A Note on the Significance of Integrating Spirituality into Education in Sri Lanka

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What is education for? To develop the country or to develop the people? We often hear about the significance of developing the country. It is about developing the economy of the country. It is about the need to develop our country to the level of other developed countries. It is about the need for an education that aims to create a workforce armed with the latest knowledge, technology and training to build the country. This has been the goal of every educational reform that has taken place in the country for more than seven decades since independence. But, the country has not developed as expected and it doesn't seem to be progressing. The question now is whether it is possible to develop a country without developing its people.

Is it the scarcity of natural resources, capital, technology, knowledge and skilled workforce which keeps our country underdeveloped? If not, the scarcity of honest, truthful, disciplined, law-abiding and unselfish people who are willing to dedicate knowledge, skills, capital, technology and natural resources unselfishly for the wellbeing of the common good? It is now becoming clear that the second is the main reason why our country is not yet developed.

Evidence suggests that the current education system has failed to produce the kind of educated people with the aforementioned good qualities needed to build the country. There is no evidence to suggest that the so-called 'educated people' produced by the existing education system are more honest, generous, unselfish, law-abiding and ready to dedicate their lives for the common good than the 'uneducated': those who were not able to be benefited from the education. Both the educated and the uneducated seem to be inferior in these qualities.

So what we need now is an education system that aims at developing the country as well as the people of the country. The country needs an education system that provides the modern knowledge, technology and training required for the 21st century and produces unselfish people who are sincere, truthful, disciplined, law-abiding, who love the country and are willing to sacrifice their personal pleasures for the common good. In other words, the country needs an education system that focuses not only on developing the economy but also on developing the people. Because it is now abundantly clear that the country cannot be developed without developing the people. There is a need for an education system that will make a positive difference in school children as well as in students studying in institutions of higher learning.

This is where the need to incorporate spirituality into education arises. When one hears the word spirituality, many people think that this is talking about religion. But it is not so. Scholars of the Sanskrit language believe that the word spirituality (අධ්‍යාත්මිකත්වය) is a combination of the two Sanskrit words "adhi" ("අධි") and "athma" ("ආත්ම"). The word "adhi" means higher or superior, and the word "athma" means individual or person. Then the meaning of the word "adhi" + "athma" = 'adyathma' or spirituality is expressed as the highest state that an individual can attain. When a person attains this highest state, the higher qualities that are manifested through that person's behavior are called spiritual qualities. Unconditional love, kindness, compassion, mercy, altruism, honesty and devotion to the common good are widely recognized as spiritual qualities.

This definition of spiritual qualities fits in well with modern science. Experts in Transpersonal Psychology, a new discipline in psychology, point out that the human race (Homo sap.) has not yet completed its evolution and reached the highest level that human beings can reach. They point out that although they evolved physically and became human passing all other living species, they have not yet fully evolved mentally. They call the remaining part of our evolution 'psycho-spiritual development'. Recent research in neuroscience has also found that the qualities we call spirituality are hardwired in the human brain. This means that those qualities remain indelible in the human brain. This shows that spiritual qualities are a set of qualities that we as human beings have inherited. Our true nature is unselfishness. Selfishness is a temporary trait that later enters our brain and becomes ingrained. What happens in spiritual development is that these spiritual qualities become manifest in our lives

All religions value spiritual qualities. Different religions offer different methods for the spiritual development of individuals. The main goal of every major religion is spiritual development. At the core of all major religions is spiritual development. It means the purpose of every religion is to teach the believer the methodology that must be practiced in order to reach the highest level that can be attained as a human being. In the long period after the death of the founders of each religion, the spiritual development that was the essence of their teachings gradually fell into insignificance and was replaced by other politically and commercially important goals. As a result, many religious organizations and the clergy who lead them today do little to help build a spiritually sound society. It is evident today that religions, rather than producing people who can live in peace and harmony with others, are creating a spiritually degenerate individuals and groups that condemns other religions in the name of their own religion. Therefore, spirituality and religion cannot be considered as one and the same.

