

EXPERIENCE—JASON HART, LONDON, ENGLAND STANDING UP FOR JUSTICE

Jason Hart tells how faith, practice and study have inspired him to take concrete action toward realizing peace in the Middle East.

At 27, having practiced Buddhism for three years, I began a degree in Hebrew and Arabic. Earlier travels to Israel had sparked a fascination with the Middle East, which grew into a desire to work for peace in this troubled part of the world. My study of Daisaku Ikeda's writings and, in particular, his dialogue with Johann Galtung, entitled *Choose Peace*, led me to understand that achieving lasting peace requires that the sufferings and injustices felt by all parties are fully acknowledged.

As a Jew, I had always been concerned that the Holocaust, and other persecutions of Jewish people, attracted due recognition and sympathy around the world, and believed that this was generally the case. However, to my mind, the expulsion of the Palestinians from their homes in 1948, in order to create a Jewish state, and the subsequent 50 years of exile and oppression, had been largely ignored.

The progress of my studies, from a B.A. in Hebrew and Arabic to an M.A. in anthropology, went hand-in-hand with the development of this conviction. For two summers, I worked as a teacher with Palestinians, and so learned close-up about their unhappy circumstances. Those were not easy times. The West Bank was still under full Israeli occupation and pitched battles occurred close to the schools where I was teaching. In one place, soldiers, positioned on the roof of a building opposite, kept their rifles trained on my students throughout our lessons. Many of the students had been imprisoned and tortured for their political activities, but their desire to end the occupation of their land and for the self-determination of their people was undimmed. I felt very privileged to teach these earnest young people and to supplement my education in lecture halls and libraries with this first-hand experience.

These two sources of learning—both academic and experiential—provided the foundation and inspiration for me to embark on a Ph.D. However, there was one obstacle: My application for a scholarship had been rejected, compelling me to enroll as a part-time student with the prospect of my studies taking eight years to complete. I spoke to a leader in the SGI-UK who encouraged me to thoroughly check my decision about this course. Over the next months I did this, while balancing various part-time jobs with my college commitments. Feeling convinced, I re-applied the following year and was offered two excellent scholarships. So it was back to university full time. After a further six months, I was ready to begin fieldwork.

I had decided to write my thesis about the lives of children growing up in a Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan: to explore how third or fourth generation refugees come to learn and think about their relationship to a 'homeland' that they have never seen. To this end, I intended to find a camp where I could live for 18 months and try to integrate myself in the daily life of the community.

For the first two months, I took one small step at a time while applying myself single-mindedly to my Buddhist practice. Officials told me that the camps were very conservative places and that as a single European male, residents would be totally opposed

to my full-time presence. However, I strove to make new friends at every opportunity and before long was “adopted” by a wonderful family who made it possible for me to live in their camp.

I knew that, in the understanding of many Muslims, Buddhism is anathema since there is no single, external God. All 50,000 inhabitants of the camp were Muslims and a fair number might have been labeled “fundamentalist.” To avoid the risk of confrontation, I therefore decided to keep my own faith a private matter. I had taken with me an Omamori Gohonzon (*Omamori*, literally protection. A miniature Gohonzon which can be carried on the person.) to chant to when alone, and found that I enjoyed practicing like this. My prayers were more focussed and my study much deeper than had often been the case in London. I felt that I was strengthening my connection with SGI President Ikeda; striving to be his representative in a place that he might never visit.

Furthermore, it was a great challenge to find ways to share the spirit of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism with my new friends without naming my faith.

My life in the camp was a fascinating adventure, immeasurably enriched by the warmth and hospitality of my neighbors. However, problems inevitably arose. After a few months, some young men whom I knew vaguely came visiting. They soon began to interrogate me, asking endless questions about London with the aim of revealing that I was lying about my origins. I understood by this that they believed I might be an Israeli spy. This was confirmed when one of them informed me that should he and his friends choose to tell others I was an agent for Mossad, it would spread rapidly throughout the camp. Another pointed out that I was living in a violent and dangerous place, where people exacted their own justice on those they believed had transgressed. Knowing that the illegal sale of guns was rife, and having heard various stories of extreme violence in the camp, these were alarming statements. At the same time, I sensed that they were deriving some pleasure from unnerving me in this way.

By the time they left, I was choked with fear and anger. I eventually calmed myself enough to chant and consider the situation. My work and my safety were suddenly on the line. I asked myself repeatedly why I was there. Perhaps it was vanity or stupidity that had brought me to such a place? (I knew that I was more than capable of both!) What should I do about the possible danger? I recalled the time, five years earlier, when I first went to teach in the West Bank. Israeli friends had advised me that this was far too dangerous for a Jew. At that time, I’d responded by demanding in my prayers that all the protective forces existing in the universe work with me. Despite a few hairy moments, I completed the job without any harm. Now, five years later, I felt I had to go one step further: to find out if I was prepared to give my life for what I was doing. What a great opportunity! Through chanting, my conviction grew stronger: I was definitely pursuing my own path toward peace and justice. Although I had always feared physical pain and death, at that point I felt prepared to risk both rather than turn back.

My prayers turned, naturally toward my visitors. I began to gain a keen sense of their intense frustration. These were bright and ambitious young men. However, as impoverished refugees their hopes were endlessly thwarted. I chanted sincerely and without resentment for their happiness. This action marked an important breakthrough for me, as I denied myself a retreat into familiar “victimhood.” I believe it may be a tendency for some Jewish people, myself included, to perceive ourselves as victims. Although justifiable in terms of the historical record, personal experience has taught me that such self-perception is debilitating and can lead to an unhealthy view of the world. The threats

of my Palestinian visitors had certainly prompted me to chip away at my own share of this. Furthermore, struggling to embrace these young men in my heart caused my life to open up—to the extent that I often felt as if my prayers were broad enough to cover the aspirations and the pain of all the residents of the refugee camp. When I reached that stage, I also knew for sure that no danger would come to me and, indeed, it didn't.

I am now back in London writing up my Ph.D thesis. I intend to use this as the basis of my efforts to tell a wide audience about the Palestinian refugees. Some friends have suggested that I must be in denial of my Jewish identity to have become so involved with the “other side.” However, through Buddhism, I am now deeply aware that before all else, we are members of the human family. It is a significant aspect of my destiny to have been born a Jew and to be involved in a cycle of victim and victimizer. I am determined to use my Buddhist faith and practice to break this cycle, while taking action to help bring just and lasting peace to the Middle East.

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