

BECOMING BRIDGE-BUILDERS IN PERIODS OF TRANSITION: TOWARDS A COMMUNION OF CIVILIZATIONS IN OUR TIMES

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Abstract

The process of globalization poses many new possibilities for communication of solutions to our many problems. This paper reviews these problems and then discusses the roots of the possible solutions to such problems. The solutions are rooted in communities, traditions and the individual in our present world. It is rooted in the dialogue among civilizations.

บทคัดย่อ

กระบวนการโลกาภิวัตน์ทำให้เกิดความเป็นไปได้ใหม่ๆ ในวงการสื่อสารที่สื่อวิธีแก้ปัญหาต่างๆ ของเรา บทความนี้จะพิจารณาถึงปัญหาต่างๆ เหล่านี้ และจะอภิปรายถึงรากเหง้าของวิธีที่เป็นไปได้ในการแก้ปัญหา แนวทางในการแก้ปัญหาเหล่านี้มาจากชุมชน ประเพณีและปัจเจกชนในโลกปัจจุบัน ซึ่งมีรากฐานอยู่บนการสานเสวนาระหว่างอารยธรรมต่างๆ

1. The Situation

To be one with the world is wisdom (Tirukkural)

With the world becoming more and more globalized, we are moving into exciting times. The world economy is taking new directions, innovations in communications are bringing people and communities together, international solidarity offers indefinite possibilities of self expres-

sion; a good idea generated at any place has the opportunity to reach out to the remotest parts of the world; and good values preserved in any civilizational tradition can offer inspiration to persons and societies in any place on the planet. There is every possibility for cultures, civilizations, and faiths to dialogue with each other, to listen to each others' insights, and **learn from each others' wisdom.**

a. Violence

Violence is flourishing. Pride is at its height! Violence produces more wickedness (Ezekiel 7:10- 11).

Violence is suicide (Mahatma Gandhi).

If we look at the world today we see that tensions are mounting: nation against nation, class against class, ethnic group against ethnic group, majority against minority and vice versa. The strong usually have their way. No wonder that dominant nations and groups are perceived as exploiting the weaker. Those who feel that they are unjustly treated take to violence in response. All slogans are about 'rights'; there is not enough reference to duties. Every claim of rights seems to be valid until its exaggerations make its limitations evident. Meantime peace continues to elude the human race.

All religions have taught peace, impartiality, and fairness. And yet there are conflicts in the name of religion in any number of places: Israelis-Palestinians, Serbs-Croats-Muslims, Indians-Pakistanis, Singhalas-Tamils, Catholics-Protestants (N.Ireland); tensions in Chechnya, Somalia, Sudan, Philippines, Indonesia. Nor can we forget the violence caused by the 'secular religions' (ideologies) of our days. Eric Hobsbawm calls the ideological wars of last century "the most militant and bloodthirsty of the religious wars", which were linked with secular pieties like personality cults and promise of permanent solutions to human problems (*Hobsbawm 563*). Solutions however have never come.

Wars in ages past were between kings, emperors, dynasties or sovereign nations. Today they are often between ethnic groups and local activists. There have been **civil wars** in Angola, Bosnia, Chechnya, Croatia, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Iraq, Liberia, Mozambique, Somalia,

Sudan, Tajikistan, Uganda (*Pinker 303*). There are battles going on between **fundamentalists** of various types: religious, secular, cultural, political, economic, and ideological. The political scientist Stanley Hoffman says he had fondly hoped for an era of peace when the Cold War ended. But his hopes were soon shattered when he kept hearing news only of violence, terrorism, suicide bombings, displaced people, and genocides; of civil wars, battles between militias, guerillas, paramilitaries; ‘new wars’, ‘**low intensity conflicts**’, and genocide, ethnic cleansing (*Pinker 296*).

The situation has grown so alarming that Norman Podhoretz brought out a book called ‘World War IV’ (*Pinker 295*). Hobsbawm argues that the weakening of state power during the second half of the 20th century led to the “democratization or **privatization of the means of destruction**” (*Hobsbawm 560*). Studying the present trends, there is no way we can feel confident that the age of Holocausts, Hiroshimas, and bloody revolutions is over.

b. Human Beings Evaluated in Market Terms

There is none high or low amongst you. You are all brethren and therefore strive altogether to attain prosperity (Rig Veda 5,60,5).

They themselves are slaves of destructive habits (2 Pet 2:19).

Slavery and absolute poverty reduce human beings to levels **less than human**. Violence takes them down one step lower. But when people are evaluated only in market terms, when they are classified merely as ‘**labour**’ or evaluated solely in reference to the ‘**market**’, their status goes down further still. In other words, when their worth is calculated only in terms of their use to the economy, they become less than human beings and bearers of dignity. And yet, the tragedy today is that entire nations are opting for this form of self-abasement by making **economic growth their sole goal**.

This process is assisted by the **dogma of ‘free choice’** propagated by Big Business.¹ They have an evident interest in promoting the dogma; it benefits their profit-making strategies. Meantime Big Corpo-

rations are making themselves less and less accountable to anybody. They manipulate mass media, **impose uniform ways of thinking and acting** on society, seek to monopolize knowledge, subject people to consumerism, imprison them in artificial environments and isolate them from nature. Those who fall victims to their mesmerizing and psychologically numbing influence, lose their concern for society, commitment to compassion and solidarity; they lose sight of ecological responsibilities and grow in their greed for wealth (Hathaway xvii), often acquired unethically.

c. Need for a Dialogue of Civilizations Leading to a Communion of Civilizations

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid....Nothing vile or evil shall be done (Judaism: Isaiah 11:6-9).

All people are a single nation (Koran II).

In the face of these and other difficulties, we must not act as though we have no resources to count on. Our civilizational heritages provide enormously valuable assets on which we can build, making use also of the dynamic new ideas of our times. We are not helpless. We make ourselves helpless only by isolating ourselves from each other or wasting energies in constant rivalry. As Thomas Berry said, “We live immersed in a **sea of energy**”. This energy primarily belongs to the community, and a big portion destined for each person is to be found in the other. It has to be discovered and tapped, not by violent snatching, but by drawing it forth gently from each other: sharing thoughts, evoking emotional support, eliciting collaboration.

We are legitimately proud of our rootedness in our own culture and civilization (each one of his/her own). But we are also happy to **reach out to other heritages** which too have a proud history deserving our respect. We know that we are mutually dependent. Our **destinies are interlinked**. Historians tell us that civilizations that grew side by side were always locked in relationships that were mutually acknowledging and mutually sustaining, even amidst tensions. It is hard for any civiliza-

tion to maintain high standards in isolation (*Fernandez-Armesto 19*).

Nor can we limit ourselves to the wisdom of the past; we must remain open to the **new insights** of our own times. It was Confucius who said, “If by keeping the **old** warm one can provide understanding of the **new**, one is fit to be a teacher” (*Analects 2.11*). May be the uncertainties of the present era is inviting us to play a bridge-building role between the old and the new.

Time has come for the West to meet the East, the North the South. The old and the new must dialogue. Commerce must be attentive to ethical values, and scientific and technological research must draw inspiration from spiritual search. The painful memories of the past need to be healed and restored, and a future of harmony constructed together. Such ‘impossible’ dreams can be realized, not through a ‘clash of civilizations’ in which the strongest will emerge on top to solve problems, but through a **dialogue** that will lead to a **communion of civilizations**. That is the only way all cultures and civilizations will be able to make a rightful contribution to human destiny.

Arnold Toynbee wrote in 1972, “The two World Wars and the present worldwide anxiety, frustration, tension, and violence tell the tale. Mankind is surely going to destroy itself unless it succeeds in growing together into something like a **single family**. For this, we must become familiar with each other; and this means becoming familiar with each other’s history...” (*Toynbee 10*), and each other’s civilizational assets. That is what we seek to do through our efforts together as intellectuals.

2. Violence

He who has killed multitudes of men should weep for them with the bitterest grief (Tao Te Ching 31).

