

Perceptions held by Teacher Educators on Emergence of Spiritual Dimension as an Integral Part of 'Peace'

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Abstract

Technological advancement and knowledge revolution in the last century have brought a new wave of modernization into our society and in the very way of life of people. Ironically, the world as a global village is also coping up with the worst of challenges, posing severe threats to its survival. Apart from several challenges, scholars in general and particularly in academy are concerned about growing intolerance, hatred and violence among the masses at large. In such scenario, efforts to bring about peace and sustainable development form core agenda of the efforts by various international and national nodal agencies such as UNESCO, WHO, NFI and MHRD, India. Spirituality in this regard has emerged as one of the crucial forces of building a more sensitive and tolerant society. UNESCO (1998) recognizes spirituality as a crucial element to promote and sustain culture of peace. This article focuses upon pivotal role of spirituality in initiating and sustaining the peace building process. It incorporates findings of the qualitative exploration of teacher educators' perception of spirituality in the form of narratives that support importance of spirituality as fundamental bases of nurturing inner peace which manifest into larger social harmony. Data for this study is collected through self constructed questionnaire followed by detailed exploration of the selected participants understanding through their in depth interviews. Objective wise thematic analysis of teacher educators' qualitative responses provide broad themes and underlying categories highlighting various aspects of participants perceptions of the key concepts of the study. One of the Broad Themes 'Significance and nurturance of spirituality in daily life', in context of relationship of Spirituality and Peace, forms the base of the present paper.

Key words: spirituality, peace, teacher educators

This article incorporates important findings of the descriptive explorative study undertaken by the author as part of the doctoral research project titled, 'Study of Perceptions of Spirituality, Spiritual Intelligence and Spiritual Development held by Teacher Educators'.

Introduction

Living in this age of modernization revolutionized by power of technology coupled with unbound potentials of human creativity and excellence has brought a great pride and a sense of empowerment among the masses. However there exists a flip side to this contemporary modernized society. Today we are living in highly volatile times characterized by unprecedented

global unrest, ecological crises, political turmoil, economic slowdown, communal tensions, increasing mental health concerns, rising natural calamities and religious fundamentalism to name a few. Our nation is also constantly witnessing brutal horrifying incidences of violence and acts of heinous crimes, many times perpetuated under the shadow of political vandalism and religious fundamentalism. This is not only a threat to existence of democratic society but it also shakes off the very foundation of basic human rights of people to live with dignity and peace. These incidents have direct bearing on mental distress and disorders (WHO, 2004). Figures on mental health problems are at all time high and in the face of growing turmoil, loss of meaning, apathy; intolerance and hatred in the lives of the people both in their personal and public spaces are leaving deep sense of fear, anxiety and insecurity. The inner strength and resilience of people to fight challenges and tolerate differences seem to be falling down in absence of a solid guiding framework which can provide meaning and direction to their life (WHO, 2004; Verghese, 2008).

In this context, Frankl (1978), rightly describes this vacuum as existential crises or crises of meaning, which is characterized by an anxiety of meaninglessness (Tillich, 1952). In response to this situation, some believe that humanity needs a spiritual awakening (Bergman et al, 2011, p.17). While others see the awakening already happening and describe the contemporary age as an age of spiritual revolution where more people are unleashing the transcendental dimension of human existence as an ultimate universal reality *and its healing effects are not only on one's life, and health but also on larger community and well-being* (Tacey, 2004).

This massive upsurge in human inclination towards exploring their spirituality and deeper aspects of life (Zinnbauer et al. 1999) is motivated by the people's quest to move towards more authentic personal identity and search for their place in a larger cosmic picture which eventually affects how one relates to the others. Scholarly enquiry into the field of spirituality regards it as a powerful force which brings a sense of meaning, purpose (Frankl, 1984), a holistic perspective to reality (Azevedo & Gil, 2009) enabling a person to see an inherent order (Singleton & Webber, 2004) and peace of mind in one's life (Bush, 2010). Peace in one's mind is of fundamental importance in ensuring harmony with outer world and therefore a more tolerant and cohesive society. Role of spirituality and a connection with one's inner world has been well acknowledged by nodal international forums like UN with its allied agencies and apex national bodies working in the area of peace keeping and harmony at local and global level (Noy, 2009).

