spread hatred and intolerance.

Indeed it is important for all people of any faith to take practical action to eliminate violence from one’s own beliefs. We can all learn and grow spiritually through compassionate action and this includes welcoming the stranger, the person who is seen as different, both to you and society at large. We are all humans after all and we all bleed when cut and weep when unhappy. Let us try to see what brings us together, rather than what divides us.

In order for that to truly happen we must allow the sorrow of others to invade our consciousness. We must remember the sorrow of the asylum seeker far from home in a cold climate in more ways than one, the child in a war-torn country who lost his parents, the person who is seen as different because of their ethnicity or sexuality, or the person who is just lonely. The Axial sages spent much time on thinking creatively about the nature of human goodness. They concluded that compassion and concern for everybody was the best policy.

The discovery of self is also important. We are all unique and it is important to know one’s self and then to respect others as we are also all part of a community. Indeed we are now part of a global community – we must develop and deepen the insights of the Axial Age so that sympathy must extend to all. If religion is to offer us anything we must go in search of the lost soul, the broken heart, the forgotten person, using the spirit of compassion that lies at the heart of all traditions.

We all need to consider the human questions that the Axial sages were reaching for answers to – what gives us life? What lifts us into wholeness? What enhances our being? What introduces us into transcendence? What calls us beyond our limits? What do we ultimately value? If we can all, from whatever faith background, seriously consider these questions and find some answers, then perhaps we really can have peaceful communities and a peaceful world.