Do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, let him slap your left cheek too (Matthew 6:39).

We have already referred to the phenomenon of ongoing violence in our times. We call those who are its cause ‘terrorists’. Some go to the point of calling them “insane fanatics, mindless gangsters, pathological

thugs, brainwashed adolescent misfits, envy-driven. But that may not be true” (Lott 22). It is good therefore that we understand them in their own contexts. Cynicism or hasty condemnations will not help. There is a French saying, to understand is to forgive. It is good to search for those “mind-wounding, soul-warping events”, realities, that lead to violence.... which includes at times self-destruction (Lott 82).

As Lott says, “If one closes eyes to ‘**rational**’ causes of terrorism, it is irrationality” (Lott 22).

When a society feels severely humiliated, there is bound to be a reaction (Germany after World War I, China before the Revolution, nations that emerged from colonial rule). The Hindu society, for example, feels it has gone through a thousand years of humiliation. So does the Islamic society. The tragedies in Afghanistan and Iraq, ‘imbalance of power, asymmetry in battle’...all these fan the flame of anger that had already been existing. When a group of poverty stricken people are brought together, organized and made to feel they are fighting for a good cause, acts of terror seem to empower them and help them to discover a new emotional identity (Lott 20-21).

In such contexts, prophetism and messianism begin to emerge on either side of the battlefield: one proclaims democracy, the freedom of the individual and human rights; the other, national and ethnic pride. A community fights to the last person to defend their history and cultural identity. In the process of defending themselves, at times they go to excesses inflicting injury on the enemy and other groups, reaching to the point of ethnic cleansing (Lott 43). Thus, we cannot always believe that the strong are always wrong and that weak always right, that victims of injustice cannot turn unjust themselves. Exaggerations can be on either side. When people decide to go in for harshness, they place no limits to what they can do. “We have arrived at a global society, but with the clanish instincts inherited from the tropical savanna. Or, as E.O. Wilson put inimitably in his forward to my book *Common Wealth*, ‘We exist in a bizarre combination of Stone Age emotions, medieval beliefs, and god-like technology’” (Sachs 260-61).

Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says, “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”. But why do even normally fair-minded persons

surprise the world with cruel, inhuman deeds during ethnic or religious clashes? There are times when one should ‘stand out’ of one’s own identity and distance oneself from the immediate issue and listen to a **sober voice**, whoever is able to give it. Are you able? If not, why don’t you equip yourself to be able?

In contexts today when people rob, rape, torture and kill each other, these words of the great Buddha seem most relevant, “One cannot steal, lie, commit adultery or go along the banks of the Ganges striking, laying waste, mutilating and commanding others to mutilate, oppressing and commanding others to oppress”, without reaping the consequences (Digha Nikaya I, 52).

3. Corruption

Use honest scales, honest weights, and honest measures (Judaism: Leviticus 19:36).

Keep your promises; you are accountable for all that you promise...Weigh with even scales; that is fair, and better in the end (Quran 17:35-39).

Today corrupt practices have risen to the world stage. No one can plead to be totally innocent. That is why all must join hands together in order to wipe out this plague from society. Corruption is not only about the **wrong use of money**, but also about the **wrong use of power**. It is not only about taking bribe in government offices, but also about **various forms of manipulation and blackmailing**, political arm-twisting, pushing a particular party’s or ethnic group’s political interests through underhand ways, unfairness of dominant classes and castes to weaker sections, the imperceptible manner of bulldozing or marginalizing legitimate claims, silencing the voices of the weaker communities, physical elimination of political opponents or commercial competitors, interfering with election processes, using ‘strong men’ for vacating land or realizing bills, fixing matches, selling drugs. Corruption also has reference to hidden transactions, unpaid salaries, underpaid employees, unfair pressure.

The **globalized world has become a refuge** for corrupt business.

The global market provides distances, creates anonymity, gives opportunities for dishonest deals, enables one to take advantage of the weak, evade laws, and make an unfair proportion of profit. Let us make a distinction: 1. if greater profits are made through harder work, greater efficiency, more effective customer service or through path-breaking innovation, it is certainly legitimate. 2. But if it is made by underpaying the worker, evading taxes, ignoring safety laws, producing counterfeits, ruining the environment, abusing customer confidence, falsifying accounts or labour figures, double book-keeping, deceptive advertisements, industrial espionage, it is undoubtedly criminal. “Would it not be better for you to be robbed? Instead you yourselves wrong one another and rob one another, even your brothers!” (1 Corinthians 5:7-9).

Investigative journalism has often highlighted specific cases of dishonesty. But media men also can bend to mammon, and sell their services for money: cooking up stories to defame or defend a party leader, **distorting facts** to press an argument, presenting allegations as proven truth for minor favours. Plagiarizing, **pirating cassettes**, and violating intellectual property rights are very common in our days. Engineers in government service get opportunities to embezzle huge amounts. Doctors are accused of patronizing particular pharmaceutical companies or diagnostic centres, and even dealing in human organs. When citizens are not alert, the mechanisms of accountability and sanction are not activated, and structures of enforcement lie idle. Society remains silent. You and I give a tacit approval.

We may take a message from the Buddha’s times. The economy had grown brisk in his days: credit, debt, interest and market-nothing was absent. There were rich people going bankrupt and poor people gathering a fortune, honestly and in other ways. A warning against corruption was timely. A passage from early Buddhist poetry says, “**Let no one deceive** anyone else, nor despise anyone anywhere. May no one wish harm to another in anger or ill-will” (*Samyutta Nikaya 146-8*). And a Taoist teaching says, “When rulers live in splendor and **speculators prosper**, while farmers lose their land and the granaries are emptied; when governments spend money on ostentation and on weapons; when the upper class is extravagant and irresponsible, indulging themselves and possessing more than they can use, while the poor have nowhere to turn. All this

is robbery and chaos. It is not in keeping with the Tao” (*Tao Te Ching* 53). Are we in such an age?

4. Hypercommercialization

Invest money in foreign trade, and one of these days you will make a profit (Ecclesiastes 11:1-2).

If you love money, you will never be satisfied; if you long to be rich, you will never get all you want. It is useless (Ecclesiastes 5:10).

Corruption has something to do with economy. It is precisely in this field that ethical values are often lost. If they are threatened, they must be defended; if they have been lost, they must re-acquired and restored. Science and technology have given us good things, but they must be regulated by the norms of wisdom contained in our cultural traditions. The Tao Te Ching has this message, “The **sage does not accumulate**. The more he does for the people, the more he saves. The more he gives to people, the more he has” (*Tao Te Ching* 81). In Confucian tradition, a gentleman is concerned with what is right; the inferior man with profit, with material welfare. Mencius too looked down on the profit motive. In the West, the first generations of capitalists were models of asceticism. Their aim was to earn, to accumulate, and not to overspend. In fact, Weber and Keynes refer to high accumulation and low consumption (*Sachs* 150). Today’s capitalists on the contrary are prone to profligacy: they believe in lavish parties, weddings, anniversaries, election victories. **Hypercommercialism** has thrown up a class of super-rich and dumped the weak in dire poverty (*Sachs* 152).

We agree that **economy** has its own importance. It plays a central role in world affairs today. Anyone who neglects economy will have to pay for it in due time. However, economy is not everything. Economic success cannot be made the ultimate goal in human affairs. It cannot be allowed to **entice and enslave** human beings, wipe out cultures, and **ruin the environment**. Just as the political empires of the past brought some advantages to subject people even when they exploited, the commercial

empires of multi-national corporations too bring some advantages to people (cheaper goods and efficient dispatch of affairs); but they exploit. As the political empires of old took advantage of weaker nations, in the same way the commercial empires **take advantage of weaker people** (sometime the customers, sometimes the workers, and at other times the shareholders, usually smaller business concerns, generally the uninformed society). The subtle manner in which this is being done is becoming more and more evident today.