There have been philosophical bases and empirical studies (in recent past) supporting the argument that peace and spirituality are closely related to one another (Fraser & Grootenboer, 2004; Harris, 2007). Mahatma Gandhi beautifully reflects upon this deeper interconnectedness of peace and spirituality and rightly observes that there is no path to peace, peace is the path (cited in Nhat & Kotler, 1991). Peace as a way of life demands more proactive integration of spirituality based intervention programs into the peace keeping endeavors in order to realize it as an innate human quest deep rooted in spiritual interconnectedness of the universal consciousness. It is likely to better sustain the process of building peaceful and tolerant habitat for people. Previous decade (2000-2010) was declared by United Nations General Assembly as a decade dedicated to education for a culture of peace and non violence with the involvement of civil society at the local, regional and national levels through the sharing of information by means of campaigns, solidarity projects, conferences, museums, publications etc. Consequently lots of initiatives have been being taken up across different countries in this regard (Adams, 2000).

However, despite India's rich spiritual tradition, spirituality has to catch up as a discipline and integrate into peace building process at a widespread level.

In spite of these commendable efforts, there has been blatant disgrace of human rights in the forms of violent attacks on humanity, coupled with ongoing stiff and struggles of people for their basic survival in different parts of the world. This trend not only poses serious threat to human survival but also calls for deeper reflection on the approaches and strategies that have been in place in this regard. Perhaps, the present situation demands a holistic understanding of peace and spirituality as a phenomenon.

Concept of Spirituality

In its simplest form spirituality is related to one's relationship with the higher reality, which eventually affects the way one operates in the world, (Armstrong, 1995). It stands on the basic premise that there is a transcendent reality beyond the material existence. The underlying assumption, as described by Noble (2001), is "*that physical reality is embedded within a larger, multidimensional reality*" (p. 46). In other words there is more to our existence which simply moves beyond the physical (referred as transcendental or non material), understanding of which is well within an ordinary man's domains of experiences (Reed, 1991). Recent advances in the field of quantum physics and neurological bases of spirituality (Zohar, 2000), throw light on the existence of higher levels of consciousness within every human being.

Contemporary literature regards spirituality as universal and innate human attribute of awareness and relatedness to the higher power. It is also denoted by common expressions like transcendent reality, higher consciousness, spiritual dimension of existence which is often manifested in the form of having a sense of meaning and purpose in one's life along with experiencing wholeness and interconnectedness. There are three key terms in description of spirituality namely 'existence of transcendental reality, our relationship with the transcendental reality and possible manifestations of this understanding in terms of outcome behaviors' (Shafranske & Gorsuch, 1984; Hey & Nye, 1998; Hill & Pargament, 2003; Miller & Thoresen, 2003; King & Decicco, 2009).

Spiritual bases of building peace process

Review of literature on 'spirituality and peace' suggests various connotations of spirituality and spiritual experiences are often associated with different attributes of peace (Bhawuk, 2011; Pandya, 2015; Pruzan, 2008; Woolley, 2008). Some of the credible instruments measuring different aspects of spirituality also include the dimensions of peace as an integral component therein (Astin & Astin, 2009; Fisher, 2009)

From Historical standpoint, there has been a rich legacy of great visionaries like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther king, Mother Teresa and many more, whose lives have been embodiment of exemplary courage towards the path of truth, love, peace and non violence. These leaders derived immense strength and insight from their unconditional faith in existence of spiritual power which seemed to be the guiding force in their peace initiatives. Mahatma Gandhi was of

view that there is inviolable connection between truth and *ahimsa* (Sahi, 2000, p.34). In Gandhi's theory of peace, nonviolence (*ahimsa*) is a way of life (Bose,1981) and to be able to live in the path of truth, following the principles of *ahimsa* becomes inevitable. In the current times, peace makers like Thich Nhat Hanh and Dalai Lama are also known for their contribution in peace endeavors, particularly for applying spiritual ideals of Buddhism in the process. Indeed many of the contemporary Buddhist leaders engaged in peace movements fundamentally advocate, inner transformation within the person who is on the path to peace in larger contexts (Yeh,2006).

