



by Kanwal Preet Kaur

# Spirituality in Human



**“Spirituality and human rights??!! Phew, what a weird combination.”**  
**That’s the reaction I get from most people on this topic. And the participants in my training courses have tended to turn out in large numbers, being initially more “curious” than “serious” about the subject.**

## ***So, what IS the link between spirituality and human rights as I see it?***

Human rights are primarily the state’s responsibility, and state laws govern relations between wo/man and wo/man and not Wo/man and God. Spirituality is perceived to be a human being’s inner relation with the Divine Power (whatever name might be given to it). The link between the two started becoming evident to me (although I cannot go into detail here because of word limits) both in conceptual terms and as regards its implementation in practice, ie implementation of human rights law, while I was studying for my PG Diploma in Human Rights law a few years back. Although I cannot boast of being a master of spirituality or the like, I do belong to those fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to enjoy close contacts with holy people in India for over a decade now. My personal encounters and experiences in spirituality enabled me to see how beautifully its foundations were articulated and materialised in the form of international human rights law.

## ***What did I do after this inner revelation?***

I did a dissertation on the “Spiritual perspective of human rights” as part of my diploma and was surprised to see my professors did not know what to ask me in my viva, as they did not “understand” or “perceive” as “practical” what was written in front of them. (Just for the record, they passed me with A grade). At that point, I realised that I was alone on this journey and would have to do all the work myself, from conceptualising, theorising to education and training.

## ***How and when did this desire materialise?***

The next whole year after my viva was full of overwhelming inspiration and inner motivation to make this very specific contribution to the human rights movement. On the outside, I started looking for likeminded individuals and organisations that shared my vision and passion, while inside ideas kept flowing with full force and opportunities kept coming my way..... it was as if a Divine force was helping and guiding my way through step by step. I finally decided to take the plunge with my perspective, with my own limited resources and funds. I chose young people as my audience and colleges, where else, as my venue.

## ***Why did I choose young people as my target group?***

Simply because they are easier nuts to crack than oldies with all their hardened attitudes and stereotyped thinking and, of course, they hold the keys to the future. In human rights training, the emphasis is on living life on the basis of the principles of equality, non-discrimination and mutual respect. The strategy adopted here is to bring about changes in attitudes and behaviour. Spirituality also teaches the art of living through its universal transformative powers reflected in humane behaviour in daily life – something which human rights trainers aim for. It infuses a sense of personal justice in the participants and helps them cultivate values like compassion, empathy and service – values which the human rights movement is in urgent need of.

# Rights Training Experiences from India

In my pilot training courses, I gauged the mood of the young people and found them desperate for positive change and in search of alternatives. The most surprising and motivating factor for me as a human rights trainer was their inner inclination towards wanting to “know” and “engage” in spirituality, but not knowing “how to” or “where to” fit it into their busy schedules.

## **What are the facilitating factors in India?**

India is redolent with a practical spiritual culture where people from varied religions share a common bond of devotion and faith and have “lived, studied, worked and enjoyed” together for centuries. Respecting diversity comes naturally to them, although they are yet to become the utopian society human rights advocates dream of. Nevertheless, religion and spirituality have deep roots in popular culture and people relate to spirituality with a good level of understanding and trust.

## **So, how do I actually conduct the training?**

Well, I begin by creating a positive atmosphere in which my audience start talking openly to me. Then I gauge their current perceptions and understanding of the concepts of human rights and spirituality: definitions, impact on their daily lives, etc. I move forward by linking their understanding of human rights violations that surround them in a local context to legal definitions, international human rights law and the role of the United Nations and the Indian Government. We reach a common level of understanding of human rights and discuss some local issues such as sexual

harassment, gender discrimination, female foeticide and AIDS, etc. Now comes the interesting part: I stop the talking and again gauge their perceptions of how they FIT into all this - do they see a role for themselves?

The whole idea is to raise their awareness of the horrific state of the world they live in and make them feel GUILTY for not contributing enough to positive social change.

Social change is discussed in brief, with all its complexities and intricacies, and the emphasis is placed on the importance of individual change before any social change can even

be contemplated. This is where spirituality comes into play. Spirituality is discussed as a universal tool for bringing about positive inner changes and then outer transformation in behaviour and spreading these changes to the people around us – a sort of institutionalised positive chain reaction of human behaviour.

In terms of actually unravelling spirituality and lin-

king it to moral values and ethical principles, the approach is based on the following three pillars of understanding:

1. Freeing religion and spirituality from the clutches of religious leaders and presenting them as a personal experience leading to a balanced art of living.
2. Relating spirituality to commonly used terms like prayer, good wishes, noble thoughts, etc, in terms of the dormant powers in the human mind.
3. Unleashing the dormant powers in the human mind by developing a personal connection / relationship with the Divine power in order to cultivate and rejuvenate the humane values we all have in us.