Economy organized on a vast scale, whether controlled by the Government (State capitalism) or by Corporations, tend not to respect persons, human concerns, families, communities, values, natural environment. **Gigantism always has its victims.** We are not opposed to the bigness of things, but are anxious that its weaknesses should be recognized. Correctives should be sought. The manner in which some companies compete looks more like an expression of the **aggressive and destructive streak in human nature** than of its constructive instincts. They ignore the inner worth of human beings, underestimate persons, communities, cultures, ethical and aesthetic traditions. After having invaded millions of human lives and damaged them, when things go wrong, the only solution that profit-makers can propose are drugs, tranquilizers, sedatives, stimulants, and antidepressants (*Fleischcker 16*); not silence, reflection, self-criticism or self-improvement.

We are moving into an age when it is technology, not human beings, that decides values. Human destiny has gone into the hands of big corporations. Kalle Lasn said, “**A corporation has no heart, no soul, no morals.** It cannot feel pain. You cannot argue with it... no sorrow or remorse” (*Hathaway 44*). What is said of corporations would be true equally of state-owned business concerns. Meantime consumer goods are in abundance, and most people are happy. They do not know what they are missing, how they are losing values that have taken shape over centuries and what their fate ultimately will be.

Gradually **speculators take over the economy.** And then, of course, there comes the **collapse.** If a collapse had not taken place, no one would believe that it was possible. But it has taken place. The reasons for the recent economic meltdown are not hard to find. John Maynard Keynes said years ago, “Speculation may do no harm as bubbles on a

steady stream of enterprise. But the position is serious when the enterprise becomes the bubble on a **whirlpool of speculation**" (*Hathaway 46*). The market is considered a 'self-organizing system', ensuring efficiency and preventing waste. But it does not always work that way. The 'invisible hand' many times remains truly invisible! Milton Friedman said, "I believe that we economists in recent years have done vast harm—to society at large and to our profession in particular—by claiming more than we can deliver" (*Capra 199*).

And when, during periods of recession, corporations and banks collapse and are gasping for breath, it is the tax-payer's (the average man's) money that is being used to bail them out. It is as though the poor are rushing to the rescue of the rich. This may sound paradoxical, but there may be some truth in it. It is similar to the paradox about International aid that has not reduced inequality or brought the needed assistance to the poor. International aid so often turned out to be the poor in rich countries coming to the aid of the rich in poor countries, and then the poor in poor countries being compelled to pay back the debt to the rich in rich countries. Thus, even plans formulated with good intentions go wrong in unforeseen ways. Truly, "A gentleman takes as much trouble to discover what is right as lesser men take to discover what will pay" (*Analects IV, 16*).

We said that economy is important. But it must be made 'human' in order to be meaningful to human beings. In fact, Wilhelm Ropke spoke of the need for '**humane economy**', e.g. not to victimize customers through exaggerated advertisements. Hans Kung keeps insisting, "**Being human must be the ethical yardstick** for all economic action": which means giving importance to human dignity, mutual respect, tolerance, compassion, care for nature, rule of law, justice, solidarity, truthfulness, reliability. We must hold up new icons before our eyes for imitation. We must make them speak to our collective unconscious, address our collective fears, respond to our common longings and desires. It is for us to make the right options. Will we choose an economic wizard or a saint for our model, a speculator or a sage? It is our choice. There are consequences.

Today **more money is spent on display than on life**. "Basic survival goods are cheap, whereas narcissistic self-stimulation and so-

cial-display products are expensive. Living doesn't cost much, but showing off does" (Sachs 167). People move from living and sharing to showing off and grabbing.

5. Damage to Environment

These classes of living beings have been declared by the Jinas: earth, water, fire, wind; grass trees, and plants; and the moving things, both the egg-bearing and those that bear live offspring, those generated from dirt and those generated in fluids. Know and understand that they all desire happiness. By hurting these beings, people do harm to their souls. Plants are beings possessed of natural development. Their bodies require nourishment, and they all have their individual life. Reckless men who cut them down for their pleasure destroy many living beings. By destroying plants, when young or grown up, a careless man does harm to his own soul (Jainism: Sutrakritanga I.7.1-9).

A wise man should not act sinfully toward the earth, nor cause others to do so, nor allow others to act so (Jainism: Acaranga Sutra5)

Unquestionably the **technological age** has brought us many blessings: e.g. reduction in infant mortality, lengthening of life expectancy, literacy, access to healthcare. But along with these blessings there have come also the **destruction of ecosystems** and erosion of traditional cultures, and undermining of the quality of life (Hathaway 17). We may well recall how the great empires of Mesopotamia, Crete, Greece, Rome, Maya, and the Indus Valley collapsed because they ruined the very environment that had brought them into existence. Deforestation has always had disastrous consequences. Felipe Fernandez-Armesto says "...civilizations commonly exploit their environments, often to the point of self-destruction" (Fernandez-Armesto 5).

Lester Brown's "*Mobilizing to Save Civilization*" speaks of pov-

erty, depletion of resources, falling of water tables, drying up of wells, shrinking of forests; of collapsing fisheries, eroding soils, grasslands becoming deserts. The list of disasters can be made longer: loss of forests, release of carbon dioxide, hole in the ozone layer, undermined the fertility of the soil, chemicals in the air, soil, water; wiped out species; overuse energy (*Hathaway 6*). There has been consistent neglect of traditional systems: of healing, cultivation, child care, family relationships, community living, problem-solving.² Though genetically modified species can add to quantity, quality remains uncertain. Moreover, corporations control the production, supply, replacement, and storing of those varieties (*Hathaway 42*).

The insensitivity that prompts people to overuse resources also inspires them to exploit the poor, reducing them to the status of ‘labour’ and ‘market’. The tragedy today lies precisely in placing **quantitative growth before quality of life**. And we gloriously lose out between different choices. This is an hour when we need to preserve the mental balance taught to us by the Wisdom of the Ancients, give attention to human Dignity affirmed by the Moderns, and look towards the Beauty that reminds us of our **eternal destiny**.

6. Misuse of the Media

There is a way to get the people: get their hearts and the people are won over (Mencius 4:9)

He (the sage) is free from self-display, and therefore he shines (Tao Te Ching 22)

Communications have made the greatest contribution to modern age. They have assisted people to come together and co-reflect, and be of assistance to each other. International solidarity has grown in a way that was never considered possible in earlier times.

But these very same instruments of communications can also be misused. They are fast falling into the grip of Big Business and centralized Governments. “**The media and the politicians are in splendid symbiosis**. The airwaves promote corporate products, consumer values, and

the careers of friendly politicians. The politicians promote media deregulation, low taxes, and freedom from scrutiny of performance and public service” (*Sachs 145*). Power slides into the hands of a small number of transnational corporations that are less and less accountable to democratic structures. Someone has described the tragedy in this manner: humanity is made subject to the market; the corporations control the market subjecting every field of human activity to serve their interests. **Mass media** strengthens this effort by **promoting consumerism** (*Hathaway 16*). Humans are reduced to the level of being mere objects.

Jeffrey Sachs is certain that even his own countrymen, living in a free country, are allowing themselves to be **manipulated by corporate propaganda**. This is just what the propaganda machinery of totalitarian governments did a few decades ago. What today’s commercial media proposes is not serious, responsible thinking about the long term good of society, but overconsuming, overborrowing, overgambling, excessive TV viewing, and other addictions (*Sachs 133*). They are not asking people to sit back and reflect, study the consequences, or plan for the good of humanity, as Asian sages would have done. May be that is where thinking people could make their contribution. That remains a challenge for Asia’s intellectuals.

There is a big difference between the needs of the rich and those of the poor. What the poor want are: food, clothing and shelter. But the rich want also to display their wealth. Their ‘wants’ are created for them by brand managers and advertising executives. **Advertisers** spend \$300 billion to manipulate minds, create cravings, whims, addictions, confusions, and quests for status (*Sachs 134-5*). They **play on human weaknesses** and aggravate them. They know that people spend less on enjoying things than for showing off what they have (for “conspicuous consumption”). Here the media rushes to their assistance. Taking advantage of their weakness, they beguile them into big spending, entice them with attractive things until they become addicted. How one would wish that media would do a more conscientious job in informing, educating, explaining, motivating, guiding, uniting, and strengthening.

