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“Sustainability Inside Out: The Significance of Culture of Yoga”

Sandeep Chakravorty

Recently, on June 5, we celebrated World Environment Day when a great deal of concern was raised about pollution caused by plastics, and our dying rivers and oceans which have become dumping grounds for all kinds of waste. Climate Change, Sustainability and Sustainable Development have become buzzwords, ringing out in classrooms to boardrooms and in summits of world leaders. Needless to say, underlying this concern is a deep-seated and pervasive conflict between modern human life style and Mother Nature. This conflict is the root cause of all crises, whether it is environmental degradation, climate change / global warming, lack of water, food insecurity, conflict, migration and rootlessness or anxiety, depression, suicide, addiction, gun violence, broken relationships or general all pervasive despair.

Our day to day disconnect with nature is near complete. In early times we used to drink from the river, stream or the pond or pluck a fruit from a tree. We produced and consumed only what we needed to sustain life. Most ailments were treated from medicines sourced from herbs and minerals and through necessary dietary and lifestyle modifications – an approach that addressed the underlying causes of illnesses.

Today water is conveyed by pipes to the home. We drink the water unmindful of its origin and therefore have the propensity to abuse it, little realizing that the water is depleting and that rivers are being polluted. These days, many children have come to believe that water is made in the supermarket in bottles. Similarly, we consume food without any clue how and where it is produced or who has produced it at what cost. We have no awareness of the complex and increasingly fragile food chain we are a part of. The medical and pharmaceutical industry is primarily based on treatment of mere symptoms using synthetic chemicals that often have harmful side effects. Greed, exploitation of nature have skyrocketed to the extent chronic and acute under nutrition in many parts of the world is matched by profligacy, waste, over consumption, over-nutrition, obesity and lifestyle illnesses in other parts.

It is not that we haven't collectively realized the severity of the degradation of our planet, the rapid depletion of resources and the looming threat it poses on human safety, security and survival. But have we fully understood **the underlying cause** and what we need to

do to find **a holistic, lasting and transformative solution** that focuses on the human being the singular agent of change? I would like to humbly posit that we haven't, and having said that, I would like to briefly propose a different way to approach this unprecedented challenge the human race faces today.

There have been meetings at very high levels for addressing Climate Change. The Paris Agreement has been agreed to by many countries. The Agreement's central aim is to strengthen the global response to the threat of climate change by keeping a global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Additionally, it aims to strengthen the ability of countries to deal with the impacts of climate change.

To reach these ambitious goals, appropriate financial flows, a new technology framework and an enhanced capacity building framework is to be put in place, thus supporting action by developing countries and the most vulnerable countries, in line with their own national objectives. It implores nations to invest in technology to arrest carbon emission, alternative fuels, emissions trading.

All fine, but does it address the issue at a fundamental level? I should think no, because amidst all the hubris on technology and investment, it totally fails to mention the principal and central actor i.e. we humans.

Nation states don't pollute, humans do. The impacts of pollution is not restricted to national boundaries; these potentially impact humans across political boundaries of nation states. Yet, there isn't a single mention of the human, how he or she behaves and how he or she will contribute to arresting climate change. The Paris Agreement mentions Internationally Determined Actions and Nationally Determined Actions but what about **Individually Determined Actions?**

In fact, does any international communique talk of the human being, how he must change, how he must be austere, frugal and only consume what he needs? Does anyone talk of changing the march of consumerism, of reducing demand? Is anyone conscious that most things made in the world today are thrown, many without being used even once such as food? No, because that will be contra-economic theory. It will be contra-growth and contra-market economy. Austerity and frugality are bad words in the market economy. They are antediluvian.

The premise for transformation:

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, proclaims 'aham brahmasmi' – I am all-encompassing existence, the universal consciousness; and the Chandogya Upanishad proclaims 'tat twam asi' – so are you. Both were written between 600 and 700 BCE, and both accorded supremacy to human consciousness and the oneness of that

consciousness with entire creation and the creator, or the creative force if you like.