Hence, it is difficult to imagine that the teaching of religion can produce children who are spiritually developed. Religion has been taught in almost every school so far, but the children who have completed their schooling do not seem to have progressed spiritually. The teaching of religion in schools does not seem to have produced disciplined, law-abiding, truthful citizens who were spiritually virtuous, selfless, and committed to the common good. The country would not be like this if such citizens were born by teaching religion in schools. Good people with spiritual qualities are seldom found here and there, but in general our society seems to be in a very spiritually

undeveloped state. It is common to all sections of society, educated and uneducated, rich and poor, all religions and races. It is not surprising that political leaders, rulers and professionals, as well as religious leaders and priests, who are born into a spiritually undeveloped society and live in such a society, are spiritually immature and lack spiritual qualities. It is not possible to expect from such individuals to serve the society unselfishly. So, not surprisingly, they use their positions and power for their own benefits rather than for the common good.

If the teaching of religion does not seem to create a spiritually advanced society, then the next option left for us is to incorporate spirituality into the formal educational process. There are several additional benefits associated with this option. Unlike in the teaching of religion, spirituality can be taught logically and scientifically. Unlike before, the 21st century children think scientifically and logically. They are not ready to accept religious teachings based on irrational beliefs and stories that are incompatible with modern science. Sometimes they accept such teachings due to the respect they have to the teachers, parents and priests, but when they realize the irrationality and falsity of the religious teachings they have learned, they abandon them. They do not absorb such teachings into his life. Furthermore, since spirituality is taught as a non-religious scientific subject, it can be taught in classrooms with children belonging to different religions. This is more appropriate for our multi-religious society.

The inclusion of spirituality in school education will lead to interfaith harmony in the future. When children of different religions study spirituality as a scientific subject, they are able to gain an understanding of humanity beyond the narrow confines of their own religions. The children will soon understand that spiritual qualities are inherent in themselves as well as in the children of other religions, and the purpose of their life as humans is to manifest these qualities through their behaviour. They will also begin to understand that different religions represents different methods or pathways to achieve this goal. With this understanding, they will begin to respect all religions. When they study different religions comparatively, scientifically and logically, they gain a broader and deeper understanding that transcends the narrow boundaries of their religious and the religious egoism (the view that only their religion is right and all other religions are wrong) planted in their minds by their own religions. Eventually, they will be able to see the humanity common in all.

They will also be able to understand the futility of the teachings, practices, rituals and beliefs that have been added to their religions after the demise of the founders of their respective religions. Then it will be difficult for religious leaders, political leaders, and clergy who arouse religious conflicts for their personal gains to continue to do so. This will also provide an opportunity for the children to re-discover and practice the spirituality that is the essence of their own religion.

However, spirituality should not be taught as a traditional style class-room based subject of which students' performance is measured by traditional-style exams, but as a practical subject such as swimming, music, and physical exercise. After imparting theoretical knowledge in the classroom, it is necessary to engage them in practical exercises that will develop them spiritually. Such practical exercises may include religious practices as well as non-religious science-based spiritual

exercises. Effectiveness of such exercises has been scientifically proved. One can choose the exercises or methods that suit best according to one's religion, cultural background and personal tastes.

As mentioned at the outset, the need to incorporate spirituality into the country's education is now clear if the people of the country are to develop the country. Individuals equipped with spiritual qualities is a prerequisite for developing a country. These days the economy of our country has suffered a severe setback due to the Covid epidemic. Now it is no secret that the plague was caused by the indiscipline, lawlessness, dishonesty, selfishness and irresponsible behavior of the people of the country. These are all signs of spiritual immaturity. This is a simple example to show the significance of spiritually developed people for a country to develop. It is necessary to integrate spirituality in education in order to develop the people spiritually. But this is not a short-term solution. This is also not a substitute for short-term solutions. It will take at least another generation or two. But it is necessary for the future prosperity of our country.

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