The technologies of mass persuasion are being used as instruments for **manipulating minds**. Edward Berry, a nephew of Sigmund Freud, used to refer to marketing skills as the skills for ‘**engineering**

consent’ with regard to sales. They are also used during elections, even during a military coup. He considered it the art of hidden manipulation of public’s unconscious, taking advantage of people’s tendency to run in herds. We had been for decades warned about the manipulative power of the TV: George Orwell (1940s), Vance Packard (1950s), John Kenneth Galbraith and Marshall McLuhan (1960s) (*Sachs 137-38*). Could we grow a little more conscious of this danger? Nearly all the wise teachings of the East spoke of the need for resisting ‘**illusions**’ and attaining ‘**truth**’. How relevant those teachings seem to us in our times when so many of us spend any length of time in the ‘unreal’ world of the TV, in the world of ‘illusions’?

Today’s TV heroes/heroines are not telling us to “buy less, think more, be critical, think about the future” as Asian prophets would have done. Drawn by the powerful pull of the TV, families have become distanced from other families, and even family members have become estranged from one another. It is no surprise that **high TV viewing and low social trust go together**. Scandinavian countries are low TV viewers, but have high levels of social trust. In the same way, not surprisingly, high TV viewing goes along with the consumption of junk food and its resulting obesity (*Sachs 139-41*). We little realize how vulnerable we are to manipulation by the vast Advertising and Public Relations Industry. Hindu and Buddhist traditions counseled the shedding of ‘illusions’. And **Jesus’ mission** was precisely this, “For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the **truth**. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice” (*John 18:37*).

7. Poor Governance

When a ruler’s personal conduct is correct, his government is effective without the issuing of orders (Confucius: Analects 12,5).

It is because he (the sage) is free from striving that no one in the world is able to strive with him (Tao Te Ching 22).

All these evils would have found remedies if the right people were leading public affairs. Confucius thought, like Plato, that political power should be wielded by men of wisdom and virtue. For him the qualities the rulers needed most were: **confidence of the people**, food, weapons (*Analects 12.7*). In that order. If this teaching were taken seriously, how much money spent on arms by Asian nations could have been spared for food, education, and health! Even democracy does not necessarily guarantee the right priorities when elected members keep a distance from people. How much control are people given over policies, in fact over their own very destinies? Even the structures of democracy can be rendered ineffective, they can be misused.

Rulers should make sure to **consult people's interests** if they wish to win their hearts. Confucius would say, "If you desire good, the people will be good. The nature of the gentleman is like the wind, and the nature of small people is the grass. When the wind blows over the grass it always bends" (*Analects 12.19*). Leaders should excel in civic virtues and their concern for the common good. Their goals should not be merely economic prosperity, but also social justice and environmental sustainability. If they succeed in creating a set of values in society that are motivating and unifying, it will bring long-term benefit to that society. And every citizen has the duty to **awaken public consciousness** about the importance of such values.³

Today governments are too closely linked with private interests, with the families of the leaders, with business groups and corporations that remunerate them for their services. Jeffrey Sachs feels that even military establishments are being controlled by megalobbies (*Sachs 105*). **Corporate lobbies** form a caucus in law-making bodies, shape policies, determine elections. They press for deregulation, cut taxes on the rich, **reduce expenditure for the poor**, and aggravate inequalities. Whenever in any nation the army is too closely linked with private industry, the nation condemns itself to **militarization**. And the better a nation is equipped for war, the greater the possibility of neighbouring nations seeking to arm themselves better still. Thus reckless military expenditure turns out to be counterproductive: it merely increases the insecurity. Meantime the poor are impoverished further, and the global arms industry thrives.

One may think that challenging the enemy with full force of arms

will awe them. It may happen that way; but it may also happen another way. It may provoke the enemy into a desperate action at a moment and in a manner that none is expecting. And the damage they inflict can be fatal. As we well know, the atom bomb was the discovery of scientists who had been desperate refugees from Nazi oppression (*Hobsbawm 545*). Is it possible to choose a strategy which seeks to complete and complement the role of the opponent (in Yin-Yang manner), of the competitor or the enemy, rather than compete, confront, and eliminate? Can we make place for wisdom, for the **reconciliation of opposing interests**, care for the poor, and ecological responsibility?

When corporations grow into giants (or when the government assumes the same role), they move away from workers and shareholders. They become impersonal and lose their adaptability. Gradually they lose credibility before those very persons who are most closely associated with them. All the more, average citizens, less informed and less interested, develop an attitude of distrust towards governments and corporations. Their general experience with those structures has been negative. So it happens that there is a **growing suspicion in society about all institutions**.

This in turn has led to exaggerated views about personal freedoms in opposition to institutional control, going to the point of ignoring common norms and collective decisions: to let every individual pursue his or her satisfaction without restraint, and to accept the result as the best that can be achieved (*Hobsbawm 565*). Loss of credibility of institutions leads to cynicism and inaction. Inaction, in turn, gives rise to further institutional abuse, and finally to total indifference from the part of the public. Ultimately irresponsible institutions and ruling elite are left unhindered to do what they like. And we sit back in **self-imposed helplessness and blind complacency**.⁴

8. Communities and Cultures are Sources of Ethical Principles

A better understanding of the way that societies have evolved over the centuries can help. Let us look at the early days of human existence. May be, the communities that we call **'primal'** (tribal) today can

teach us how human society used to be at an earlier stage of its evolution. Each of them (tribe, ethnic group, ‘volk’) constituted a coherent, singular, unique group of people with its own internal norms. Each had its own set of beliefs, values, customs, and traditions. These traditions, rooted in culture, were inherited, not reasoned out,⁵ not debated and consciously developed. They are **a ready source of ethical principles** for each community.

The Buddha’s immediate followers were members of tribal communities. He wisely recommended to each group to follow its own **ancestral morality and tradition**. He was fully aware that people’s values were closely linked to their own history and culture. Recognizing their usefulness and relevance, he brought some of those values and traditions into his monastic traditions (e.g. that of concord, unanimous decisions, respect to elders and to inherited code of behaviour). The intention of Confucius too was to build on traditional values in his times.

In recent years, several anthropologists (Margaret Mead, Melville Herskovits, Clifford Geertz) have been insisting on the validity of ‘primal’ traditions, and proposing them as **correctives** to the counter-values proper of modern society like individualism, material-mindedness, insensitivity to nature, lack of community sense. Pride in one’s ethnic identity and culture does not necessarily lead to fanaticism, fascism, racism or fundamentalism, as it has occasionally done. As every community is proud of its own individuality and heritage, it should respect similar sentiments in others.

Even though there can be **differences** in the values prevalent in different communities, they are generally **complementary**. For example, some value freedom, others discipline; some give importance to wisdom, others to happy relationships; some insist on frankness, others on courtesy. Greeks look for wisdom, Jews for miracles (*1 Corinthians 1:22*). The West may insist on freedom of the press, the East on respect for religious sentiments. It is unfair to impose one’s own perceptions or priorities (even democracy) on others ignoring the path of history that different people have trodden. We ought to allow each community to walk at its own pace towards the **goals that it has chosen for itself**.

However, at the same time, in many things we agree. Nearly everyone sees evil in murder, torture, slavery, genocide, separation of fami-

lies, desecration of religious symbols. All communities encourage helpfulness to each other within the community and sympathetic dealings with outsiders. A concern for others is considered central. As Buddhists respect all sentient things, Confucians teach human-heartedness, Muslims compassion, Christians generous service.