Swami Vivekananda said “Nature is homogeneous. Differentiation is in manifestation. The Sanskrit word for nature is *Prakriti* and means literally differentiation. All is one substance, but it is manifested variously” So all five elements – earth, fire, water, air and ether (or space) are as much us, as are the mountains, forests, rivers, plants and animals. These are mere differentiated manifestations of a homogenous substance. And mind you, this is not mere metaphysical speculation. Our modern day understanding of quantum physics leads us to the same conclusion.

In Albert Einstein’s profound words - “A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty”.

Our oneness with creation is therefore not just spiritual and metaphysical speculation. Modern science is leading us to this conclusion as well. Climate Change and Environmental concerns therefore cannot be divorced

from our inner and lives; the problem, and my implication the solutions are not outside us, these are verily a part of us – it is a consequence of what we think and how we act. Although we may not be conscious of it, we are experiencing and living it every moment; it is an organic part of how and where we live.

This essential oneness of humans with creation that has been articulated over the ages in unequivocal terms. Many of us genuinely want minimal damage to the environment, and in our own way we try different methods – from our individual behaviors that include reducing, reusing, upcycling, recycling to environmental activism. Many also think of converting their entire lifestyles into sustainable ways of living. And this is great. But is it enough?

Also, assuming that appropriate technology and money will clean the dirt would be a fallacy because technology and investment, useful as they are, cannot be the panacea to all problems. Neither will be fully up to speed with increasing need, and we will forever be in a mode of mitigation, as against being in a mode of primary prevention.

It is clear that trying to understand nature and creation, and approaching environmental protection, conservation and issues of climate change by looking at life and the world around us in a fragmented piecemeal way will not work. We have to see it comprehensively in all

its possible dimensions, and holistically in terms of connectedness between various elements.

The question is - how do we approach the problem in a holistic, harmonious and sustainable way? What will be our approach to finding sustainable and transformative solutions? Where and how do we begin? What are our underlying cultural and paradigmatic shift that we need to bring about a true transformation, as against making incremental changes that is constantly trying to catch up with increasing unmet need?

Can the science and culture of Yoga wherein we strive to be in oneness with oneself, with our surroundings and with the universe help?

A new paradigm for transformation from within:

It is fairly easy to understand interconnectedness and interdependence of life - within and without - from an intellectual dimension, but then, intellectual understanding does not necessarily ensure transformation. We know that smoking is harmful, but why do we still smoke? Why is this deep conflict between knowledge and action?

It is only when we connect to our inner consciousness and resolve our inner contradictions and conflicts – that between our knowledge, thoughts, emotions and actions that we will embrace, as a fundamental truth of existence, the essential interconnectedness and oneness of life. It is only then that we will be in total harmony with our inner and outer lives, and with creation and recognize its true

beauty. Till then we will remain schizophrenic humans, worse than beasts.

Now how do we resolve this contradiction, this conflict? How do we awaken our inner consciousness about our environment and then realize it in our conscious actions? Yoga provides us a potent technology, solution if you like for this.

Yoga literally means union - that of the soul with entire creation. According to the yogic tradition, the practice of Yoga enhances our consciousness and sharpens our perception, leading to total harmony with creation - a state in which all boundaries are said to disappear and all contradictions resolve upon themselves.

Once we become conscious that we are part of the whole; of a continuum, then how can we pollute the water that we drink, contaminate the air that we breathe or poison the river in and destroy the live giving forest?

Mahatma Gandhi said there is enough in this world for everyone's need but not enough for even one's greed. This is the central yogic message. "Yoga is about self-awareness, conscious decisions and actions.

Consciousness distinguishes Asanas from exercise. It is about being reflective, not being impulsive. Sustainable living is to be practiced first at the level of the individual, then society, and then globally. But where will this motivation for acting individually come from? It won't come

from the Paris Agreement or fat tomes of scientists. We can be a believer of Climate Change not by clinical and scientific evidence but by looking inside our own self.

The answer therefore is simply within. “Along with oversight what we require foremost is insight, into ourselves and our real self-interest as conscious living beings”. Environmental control seldom works. Self-control almost always works. If we decide to live in harmony with nature from within, we don’t need any Accord, Agreement, Investment or Fines. We will do it as habit, as our nature.