Eastern spiritual traditions are particularly been known for their emphasis placed upon deeper spiritual identity of a person, in order to get a more holistic and interconnected view of outside world as an extension of oneself. With such a perspective, peace comes very natural to the person and the culture. Comparing the eastern and western approach to peace, Dorn(2001) writes

“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 behavior 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” (p.156).

In this context, India is been particularly known for its spiritualphilosophical tradition of universal humanism (Ikeda, 2001, p.11)).Our ancient message of ‘Vasudaiva Kutumbakam’ also implies that whole world is one family and many of our ancient scriptures like Vedas, Puranas and Upanishads advocate the path of self restrain, tolerance and self sacrifice at the cost of greater good to the others (Bhagabati, 2006). In fact the connotation of peace in Sanskrit is ‘*Shanti*’ which not only denotes contentment at spiritual level but also a cosmic and holistic view of peace denoting peace of mind, peace of the earth, peace underneath the seas and peace in outer space (Barash, 1999).

Acknowledging the importance of spirituality in relation to building peace, NCERT(2010), in its important publication manual on, ‘Ways to peace; resource book for teachers’, states that only a fully and holistically developed person can be the building block of peace whose spiritual needs are equally important to be met as other needs being integral to overall harmonious development.

Spirituality and Peace- Exploration of Teacher Educators' Perceptions The undertaken study was a descriptive explorative which aimed at exploring perceptions of teachers educators about ‘spirituality, spiritual intelligence and spiritual development’. However for the purpose of this paper, the author presents specific findings of the participants' perceptions on ‘the role of spirituality in developing peace and harmony’. This theme has two sub themes: one inner and spiritual well being & second, spiritual practices for peace. The paper discusses the two.

Data in the study was collected (using random sampling method) from 5 DIETs and SCERT. All the teacher educators, working in these teacher education institutes were selected as sample for the study.

Consequently this study was conducted on 100 teacher educators from whom, data was collected through self constructed questionnaire which was duly piloted and validated by experts. For the second phase of data collection through interview schedules, purposive sampling was employed

to select the sample and consequently 35 teacher educators out of 100 participants (sample of the first phase) were selected from the sample. In the research study, qualitative responses collected through questionnaire and interviews were systematically transcribed and analyzed.

One of the objectives of the study was to explore perception of teacher educators about significance and nurturance of spirituality in daily life. As part of the analysis of this objective, in one of the themes ‘relevance of spirituality in modern times’, in all 31 % of the teacher educator perceived spirituality as helpful in maintaining peace of mind and related attributes. Under this particular theme, participants’ responses highlighted positive role of spirituality in maintaining peace of mind along with developing inner and social harmony apart from self confidence, progressive attitude and positive thinking. Spiritual outlook in life was perceived to be essential for remaining peaceful, calm, composed, balanced, stable and happy. Relating these aspects to sound mental health, the participants considered the stated attributes to be the naturally occurring outcomes of ‘being spiritual’.

In this context it is worth mentioning that for some of the participants’ perception of spirituality as a phenomenon comprised expressions like, having sense of peace with oneself, being calm and composed, inner contentment, harmony, bliss and happiness apart from other set of responses. In the subsequent sections, the paper presents few glimpses of findings (only from the detail interviews) of the study. The findings are with reference to two broad areas namely ‘Inner peace as an aspect spiritual wellbeing and spiritual practices as means of cultivating peace and harmony’.

Inner Peace as an aspect of spiritual wellbeing

Peace comes with many connotations. UNESCO (2001) broadly divides them into two main categories: Inner peace and Social peace (including peace with nature) which together represent the true and holistic view of peace. It further recognizes inner peace which the document described as peace with oneself, as precondition for ensuring peace with others. Inner peace is also conceived in various forms including harmony with oneself, sense of freedom, spiritual peace, feelings of kindness, compassion, and feeling of content (p.10). Spiritual well being as in integral aspect of overall health comprises of aspects of peace, joy and fulfillment (Fisher, J. (2011). Further Hick (1999) also states that spirituality moves the person towards inner peace, serenity, joy, purity of heart and clarity of vision.

In line with available literature, many of the participants of this study also identified with various expressions of peace as manifestations of their spiritual wellbeing particularly with reference to their mental health.

In this context, according to one of the teacher educators:

“Spirituality unfolds personality of an individual and gives inner sense and peace to one’s mind. I think it makes you focused on important things in life, when there is so much of pulling and distraction from every direction. Now a days people are unhappy in spite of all the luxury. Happiness and peace can only be achieved through spiritual development”.