At the same time everyone has the duty of making space for **self-criticism**. A broadminded person, while questioning his own **ethnocentrism**, understands and accepts a measure of it in others (people of other castes, tribes or communities: Brahmins, Hutus, easterners, westerners, Christians, Muslims, Hindus). Self-criticism is important because we know that no one is perfect and no culture is complete. Moreover, the more worrying problems of life are **not ultimately economic or academic, but existential**. They call for serious reflection. That is what made insightful Asians long for apartness, silence, contemplation, peace of mind, community-building, **self-realization** (*Capra 440*).

9. We Belong Together: Community, Family

Never in this world will hatred cease by hatred...hatred is ceased by love (The Buddha).

In order rightly to govern the state, it is necessary first to regulate the family (Confucius).

We spoke of the need for beginning with our own individual tradition and community. However, we cannot live in isolation; we belong to each other. Nature gives us models of several patterns of inter-relationships and integrated systems: atoms, molecules, organs, body; individuals, families, tribes, societies, and nations. As the material world is made up of an inseparable network of linkages, and as the human body and nature itself are self-regulating systems, in the same way we belong to each other in an intimate fashion within the human family. Therefore, what we need to make of life is **not a competitive struggle, but a cooperative venture**, each person and community playing a complementary role with the other, like musicians in a concert. And when it does turn out that way, something surprising happens. We notice the creative forces in

nature continuously causing the emergence of something new in the universe. We see that whatever happens in society speaks of **connectedness, relationship, interdependence**...giving expression to a common, shared spiritual experience.

That is what makes individualism and altruism, self-care and social commitment, not mutually exclusive but complementary. Self-renunciation in behalf of others is not ego-killing, but **self-realization** (fulfilling) in the true sense. At such a moment, one wins the same joy as when one composes a poem or a piece of music, or makes a marvelous discovery, or accomplishes an impossible task...it may even be greater. When a person is lost in his concern for others, he has an intense feeling that he is loved and cared for!

In this broken world today (broken families, damaged communities, fragmented societies, divided humanity) we must return to the spirit of **primal** communities which were characterized by love, relationship and solidarity. We should invite each other into a fellowship of co-belonging. We need to construct new narratives to strengthen the bonds of our togetherness, building on what we have inherited.

At an earlier section, we referred to several problems that seemed to be beyond our strength. It is precisely when we feel helpless that we begin to hear an inner voice, a soft whispering. A **new inspiration** awakens in our minds. A new insight is churned out from the running stream of the cultural wisdom that comes to us from our ancestors who were a little closer to the origin of things than we are. It is a spark that flies out of a mysterious collective mind (collective psyche, **collective unconscious**). It takes shape in some form of co-thinking. When we say we have a 'gut feeling', it is as if the Universe is revealing a secret to us. Things that look like chance, coincidence, or casual inspiration, have been pre-ordained towards an undefinable goal in some unutterable manner even before the foundation of the world. These are the ways in which our lives are shaped and our societies led forward. We cannot be blind to this **Higher Energy** that guides the course of history even amidst the ordinariness of our daily lives.

The true meaning and purpose of life is to realize the potential of every human being as a creative, active life-enhancing participant in life's festivity. The deeper the interiority of an individual and the clearer the

collective identity of a community, the stronger the society to which they belong. Such persons know that they are participants in the subtle mystery of an unfolding cosmic destiny. They know that when they do what is good (e.g. show an extraordinary gesture of generosity, make a unique discovery, have an intense experience of the divine, hit a target with perfection, write an inspired poem, give a spiritual message) they are in harmony with the Universe, and they are fulfilling a plan formed long ago (Eph 1: 9-10) without realizing it. They will not allow any narrow self-interest to limit, diminish or trivialize this perception of reality.

When several scientific discoveries take place at the same time, we know that they come from the collective unconscious of humanity where those ideas had been floating for some time. An awareness of this truth itself translates into energy. Today's science tells us that subatomic particles are more like waves of **information and energy** than matter. **Collective thought and energy**, when used for positive purposes (in a human assembly, a team, a group, a community, country, in the world at a particular moment or era), the future is being built up.⁶ When we develop a holistic outlook, we see clearly how one reality completes another, and how one vision of life enhances another: economy with ecology, physics with psychology, scientific research with spiritual search, technology with mysticism, social struggle with self-realization. Thus we see that one gleam of truth is not complete without the other.

10. The Greater the Challenge the Greater our Determination

People in their conduct of affairs are constantly ruining them when they are on the eve of success (Tao Te Ching 64).

If you shed tears when you miss the sun at night, you also miss the stars (Tagore).

If we feel that the world is in bad shape today, that is no reason for being discouraged. It only gives us an additional stimulus to gather up our energies, clarify our goals and commit ourselves to remedial action. Violence has become so common in our times that there is a **compas-**

sion-fatigue. We are caught into a series of vicious circles: violence—counter—violence—desperate response—violence in return. Ideological fanaticism—religious fanaticism—political fanaticism—ethnic fanaticism. During the fierce violence of the First World War Arnold Toynbee wrote, “...about half the number of my school fellows were killed, together with proportionate numbers of my contemporaries in other belligerent countries. The longer I live, the greater grows my grief and indignation at the wicked cutting-short of all those lives. I do not want my grandchildren and great-grandchildren to have the same fate. The writing of this book (*The Study of History*) has been one of my responses to the challenge that has been presented to me by the senseless criminality of human affairs” (*Toynbee II*). This paper expresses a similar concern.

One explanation that psychologists give for today’s tense atmosphere everywhere is **overcrowding** in cities. Asian cities are growing into unmanageable monsters. There should be a concerted effort to search for ways of helping people to **remain ‘human’ in the inhuman atmosphere** of megalopolises.

Recent **scandals** caused by leading persons in society have been shocking the world and **weakening the credibility** of persons holding public offices. There is a feeling that public truth telling, like ethical business, is on the way out. As a result, even the most solemn public statements (including UN declarations, reports to the parliament on the financial state of the nation, government accounts with regard to military expenses, or impressive advertisements) find few takers. The failure of some of these public agencies has damaged the image of others as well. There is a **general distrust** of banks, corporations, news media, the entertainment industry, unions, government and its agencies (*Sachs 12*), and of public organizations in general.

The desperateness of these and similar situations itself should be a motivation for a determined search for solution. We believe with John Kennedy “No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings. **Man’s reason and spirit** have often solved the seemingly unsolvable—and we believe they can do it again” (*Sachs 262*).

11. Judging for Oneself, Acquiring Authority

What is man that you have been mindful of him, mortal man that you have taken note of him, that you have made little less than divine, and adorned with glory and majesty (Psalms 8:5).

One ignorant of the land asks of one who knows it; he travels forward instructed by the knowing guide. This, indeed, is the blessing of instruction; one finds the path that leads straight onward (Rig Veda 10.32.7).

Scientists sometimes describe the origin all things as though the Universe came into existence and developed through a series of **coincidences**. According to Big Bang Theory, ‘particles’ collided with ‘antiparticles’ and annihilated each other. Particles had a quantitative advantage and they created the Universe. Ever since, it has held itself precariously in existence. The Universe could go awry any time, but it has not. ‘**A sense of purpose** is all pervasive and deeply ingrained in the fabric of the universe’. If this provides the cue, we have hope that every problem invites its own solution. This invitation is extended to us, and the solution may be reached only through our intervention.

There is an interesting story in the life of the Buddha. The Kalamans had been conquered by the Kosala kingdom. Under the Kosalan dispensation the tribal norms under which the Kalamans had lived until then did not seem to hold good any more. Too many wandering preachers were approaching them to propose their own theories, one contradicting the other. What is the right thing to do under the changed circumstances, which teaching is true? They wanted Buddha’s advice. Buddha had only a simple answer: ‘**Judge for yourselves**’. He asked them not to go by hearsay, or legend or some proposed theory or out of respect for an ascetic, but by the personal verification of what was true (*Anguttara Nikaya A I 188-93*). The wisdom in the Kalamans tradition had to be re-evaluated through reflection and re-appropriated, and what was valid in the new proposals carefully integrated. We are in a similar **period of transition** today.