***The aim here is to trigger a “change in mindsets”, with people’s belief systems and rationality being questioned – as people do behave in accordance with what they think and believe!***



Spirituality is also emphasised in terms of a conceptual basis for human rights and a tool for turning rhetoric into reality. More importantly, it is made clear that young people share an equal responsibility as agents for change in civil society, alongside government officials, the UN, NGOs and the media.

## **Outline of my training courses:**

1. Creating a positive atmosphere.
2. Introduction to human rights (purpose, principles, myths, rights and duties, international human rights law, whose responsibility, the naked hypocrisy in reality, power play, exercise on understanding).
3. Role of urban youth (the guilt trip, their powers, the barriers, undisciplined minds - the real culprit of every human rights violation).
4. Universal remedy called spirituality - link with human rights, answering nagging questions - why spirituality, who can be spiritual, definition, philosophy, gains for individual and society, fitting it in daily life).

## **Why do I focus on «spirituality» being an integral part of human rights training?**

Human rights education differs from normal education, as it not only involves instruction and information, but also makes bold attempts to shape attitudes and behaviour by changing mindsets around universally agreed standards, while building the target group's skills and their ability to go out and make human rights a way of living their daily lives. However, a task as daunting as this CANNOT be «taught» in lecture mode at all. Any attempts to do so are bound to end up being no more than a waste of time, money and resources. Attempts can, however, be made to trigger reflective thinking that would facilitate the necessary changes.

Such thinking would serve as an inspiration to live human values by switching the mind from hatred, self-centredness, jealousy and greed to tolerance, empathy, compassion and contentment. Spirituality identifies this as the journey from a state of unconsciousness to consciousness. This inner journey facilitates the above switch-over of values, while corresponding practice renews and cements individuals' faith in humanity.

## **Spirituality's role in developing a sustained will:**

I see the following as a successful human rights trainer's strategy:



Renewed faith in humanity makes peace and justice a «personal goal» for individuals, which in turn develops into a sustained inner will to reject any kind of injustice that surrounds them. If a human rights trainer is able to achieve that, I believe more than half the battle has been won. For it is totally impractical to imagine trainers remaining in close enough contact with the target groups so as to keep their motivation and commitment up after the training. And human rights training with no follow-up is not what we are looking for, is it? Information and skill development are also things people can do on their own initiative, as access to them is widely available. I therefore strongly believe that human rights training must include a module on spirituality to bring practical meaning to human rights.





## But how does spirituality help human rights advocates, trainers and participants specifically?

Spiritual values, education and practice are a must for the participants themselves and for the training to have a sustainable impact:

- \* Give a sense of purpose to the participants – Their inner journeys show the purpose of life to be much more than mere materialistic gains.
- \* Keep their inner motivation high – With newly developed personal goals, they feel very much part of the global human rights movement.
- \* Move them away from the realm of “only my miseries” to “theirs” - A realisation sinks in whereby self-focused actions give way to a sense of “selfless service” as empathy develops. The tsunami waves proved to be a great “trigger” for the sleeping humanity in all of us!
- \* Provide them with a sense of Divine protection and security – This stems from faith in the Divine power that it is there with you and is always ready to help you overcome the obstacles of daily life.

Specifically, the approach helps participants develop a sustained will after their very personal inner experiences of spiritual practice and enables them to take the initiative for positive change in their respective societies.

## How I have changed since my first training course?

Each course has been a learning experience for me, too, and has proved to be a building block for my next course – in terms of both concept and methodology – and relating to a new audience with such a volatile subject!

The young people have been extremely enthusiastic and active in the training courses and have helped me “simplify” the link between human rights and spirituality so that the lay person can recognise and relate to it. As far as methodology is concerned, I have experimented with lectures, exercises, role playing, visual aids and rapid-fire sessions, alongside in-depth discussions, and feel that one size does not fit all - even with the same target group at different venues. Each group has its own understanding and academic and cultural backgrounds. I now go to the courses prepared with a potpourri of methodologies and customise on the spot!

## What next?

Although it is obvious that I am enjoying my work and feel a sense of inner satisfaction after each course, the journey has only just begun. We have a saying in India that goes: “I was walking alone and didn’t notice that a caravan had formed behind me.” While not being over-ambitious, but with spirits and motivation all riding high, I plan to complete this phase in my training courses and move on to the next phase of conducting intensive workshops with carefully selected youth leaders who have the potential to become what I would call “Spiritual Human Rights Warriors” (SHRW).

The idea behind building a force of SHRW within civil society is not to force young people into adopting human rights as a career option, but to develop a sustained interest in the topic on their part and a knowledge base about local human rights violations that surround them and, most importantly, to have a concrete end-product at the end of the workshop in the form of a “customised action plan” for each participant on the issues they are interested in. They would be assisted while carrying out their plans and would be monitored, with the results being evaluated. I hope to develop a model based on my experience.

While this was a short-term strategy, in the long run and God willing, I plan to link the SHRW to resources and organisations working on various issues – making this a supply chain of SHRW for as many human rights issues as possible!



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