

Beyond the Ego: New Values for a Global Neighbourhood

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THE paper seeks to delineate the ego-centred narcissistic personality of our time, examines the factors that have slowly led to it and its utter incompatibility with the “global village” or global neighbourhood, which is so much a reality today.

It then goes on to examine what could be the new route out of this self-destroying personality—the imperative journey in today’s world. It concludes with a plea for a new set of values that alone can redeem the individual and integrate him into the web of communitarian life as in earlier centuries.

Search for New Values for Our Global Neighbourhood

Call it Marshal McLuhan’s global village or the new imagery of global neighbourhood the world today is indeed, to a large extent, in our drawing room. Aldous Huxley had arraigned flew with a hearty laugh. But today, in the new millenium, the internet makes the citizen or netizen (or a net-slave, if you like and our world really too wired, too connected. The Oklahoma bombing, the Gujarat or Kobe earthquakes reverberate in our drawing-rooms. Ecology, economics and culture have now to be integrated. The Rio Conference, and the WTO have been followed by the discovery and recognition of our “creative diversity” and the great imperative of mainstreaming culture in the development process. The latter was the theme of the World Commission on Culture and Development of which this author had the privilege of being a part. The realization has dawned that God may be dead but as Vaclav Havel would say, man is very sick. And the roots of our sickness none had seen more clearly than Lord Buddha. The Prince did not ask his father the King to distribute his wealth among the poor or to preserve ecology. For he had seen at greater depth the existential human condition. He was not an escapist to go away from home. He left home for he loved man too much to be satisfied with palliatives.

And Buddhism in its various manifestations, particularly the shape it took in the hands of Rev. Nichiren and the Soka Gakkai movement has

striven hard to achieve human happiness and peace in more concrete and socially-oriented ways.

Mr. Daisaku Ikeda, as president of the Soka Gakkai International and his wonderful meeting of minds and dialogues with greats like Arnold Toynbee, Linus Pauling, Johan Galtung, Bryan Wilson and others has, over the years, gone ahead with this relentless search for new values for our global neighbourhood peace and human happiness. His book *The Living Buddha* is a tribute to the new role that Buddhism and SGI play in the new millennium. This author has immense regard for what he has done in this direction.

The Narcissistic Personality of Our Time

Let us have a look at what ails today's man, the selfcentred narcissistic man.

Narcissism is basically a strong and ideal metaphor of the human condition in our times. A host of social and cultural factors have gone into the making of this state of mind which emerges out of a void within and an inability to connect meaningfully with others. It is not just an acquisitive or authoritarian personality. The former was the hallmark of the early stages of bourgeois capitalism that characterized the 19th century political economy in most of Europe. Today the acquisitive spirit does not want any acquisition as insurance against the future for the simple reason that the existence of the future itself is doubted. Instead what is passionately desired is the immediate or instantaneous gratification of wishes and demands. Life is sought to be lived as a never-ceasing, restless and ever-unsatisfied flood of desires from which there is no respite. And modern information technology and massive advertisement industry do precisely that. Descartes is turned upside down. It is no longer *cogito ergo sum*, I think, therefore, I am. It is now we think therefore you are. In fact you don't even have to think. Researchers in multi-million dollar business have done all the thinking for you in terms of profit-loss calculus! They have struggled hard to determine not only what soap or shampoo you should use or what food you should take but also how you should adjust your relationship to others and manage your life.

Secondly this personality is not an authoritarian personality which is anchored to a highly egotistic self that arrogates to itself all knowledge or all decision making capacity. Such an authoritarian personality that imposes its will on others at least occasionally develops a guilt-complex. The present narcissist is not a dictatorial political-economic man. He is a troubled, anxiety-ridden psychological man. This is perhaps the

end product of bourgeois individualism. Such a personality cannot even think of imposing his own certainties on others. In fact he hardly possesses any certainties. He is himself unsure of any meaning in his own life and therefore regards everyone as a rival. He has forfeited his grip on reality and his own life.

The narcissistic personality not only does not crave for meaning; he denies the possibility of any meaning beyond the moment, beyond possessions, beyond himself. This is the dreadful impoverishment of the psyche from where there is no return. Tom Wolfe calls this narcissism as the “third awakening.” It is an awakening into the terrible silence of the ego-centric self which lives for the moment and for himself. To sum up narcissism has become the most telling metaphor of the human condition in our time. Its twin faces are total ego-centrism with all its anxiety and helplessness and the denial of all connectivity, all linkages to other.