Solutions dawn in the minds of ‘**alert**’ people, people who culti-

vate their inner consciousness. Such people acquire ‘**authority**’ when they know how to make their insights respond to the needs and agonies of the society in which they live. This sort of ‘authority’ comes not from some ego-claims or self-pretensions, but from profound convictions about what is true and good, arising out of one’s constant attention to the **deeper causes of things**. In consequence, the solutions they propose appeal to the deeper-selves of others and convince them. People listen to those who address their anxieties with keen interest and propose solutions that are realistic; who also teach them to transcend their own petty interests and small-mindedness as situation demands. This is mission of true intellectuals.

If more people would try to acquire this sort of ‘authority’ and share their insights, the world would be a better place. If communities, cultures, and civilizations were to exchange their **deeper spiritual perceptions** as profit-makers exchange goods, a ‘natural selection’ (Darwin) of good intuitions would result, and an ‘invisible’ hand would lead humanity to unforeseen achievements. There has been a continuous exchange of ideas between human societies from the earliest times. While the Eastward flow of the concepts of Modernity has been sufficiently noted, Clive Ponting refers to the Westward flow of civilization from Egypt and Mesopotamia, to Crete, Greece, Italy, the Iberian peninsula and to western Europe (Ponting 7), and finally to the rest of the world. Such flows and counter-flows continue.

We are convinced like Margaret Mead that “a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has” (*Hathaway 214*). Confucius suggested five things to those who wished to offer effective leadership, “If you behave with courtesy, then you will not be insulted; if you are **generous**, then you will win the multitude; if you are of **good faith**, then other men will put their trust in you; if you are **diligent**, then you will have success; and if you are **kind**, then you will be able to command others” (*Analects 17.6*). Why do we not seek to acquire this sort of authority?

12. Equipping Oneself

“The Master said...But if even a simple peasant comes in all sincerity and asks me a question, I am ready to thrash the matter out, with all its pros and cons, to the very end” (Analects IX, 7).

O Lord, grant me such qualities of head and heart as would endear me to the enlightened and learned among us, to the ruling class and to all that have eyes to see (Atharva Veda 19,62).

In times of persistent troubles, there emerge spontaneously persons with a strong sense of mission. The first thing they do is to equip themselves adequately for the challenge; they **gather knowledge**. They begin with what is already within reach. Confucius said, “At fifteen I set my heart on learning” (*Analects 2.4*). He continued, “I silently accumulate knowledge; I study and do not get bored; I **teach** others and do not grow weary—for these things come naturally to me” (*Analects 7.2*).

Next, they commit themselves to the cause they have chosen with unflagging zeal. They **do not give up** because of difficulties, even repeated failures. “He’s the one who knows it’s no good but goes on trying” (*Analects 14,41*) said Confucius. A similar teaching we find in the Bhagavadgita which insists on perseverance in duty, work, action...**detachment** from fruits, from results, from remunerations and rewards. A lack of appreciation from others does not disconcert persons who are mentally set. For them, their commitment is everything. The pleading of Archimedes while he was being attacked by invading soldiers was not to spare his life, but not ruin his diagrams! (*Hobsbawm 557*).

The most important thing for those of us with a sense of mission in Asia today is to be acquainted with the **foundational literature** of various Asian traditions. The concepts, images and symbols contained in them remain deeply imbedded in the collective unconscious of respective communities. They refer to the origins of the human race, its purpose and destiny. It is a symbolic interpretation of the spiritual journey on which *homo sapiens* set out centuries ago.⁷

With the passage of time, even the most cherished words of wis-

dom can grow stale, boring and uninspiring, and irrelevant to the current situation. History can associate them with un-genuineness and superficiality. Therefore, their inner **potentiality must be re-awakened**. Old teachings need to be re-interpreted and made relevant and capable of addressing the problems of our times: violence, corruption, nuclear arms, abortion, euthanasia, genetic engineering, exploitation of minorities, economic imbalances, destruction of nature. “He who by **reanimating the Old** can gain knowledge of the New is fit to be a teacher...”, said Confucius. Persons with a sense of mission help humanity to regain its balance by relating the present to the past, looking to the future, and by putting the diverse **cultural heritages of the world in relationship**.

Confucius insisted on **self-cultivation** to respond to the challenges of his times. The gentleman practices moral cultivation, develops a moral personality, acquires tranquility. Self-cultivation makes one strong, generous, humble, caring, conciliatory, gracious...and therefore successful. Man’s differences are due to disparities in education (*Analects 16.9*). “The Master said, without goodness a man cannot for long endure adversity, cannot for long enjoy prosperity” (*Analects IV, 2*). **A prepared mind meets with opportunity**, which is often described as ‘good luck’. What is considered chance, luck, coincidence is part of the cosmic plan, universal mind, and the Providence of God.

13. Is a Middle Path Possible? Can We Open out a Path to Peace?

This is my servant, whom I uphold; my chosen one, in whom I delight. I have put my spirit upon him. He shall teach the true way to the nations. He shall not cry out or shout aloud, or make his voice heard in the streets. He shall not break even a bruised reed, or snuff out even a dim wick. He shall bring forth the true way. He shall grow dim or be bruised till he has established the true way on earth (Isaiah 42: 1-4).

You shall speak to men good words (Quran 2,83).

Let us take as an example of a problem that has been continuously

plaguing the world: the problem of war and violence. At the end of the World War, the leaders of countries that had for centuries been in conflict (France, Germany and others) decided they would no **further adopt the path of war** to resolve problems. That was to become a historic decision. In them humanity itself was taking a new direction. And they succeeded. Many other countries joined them, and today we have the **European Union**. The impossible became possible.

Let us now look at our own continent. Inter-national tensions keep several Asian nations continuously on the defensive against each other. Deterrence only adds to anxiety. It is a repetition of the European drama of the early 20th century. Toynbee calls an excess of nationalism ‘tribalism’, each nation claiming to be a universe in itself ‘self-contained and self-sufficient’. “All nation states, from the greatest down to the least, put forward the same claim to be enduring entities, each sufficient unto itself and independent of the rest of the world” (*Toynbee 34-5*). It had disastrous consequences. Asian nations are tempted to make the same mistake that Europe made a century ago, easily becoming over-ambitious, aggressive, and mutually provocative. Arms selling nations and companies fan the flame. Their business would collapse if there were no international tensions. So, conflicts continue, and, in each nation, growing social tensions leave many things unpredictable for Asia’s future.

Nonetheless, peace is possible. In recent times we have seen how Mikhail Gorbachev made a radical option for peace. If such enormously great changes could be worked out in a peaceful way, similar successes are possible for those who set their hearts on a peaceful solution to problems. Historians can show us how the great **World Wars could have been avoided**... how people need not have died in Korea, or Vietnam, or in Afghanistan, or Pakistan.

“Do not do to others what you would not like yourself” (*Analects 12.2*). If this message were brought creatively to the world scene as Gandhi did while struggling for his nation’s independence, such tragedies would not have taken place. History has shown that force is low-quality power. “...violence produces resistance. Its victims or its survivors look for the first chance to strike back” (*Toffler 15*).

The Buddha spoke of the middle path, Aristotle of ‘moderation in all things’. If people had adopted a ‘**middle path**’, could not the eco-

conomic sanction on Iraq which killed a million Iraqi children and other vulnerable people have been avoided? If there was **moderation in all things**, the attack on World Trade Centre would never have taken place. We need to seek sobriety and balance in all things. “As individuals, we need to regain the balance of our own lives between

work and leisure,
saving and consumption,
self-interest and compassion,
individualism and citizenship” (*Sachs 161*).
self-assertion and affirmation of others
national interests and the long term good of the human race.

Could we seek balance with regard to other human interests as well?

14. We Need Communities of Vision

I neither stood still, nor sat nor lay down until, pacing to and fro, I has mastered that fear and terror (the Buddha).

Oh men, direct your energies to promote the good of all mankind. Let your relations with all be characterized by love, peace and harmony. Let your hearts beat in unison with human hearts (Rig Veda 8,49,4).