“Yoga teaches us a holistic vision of the world, blurring the boundaries between ourselves and other life forms, cultivating attitudes and igniting actions with the potential to more intimately connect us with the earth’s changing climate” says Deborah Phelan, a climate justice journalist.

Inspiration for combating environmental degradation has to come from within. Every action we perform is a contribution to some aspect of the world. Just being conscious of that will keep us inspired. And inspired souls are those who will change the world.

The operative word is **inner**. If we are convinced in our innermost selves that we have to change the abuse of the environment, we will do so. It comes naturally. If, for example, you are convinced that from your inner calling that vegetarianism is good for yourself and for the world, it won’t take a second to stop eating meat. If you are convinced from within that plastics in the oceans are

destroying all marine life, it doesn't take a second to stop using plastics. We don't really need a straw to sip our coffee or drink or use plastic shopping bags.

All behavioral changes will come when we have the strength to make the journey within and this is the essence of Yoga. Srila Prabhupada, the founder of ISKON said that a conscious person is humbler than the grass and bowed down like the fruitful treesand discharges his duty with great responsibility.” So can a conscious person inflict pain on Mother Nature? The answer is an emphatic No. The life of the Yogis is replete with messages of austerity and simplicity. Yoga engenders consciousness, sensitivity and need for balance.

This is the Culture of Yoga that needs to pervade the world. Paramahansa Yogananda said “It is not your passing thoughts or brilliant ideas so much as your plain everyday habits that control your life....Live simply. Don't get caught in the machine of the world— it is too exacting. By the time you get what you are seeking your nerves are gone, the heart is damaged, and the bones are aching. Resolve to develop your spiritual powers more earnestly from now on. Learn the art of right living. If you have joy you have everything, so learn to be glad and contented....Have happiness now.”

And what can be greater joy than living in the lap of Mother Nature in total harmony? And how will we attain this without the Culture of Yoga becoming the World Culture?

The UN World Commission on Environment and Development states: “sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Sustainability is about being self sufficient – producing as little waste as possible and living a life of harmony with nature. The conventional wisdom is that there are three pillars of sustainability i.e. environmental, social and economic. But where is the pillar for humans? I would say it is the absent 4th pillar that it is the most important pillar because it has to do with Us, you and me, how we are, what we are, our body, our mind and our soul.

Nature or Divinity resides within us. When we realize this, when we have the strength and courage to make an inward journey then we not only discover ourselves but also realize that we can only prosper spiritually and materially if we are in harmony with others and nature. This is the message of Yoga, message of Yogis and perhaps the only remedy for Climate Change and environmental degradation is the Culture of Yoga.

Being in Boston it gives me delight in quoting Emerson who wrote in his essay “The Over-Soul” “.....within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but

the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul.”quote.

I seek your indulgence for one more minute - to conclude my talk with a short prayer - an extract from the Kshetrapati Suktam taken from the Rig Veda. Written between 1,500 to 1,200 BCE, the Rig Veda is the oldest extant text in any Indo-European language, and the Skshetrapati Suktam is probably the most ancient ‘green prayer’ if you like. It says:

मधुमतीरोषधीर्द्याव आपो मधुमन्नो भवत्वन्तरिक्षम् ।
क्षेत्रस्य पतिर्मधुमान्नो अस्त्वरिष्यन्तो अन्वेनं चरेम ॥३॥

Madhumatiir-Ossadhiir-Dyaava Aapo Madhuman-No
Bhavatv[u]-Antarikssam |
Kssetrasya Patir-Madhumaan-No Astv[u]-Arissyanto
Anvenam Carema ||3||

May the Plants be Sweet, i.e. filled with Nature's bounty
May the Sky/Air be Sweet, i.e. filled with Nature's clarity
May the Waters be Sweet i.e. filled with Nature's Purity,
May the Space be Sweet i.e. may it remain unpolluted.
May the Lord of the Kshetra (the creator) be Sweet to us,
and may we be devoted followers of the creator, i.e. take
gentle recourse to Nature's Bounty and Prosper.

Aum Shanti, Aum Shanti, Aum Shantihi...

Thank you for your attention...