The Long Story of the Broken Gestalt

Once upon a time they were intimately, almost organically, linked to each other. Man, the individual; other man in various groups, family and community constituting the social web; the world of nature, earth with all its ineluctable beauty, its sun-laden promises, the vast sky, the oceans, rivers, forests, birds and animals; thirdly the ancestors who left the world of humans but yet were interested in its welfare while the survivors remembered them gratefully; and finally the unseen gods behind the clouds. Man was a part of this huge circle of belongingness. The vision was holistic. In such an integral view of the cosmos the individual never felt alone. True he could seek the blessing of the gods and ancestors through appropriate ritual offerings and worships. Some of the gods were also malevolent just as others, the majority, were benevolent. One was also supposed to invoke the blessings of the ancestors but the equilibrium of life was maintained by an integrated approach to a world-view where man, other men, nature, gods and society each had a rightful place.

The birth of technological civilization has resulted in the demolition of this holistic vision of earlier centuries so common to all primitive cultures where an isolated selfish lonely individual was the exception rather than the rule. Modern science explored, after all, only one dimension of reality—the physical, the biological and the psychological. The other dimensions such as the socio-cultural, the ethical and the psychic were no doubt explored but only with limited success. We still do not know enough of the new frontiers of the mind where para-psychology is

only at the door-steps of a vast unexplored realm. The pride in knowledge of the earlier periods is giving place to an awareness of inadequacy. The greatest of scientists in our generation have come to visualize the inadequacies of the scientific view of the self and the reality around us. May be we know substantially more than our ancestors about the Universe but it appears in this knowledge there is dearth of some thing which, along with the lack of humility, holistic outlook and altruism, affects our perceptions. It is not merely the Universe as a whole but of nature, of our own psyche and of gods, spirits and ancestors. In short, modern civilization fully backed by the gains of science had failed to provide a valid alternative which could restore the earlier balance of holistic vision. No doubt science has started talking of the gaps in our knowledge, of the principle of uncertainty, the black holes and the edges of being but restoration of the integral vision that takes man out of his ego-centric self to a higher level of integration with reality had not yet become possible. Meanwhile Stephen Hawking, Roger Penrose, Stephen Jay Gould and a host of other eminent scientists are looking at the borderlines of knowledge and mystery, of technology and myth.

We are aware of the slow, inexorable process by which man got alienated from nature. Intimacy gave place to a feeling of ownership and exploitative approach. Even the question of inter-generational equity tended to be forgotten. The earth's bounties, many of which are not renewable, is after all meant for all posterity and not merely for one generation. The result: ecological imbalance, acid rain, green-house effect, the talk of silent spring and all that led to the Rio-Summit. All of us have heard of the Gaia hypothesis, according to which we are part of a greater whole and our destiny inevitably and integrally linked to the living planet Gaia, named after an ancient Greek goddess, the archetype of the Earth Mother in all cultures, all religions. In fact, this uncaring and ceaseless exploitation of earth's resources with the help of science and technology has come to threaten the survival of life itself. We cannot any longer leave it to Jesus, Mohammed or any other god to redeem the world. The eminent scientist Collin A. Russel in the collection of his Templeton Lectures, *The Earth Humanity and God*, rightly emphasizes that man is the millennial measure and he cannot refuse to bear his own cross. Technology—at all the stages of it, the steam engine, the printing press, the computer and the information revolution—only heightens the incoming future shock. And as the millennium comes to an end man must come to terms with nature.

Yet another leading scientist has warned us of the likely consequence of our endless pride in the conquest of nature. Our *hebris* may invite the

nemesis of human civilization as we know it. Carl Sagan in his autobiography *Billions and Billions* tells us how man, without being fully aware of it, is becoming a danger to himself. The technological revolution has changed the world so much that many people no longer feel at home in it. And then he cautions: “the dinosaurs were exterminated to the last one after having inhabited the earth for 180 million years. Human beings have been around only for a million years.”

Unattainable Earth And Human Values

Today life seems to be without joy, without love and therefore without passion. There is no passion for one’s own life, for other men in society or for the intimacy of togetherness. There is no passion for gods, for the natural world, for dead ancestors, for rivers, trees, birds, clouds, animals, for death or another life. In short there is no passion left in loving, living and dying. No wonder life has become dull, colorless, routinised, a burden, a boredom instead of a celebration, a release, an ecstasy. Love has become clinical, too physical, mechanical and no longer reveals the colors of rainbow, the nuances of feeling that involves the whole being of man—his heart, his body, his soul, his instinct, his reason—the whole of his Being. Today Gods either do not exist or are irrelevant. The life of man is again becoming as Hobbes thought it was; nasty, brutish and short. There is no meaning, no significance because there is no passion. Meaning and significance are matters of discovery by the individual mind and not “given” by some sacred text or guru. And the discovery of significance is impossible if there is no passionate love of life; if it is looked upon either as an organic functional graph, a robotic performance or only a whisper in the dark.