When we are satisfied with quick-fix solutions as a regular habit, permanent solutions keep evading us. A dosage of drugs will not serve as a permanent solution to psychological problems. A few personality-development tips will not take away guilt feelings from human hearts. A double share of consumer goods will not satisfy the spiritual hunger of a society. Financial compensations will not make up for the injury inflicted on the culture and identity of a dying community (tribe, ethnic group). In the same way, a list of punishments will not be an adequate response to the needs of a society that is agonizing with pain for the **absence of ethi-**

cal and spiritual guidance.

It is hoped that gradually we may awaken to the truth that a scientific worldview need not exclude religion, a modern outlook need not marginalize spiritual and ethical values. It may also be helpful to understand that it is in opposition to **aggressive secularism** that religious fundamentalism has arisen. So it happens that just at a time when the dominant regions of the world are thinking that religion should be privatized and marginalized, there is a **global resurgence of religion** (*Lott 252*), going to the point of exaggeration.

A new beginning takes place when we gain access to the inner chambers of our hearts and stay for a while deep within ourselves, where we discover the profound nature of things. Yes, that depth is within the reach of everyone. That is why self-reflection can be extremely educative and many Asian sages have attached great importance to it. When we reach that level of our being, the **nonlocal intelligence takes over**. We are admitted into a subtle cosmic process (*Hathaway 247*) and even the least thing we think of or do can have vast consequences. It is like a butterfly flapping its wings causing a storm on the other side of the globe. We need today persons of deeper insight and ‘communities of vision’, who are able to **anticipate the future** and make it come about through committed action. Asians should not forget that “For nearly all of world history the richest and most developed societies have been in Asia” (*Ponting 9*). Asia has shown the way on many occasions, it can still do in the future if it will remain true to its identity and to its vocation.

As the Universe constantly keeps re-building balance within itself, in nature and in the human body, so our inner world keeps making an effort continuously to attain balance, proportion, and harmony. Persons **who cultivate their interiority pass on the waves of their thoughts to others**, far and near. The Universe vibrates with them and takes unforeseen steps forward in its process of self-creation. It is said that one hundred trillion cells in the human body are doing one million things per second to support the human being. Therefore we should not be surprised that even a simple thought, a soft whisper, a casual happening, an accidental encounter, can take a message across to the other person, then to another person, and then to the entire world. When it comes from a person who has searched his inner world, his/her communication can be

compared to the **generative moment of the Big Bang**.

Gandhi conveyed his message through **religious silence** and ritual defiance. When a person receives the ‘mandate of Heaven’ (*Braudel 187*), his spirit is awakened. The ‘Invisible Hand’ becomes visible. So we feel confident to take seriously what Alfred Lord Tennyson said, “More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of”, which would mean, when we connect with the Universal and the Supreme, we come to be related to everyone else, to all living organisms, and ultimately to everything.

15. A Period of Transition: a Period for New Ideas and New Happenings

First establish yourself in the good; thereafter you should counsel others. The wise man who acts thus will be above reproach (Dhammapada 12,2).

For this purpose I was born, and to spread this religion God appointed men; go and spread righteousness everywhere (Guru Govind Singh).

The early 6th century The Buddha’s world was in the process of rapid cultural changes: from a tribal government to political empires, village economies to commercial cities, classless society to new social classes based on wealth, Vedic sacrifices to Upanishadic meditational thinking (*Kramer 73*). He lived at the rise of a new civilization, just as Socrates did at the rise of Hellenic civilization. Old patterns were making way for new ones. It can generally be said that the **decline of a culture** (civilization) takes place when its ideas, customs and social organization become lifeless and its internal harmony is lost; things stagnate, society is lost in superficial issues, uncertainty and confusion prevail. It is at this juncture that **creative minorities** appear proposing new solutions to the new problems.

The need for this arose in Buddha’s times when communities (tribes) that had lived in isolation were compelled to live with others in a wider political dispensation. Traditional patterns of thought did not seem

to hold good any more. The earlier moral norms looked unrelated to the needs of the times. In the composite, impersonal atmosphere of an urban world people unused to mixed societies found themselves fendless. Buddha's message came into such world.

Though very contextual, his teaching was not meant for his own community only. It transcended his culture and had a universal application. His insistence on **right understanding and right action** opened out a path to new possibilities. He taught the shedding of the ego, remaining unconcerned about flattery or criticism...and concentrating on the right thought and right action. The Bhagavadgita too emphasized similar ideas. Buddha's Middle Path proposes moderation, **avoids exaggerations so typical of innovators**, provides new insights, points the way to wisdom and peace.

16. Inter-relating Civilizational Heritages

Cultivate the friendship of the good, cultivate the friendship of the noble ones (Dhammapada 6,3).

You have become a disciple in order to benefit the world (Silbhadra, the Buddhist professor of Nalanda University, to Hiuen Tsang).

We can begin taking up the issues we have been discussing only within the framework of our own individual culture (each one his/her own) that gives us an identity and a collective being. While it provides the immediate support we need for our work, our efforts can attain sustainability only by building up relationship with a **family of cultures**, which in turn derive sustenance from a civilization.⁸

It is true, our immediate consciousness is concerned about our existence in a political society; but a civilization transcends this reality. While the political society is an association for practical ends, **civilization is a spiritual communion** (Dawson 53-4). It cannot be bought or sold, budgeted or planned. It is a spiritual heritage that has taken shape over centuries. Everyone within its influence benefits from it, and can make a contribution towards its development.

Great societies like those of Asia have a variety of civilizational heritages within the context of which we work out solutions to our problems. There is a renewed understanding and appreciation of these great civilizations of our continent in these days. They are showing their sturdiness in the face of challenges and winning the attention and respect of the world. They have been great in their own times and have played an educative role in the global society in different periods of history. It is good to remind ourselves that the **inspiring ideas that have roots in our ancient civilizations** will prove ultimately more precious than the volume of accumulated capital or an abundance of natural resources that we boast of.

Communities whose innovative ideas turn out to be relevant and inspiring, gradually begin to make an impact on others. They transform the world. Arms assail and crush, economies entice and enslave, **ideas enlighten, unite and motivate**. We do not deny the fact that every civilization possesses some negative elements as well. However, given the needed good will, the worst can be averted and the best ensured.

17. Societies must be Saved from Self-alienation

Do not walk proudly on the earth. You cannot cleave the earth, nor can you rival the mountains (Quran 17:39).

A person of good acts and good, agreeable, and sweet speech, has no equal (Mahabharata, Shanti Parva, 84,10).

Today civilizations and cultures are in crisis. They are in rapid transition. When the ideals and values on which they were built get marginalized, the society concerned goes through an experience of **self-alienation and estrangement from its collective self**. The insecurity such a process generates leads it to a frantic search for a substitute. If the society chooses to re-affirm the ideals and values on which it was established, it witnesses the revival of its ancient glory. If it fails to do that, it puts itself on the path of decline. At a moment of self-delusion, it opts for an alternative: glorification of an artificially constructed ‘self’, a distorted form of the original, an unreal collective identity. In the Roman Empire it

took the form of emperor-worship, which ended up in statolatry. Effectively, it was the empire's self-worship, ignoring its real identity: in fact, **worship of the 'false self'**.

When **nationalism verges on state-worship or cultural imperialism**, it makes the same mistake: worship of a distorted form of a 'collective self'. Persons who advocate such forms of nationalism could learn from the mistakes of those nations who were the principal actors in the last World War. They admitted their mistake, changed their mind and opted for peace. They hold out a message for today's state-worshippers and cultural nationalists, the fascists of the day. Those who rely on military might are placing too much trust on the strength of the "mindless fist" or the "congealed mind" (*Toffler 17*).