Many of the participants reported spirituality as a survival mechanism particularly concerned with maintaining their psychological wellbeing, which was quiet often used interchangeably with peace of mind. Amidst modern day complexities, some participants also considered spiritual development as need of the hour and key to be more peaceful. To quote a response:

“Working on your spirituality is absolutely important and urgent too, as we are seeing too much of violence everywhere. Moreover, spiritual development in any human being brings qualities of kindness, love, sharing, truthfulness and moral values in their conduct. This in a way will bring more harmony and peace in the society at a larger scale”.

There were no dearth of responses from teacher educators about the common elements of anxiety and stress faced which arise from various sources and need of spirituality in this context. As put by one of the teacher educators:

“Spirituality is very important to maintain my high willpower and motivation specially in challenging times since there is so much of work related stress, competition, high cost of living, it will bring much needed peace and happiness when other support systems like basic structures in family and society are breaking”.

Another dimension of the participants’ responses which is relevant to this section is in context of positive role of spirituality as a means for handling conflicts in a peaceful manner. According to one of the participants, external conflicts were the manifestation of dissatisfaction and frustration within one’s own self. To quote his words:

“We are so manipulative in our social interactions and we simply don’t have any consistency and harmony in our thoughts, words and actions. If we move towards spirituality we automatically know who we are and slowly have the courage to be the same outside as we are inside our hearts without much of conflicts”.

Similar to the above views, another participant considered spirituality as a way of life and mainly described it in terms of day to day actions and behavior. In the words of one of the participants:

“If I am honest to myself, stable, at peace, doing my duties in a most diligent manner, not harming or hurting anybody I think I am spiritual”.

Spiritual practices as a means of experiencing peace

The findings also highlighted reasonably high level of participants’ engagement with many contemplative and other meditative practices that they perceived as being instrumental in their spiritual growth. One fourth of the total teacher educators also perceived these practices as means to achieve peace of mind and harmony in their personal and professional domains. Among these practices, yoga and meditation, stood out to be the most preferred practices. The participants added their own variations to them. For instance, according to one of the participants, practice of sitting in silence was one such way of connecting to the higher self. She described her experience as;

“When I sit in silence for my morning meditation, it helps me to connect to my higher self and I can feel a divine flow, a sort of stability, calmness as if everything is just in order and so peaceful”.

The available literature also reports widespread use of such exercises. In UNESCO’s module (1998), titled “learning to live together in peace and harmony”, suggests various methods gathered from different wisdom traditions for nurturing global spirituality which is being regarded instrumental in promoting peace, harmony and unity. Some of these practices, which envision cultivating inner peace through spiritual transformation at cognitive, affective and active levels in an individual include honoring the sacred space of others, finding a peace *mantra* or mandala, practice of daily meditation and use of creative visualization (p.146).

Many teacher educators considered particularly the practice of ‘mindfulness’ very helpful in developing ‘self awareness’ and ‘presence of mind’ which they believed help them in maintaining their temper in critical classroom situations. A teacher educator said:

“I no longer get carried away and I am more mindful of what I do, how I deal with others particularly my students. I no more shout at them or lose my temper easily instead, I remain calm and workout the appropriate course of action”.

Mindfulness is defined as a moment to moment awareness of one’s experience without any judgment (Davis & Hayes, 2011). In this regard UNESCO (2001) also observes that

“As a matter of fact all of us know that when the mind calms down a serene feeling of joy and peace begins to unfold within us. One of the effective ways of realizing the peace within is meditation” (p.105).

There were others who conceived their practice of introspection and reflection upon ultimate questions of life as playing a facilitating role in putting the situations in larger perspective and understanding the long term consequences of action without being impulsive or self centered. As reported by one of the teacher educators:

“I often ask myself is my work and my life giving me peace of mind or do I need to think more in depth so as to find what is it that I really love to do and which make sense to me and what ultimately matters to my life”.

According to few of these participants, a sense of fulfillment and being content with oneself fostered their inner stability which helped them in resolving personal conflicts with much more ease and clarity.