Since every idea involves its opposite, even in the present difficult situation there is the possibility of a new hope-filled future arising, towards which we all can contribute. This paper is an invitation to do so. When cultural processes are undergoing rapid changes, very few people succeed to **integrate the old and the new** and make a synthesis of ideals, values, ethical norms, philosophical principles, and religious traditions. Malachi proposed the bringing of "fathers and children together again" (*Malachi 4:6*). We all can play a role in this endeavour. Jesus said, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets (meaning, earlier traditions); I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (*Matthew 5:17*).

History makes it abundantly clear that unity and motivation imposed by dominant personalities (conquerors) or by **exploiting minorities** (ruling cliques) in the form of an empire has a limited future, that self-worship is suicidal. Similarly, the **togetherness built on people's anger**, ambition or ignorance, egged on by ideologies of hatred is counterproductive. In the same way, enthusiasm constructed on impressive successes in the field of economy can last only for a brief while. Muscle and money fail us when we least expect it. Societies gathered round values construct a great future.

18. Gathering Round Great Values and High Ideals

Let my life be a life of dedication, let my vital breath, eyes, intellect and spirit be dedicated to service; let my love and my understanding, my prosperity and my knowledge be dedicated to service. Let the service be made in a spirit of utter sacrifice (Upanishads).

The journey of thousand miles begins with a single step (Tao Te Ching 64).

The unity based on the spiritual bonds provided by a ‘communion of civilizations’ will have the strength to bring together our diverse cultural and religious groups, economic and political interests, ideological and philosophical visions. When we begin to re-**capture the spirit of our ancient civilizations**, express it in today’s vocabulary, and live them out in dynamic ways and relevant styles, we shall begin to regain our lost energies. When they are brought to actual life situations, they will manifest their strength and validity once again.

With growing instances of violence, corruption, erosion of culture, damage to environment, and poor governance, there is no denying the fact that our inherited ideas and values are in danger. And the threat comes from those **trends in our society that weaken our moral fibre, social bonds**, sense of common belonging, commitment to shared values and ideals, and those that promote sectarian thinking. Many of communities that were rural, agricultural, living generally in isolated villages, eking out an existence from seasonal labour, have moved into investment economy and global economy in a matter of a few decades. Along with these changes, **new political forces (even radical ones)** have arisen at national levels in a manner that could not easily have been foreseen before.

The New Economy is **uprooting people from their homes, families**, religious beliefs, cultures, community identities, and familiar terrain, and throwing them into the high seas of uncertainty. They have little sense of security or belonging, and experience the weakening of family and community support; no sure concept of the future, no consistent vision or convictions. They miss the cultural continuity that the presence of par-

ents and grandparents, uncles and cousins used to give, the sanctions that the parents or the community used to impose, the certainties that a common heritage used to hand down, and the solidarity that the village community used to offer in moments of crisis. The **entire value-system itself is under threat**.

We need to stand aside and develop a detached view of things, and reflect and meditate. We know that another world is possible. Victor Hugo once said, “There is one thing stronger than all the armies of the world: and that is an idea whose time has come”. May be such a **time has come for bringing human civilizations into a communion**. However, this possibility can be made a reality only if we build up our inner sturdiness. Mahatma Gandhi said, “Such power as I possess for working in the political field has derived from my experiments in the spiritual field”. No wonder he conveyed his message as much through **religious silence**, as by political interventions.

19. Gentle Action

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth (Corinthians 13:4-6).

May my life, each breath of life, the eyes, the ears, the speech, the mind, the soul and all other acts and deeds, be put to the service of humankind (Yajur Veda 18,29).

I refer to Toynbee again, “In order to save Mankind we have to learn to live together in concord in spite of traditional differences of religion, civilization, nationality, class, and race. In order to live together in concord successfully, **we have to know each other**, and knowing each other includes knowing each other’s past... Historical forces can be more explosive than atomic bombs... We must try to recognize and, as far as possible, to understand, the different cultural configurations in which our common human nature has expressed itself in the different religions, civi-

lizations, and nationalities into which human culture has come to be articulated in the course of its history... We shall, however, have to do more than just understand each other's **cultural heritages**, and more even than appreciate them. We shall have to value them and **love them** as being parts of Mankind's common treasure and therefore ours too...." (*Toynbee* 47).

Our message is something similar. All we add is, "Be gentle as doves" (*Matthew 10:16*); that is the 'Asian way' of communicating a message. For we know and appreciate the wisdom contained in such teachings as this: "Those who lead others in harmony with the *Tao* (Way) do not use force to subdue others, or attempt to dominate the world through force of arms. For every force there is a counterforce. Violence, even when well intentioned, always rebounds upon oneself" (*Tao Te Ching* 30). A non-adversarial approach to each other listening to other voices than our own...., readiness to accept the wisdom of the wider community...that is closer to the Asian way. Dhammapada says, "Do not speak harshly to anybody; those who are spoken to will answer thee in the same way. Angry speech is painful, blows for blows will touch thee" (*X*, 133).

The Physicist David Peat speaks of 'gentle action' in this manner, "**Gentle action** is global... It addresses itself not just to practical issues, as the price of oil or the efficiency of a given factory, but also to values, ethics, and the quality of life.... Like the ripples around the point, it moves inward to **converge on a particular issue**. Gentle action works not through force and raw energy but by modifying the very processes that generate and sustain an undesired or harmful effect... Gentle action... gives a new dimension to the whole idea of social action...It suggests that the origins of effective action can lie in **ordinary people**, both as individuals and as members of a group-and with their values, ethics, goals, and desires" (*Hathaway* 387). "Learn from me", Jesus said, "because I am gentle and humble in spirit" (*Matthew 11:29*).

Endnotes

¹Eric Lott says, "The much trumpeted freedom of choice has no much room

in modern corporations and military giants” (*Lott 253*).

²The prevailing manner of developing industries is fast leading to the degradation of environment and depletion of topsoil. Deepak Chopra quotes social scientists who claim that our collective behaviour is creating an unsustainable environment due to depletion of timber and fossil fuels, leading to devastating effects such as the greenhouse effect, changing weather patterns, hurricanes, and rising ocean tides.

“On the surface these different events don’t seem related, but they are. They are the result of constricted collective sense of self, and they **synchronistically, simultaneously co-arise**. Religious conflict, **pollution, terrorism**, nuclear plants, drug addiction, extinction of species, poverty, crime, drug wars, the gun industry, floods and famine, dangerous chemicals in the food chain, and wars are causally related” (*Synchro-destiny*, Rider, London, 2003, pg. 266). The Taoist position would be something similar.

Ecologists have suggested soft technologies that do not damage environment, the use of renewable resources, recycling of material. They recommend solar energy collectors, wind generators, organic farming, regional and local food production, recycling of waste. “Wisdom demands a new orientation of science and technology towards the organic, the gentle, the non-violent, the elegant and beautiful” (quoted at Capra 443). It is gradually being realized that **ethics needs to be also ecological**: e.g. an ecological awareness and frugal consumption ensuring inner growth (Capra 459).

³“He who rules by means of virtue may be compared to the pole-star, which keeps its place while all the other stars pay homage to it” (*Analects 2.1*).

⁴“When rulers live in splendor and speculators prosper, while farmers lose their land and the granaries are emptied; when governments spend money on ostentation and on weapons; when the upper class is extravagant and irresponsible, indulging themselves and possessing more than they can use, while the poor have nowhere to turn. All this is robbery and chaos. It is not in keeping with the Tao (*Tao Te Ching 53*). Such a message seems to be most relevant in our times.

⁵It is good to remember in this context that “reason (itself) may depend on something unreasoned”, though it may sound like a paradox (*Fleischacker 54*). But it is true.

⁶“What we learn and what we think can affect other people by morphic resonance. Our souls are bound up with those of others and bound up with the world around us” (*Fox and Sheldrake in Hathaway 222*).

⁷Cave paintings, 17,000 years old, give indications that homo sapiens was also homo spiritualis (a spiritual being).

⁸This reality called ‘civilization’ has something to do with our collective identity as a ‘people’, the memory of its past, experience of the present, and the hopes for the future. Our respective civilizations cannot be ignored as we pursue our goals to a common destiny.

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