Sharing his experiences, one of the teacher educators said,

“I have a fair idea as to what I stand for in life and what is the purpose of my living, my each and every day is dedicated to my higher goal and I don’t think it’s a good idea to fight for petty things, I mean conflicts just take away much of your energy and focus”.

One of the participants report the practice to reinstate ‘mindfulness’:

“When I know I am eventually a pure soul and everybody around me is also the same it’s some are close or some are too far from the destination, so where are the conflicts. I accept them for being who they are and ultimately all differences are only at superficial”.

These aspects of existential questioning which commonly surfaced during the reflective encounter with oneself, dealing with the pertinent issues of one’s existence provides a context to one’s existence within the larger metaphysical reality. This eventually provides existential meaning to one’s life which not only affects our belief but also how we love others and how we treat them Paul Tillich (1952). As reflected one of the participants,

“When you feel a genuine connection with others, your spirituality invokes all positive qualities in you. You become peaceful, forgive others, love others and as a result others also send same vibrations to you”.

This kind of existential philosophy in life also provides a frame of reference and set of values (Frankl, 1984). These guide one’s behavior in day to day situations or in major life decisions, including whether one chooses peace over violence in settling differences of opinion or mutually co exist with diverse people rather than attacking them for being different. In fact our values and beliefs determine our perception of ourselves, reality and others (Combs, 1974). This perception of reality (physical or spiritual) determines our response to it. Spiritual orientation is about valuing outcomes which are far reaching, beyond the immediate gains.

One of the participants who categorically described the source of inner happiness and peace of mind within the person and believed that running after material pleasures only brings misery and restlessness. This practice of detachment was also described in terms of renunciation from ego. To quote one of the participants,

“Ego is when I attach my existence and my identity solely to my physical status, spirituality teaches me not to identify with body alone but to know that I am made up of body, mind and soul which are inherently divine and peaceful”.

The idea is echoed in a message which our former President Dr. Abdul Kalam received from a Buddhist Monk,

“If you want peace, remove ‘I’ and ‘Me’. When you remove ‘I’ and ‘Me’, You remove Ego. When you remove Ego, you remove hatred. When you remove hatred you have Peace”
(cited in Bhagabati, 2006, p.4).

Another participant expressed the views in similar context,

“Many a times it’s our response which triggers or smoothens situation. Spirituality gives us the ability to be the witness to a situation, to be able to see situation with greater detachment and not to get one’s ego involved”.

Conclusion

The findings discussed in this paper, are consistent with the work of many other researchers (Harvey, 2004; Hyde & Woolley, 2008) where they reported about participants spiritual experiences characterized by feeling of intense peace and harmony with oneself and others, feeling of total peace, being anything but peaceful apart from the other dimensions. The researches in Education need to address issue of spirituality and well being with diverse population. Not only it would help spirituality emerge as a discipline but identified groups can throw immense possibilities of viewing spirituality and peace as inseparable phenomenon in our society as is advocated in the light of theoretical arguments and empirical bases presented so far. These two originates from the same root and signify the very essence of being human. Similar studies would bring the focus on essential human nature and hope back to the field of Education.

On the bases of theoretical arguments and the narratives of teacher educators, there is a very conclusive and compelling argument that spiritual unity is the underlying base of authentic interconnectedness of all human beings on earth. The authenticity helps the teachers in day-to-day lives including managing them as teachers and classroom events. This cosmic humanism which has been the focal point of Indian spiritual philosophy for all these years can now perhaps take the centre stage in peace oriented discourses particularly in educational context.

An integrated approach to spirituality based peace endeavors is perhaps more relevant than ever before in contemporary situations when one's voice and opinion can be so radicalized amidst a very thin line of demarcation between right and wrong, where holding a minority opinion can be misunderstood as being unethical. When the age old legacy of diversity, inclusivity and peaceful coexistence is in severe threat, only inner voice of people and their deeper conscience can be the compass and a guiding force towards culture of peace. Exploring Indian spiritual themes anew, like these participants have reported, is likely to be the focus of new age spirituality and education.

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List Of Abbreviation

MHRD- Ministry Of Human Resource Development
NCERT – National Council Of Educational Research And Training
NFI – National Foundation For India
SCERT – State Council Of Educational Research And Training
U.N- United Nations

UNESCO- United Nations Organization For Education, Science And Culture
WHO – World Health Organisation