So too the passion for the world, for what Czeslaw Milos the Polish poet calls the unattainable earth:

They are incomprehensible, the things of this earth.
 The lure of waters. The lure of fruits.
 And ungraspable multitudes swarm, come together.
 In the crinkles of tree bark, in the telescope’s eye.
 For an endless wedding.
 For the kindling of the eyes, for a sweet dance
 In the elements of the air, sea, earth and subterranean caves
 So that for a short moment there is no death
 And time does not unreel like a skein of yarn
 Thrown into an abyss.

And Pablo Neruda celebrates the earth by asking:

Oh Earth wait for me
 give me back your pure gifts
 it does not matter to be one stone more
 the dark stone, the pure stone which
 the river bears away.

There is always an ineluctable magic in the life here on this planet. Behind its quotidian routine there is a magic, an ever-recurring miracle which make it a myth of eternal Being. We have perhaps been dehumanized to an extent when even death has lost both its grandeur and its moving image. Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet once felt that the question is not whether there is life after death. The real question is whether there is life before death. It has been asserted that one's passion for the world is at its most intense at the moment of death and that the whole of one's life, the series of images that constitute one's existence fleets through the screen of the mind in those last moments. Death was also often sacral, the soul being supposed to begin a new life and therefore whatever the person valued or loved were also to accompany him on the journey that was going to begin. For others, who were in the presence of death, it was an enactment of one of the most moving events one could be faced with. One may recall the classic dialogue between the protagonist Dr. Bernard Rieux and the church father in Camus's *The Plague*. The father who initially thought of "the plague" as a punishment from the heavens for the unbelievers, the heathens of the city of Oran was now face to face with the death of an innocent child. Those moments of the child's suffering, his writhing intolerable pain were an eternity. And he could realize why it is said that in every death we are reduced.

Today death is only a matter of statistics, of numbers whether it is a car bomb or showering of terrorist bullets on innocent bystanders, or a planeload of unsuspecting human beings falling from the sky into the sea or millions being hacked to death as in Kigali or killed in sniper fire in Sarajevo. We have got used to the number-game. Never before in human history has "life" meant so little and "death" so devoid of significance. We are being reduced either to worms or to inanimate objects. Where is the passion that would create revulsion, would make every individual's blood boil against inhumanity and provide the ultimate defense for the sacredness of life. Life is sacred, it is magical, it is a miracle because it is evanescent, because it evaporates like the moment. It is only passion, a degree of pagan love of life and awareness of death that can redeem us from the ever-growing dehumanization of the Age.

For even today miracles happen. A mango tree bursts into blossom, clouds lean over the earth and come down in life-giving rain, the sun and moon shine, children are born even on pavements and battlefields their joyful cry announcing that god is still not tired of this world.

Several international forums repeat the need for a new world order based on a universal respect for human rights. Such respect can be summed up in what Albert Schweitzer the humanist doctor working in Africa once said: "I am a Being wishing to live in the midst of other Beings who also wish to live." But the imperative for such-universal respect for human rights has to come only by a new revival of values, a reawakening of the forgotten awareness that no individual is here alone or only for himself but each is anchored to the earth and the universe. We are an integral part of not only an intimate social web but a larger, higher any mysterious cosmos whose laws have to be respected.

What is needed, therefore is a renewal of lost integrity which was based upon an awareness of our deeper connection to the entire universe. In fact science today has started talking more about uncertainties in the shape of the edge of infinity and holes in space. It no longer exudes is reaching out to the outer limits of human powers and a return to man, to his integrity and his integral linkage to the cosmos. Many of us have heard about the "Gaia-hypothesis." This theory envisions that organic and inorganic portions of the earth's surface are part of a single system and that the earth is only a mega-organism, a living planet. Gaia, the name of the ancient goddess is the archetypal Earth Mother.

The awareness we have just talked about is the basic voice of all religions. The recognition that man must understand himself in relation to the world and the cosmos in the right spirit. This recognition will give back to us the much-needed capacity for self transcendence.

The real value for a new world can emerge out of our own respect for the miracle that is life, the miracle that is the universe, the miracle that is nature and the miracle which is our togetherness on this planet. Only when we think of such a world and our place in it that we can respect a universal order, participate in that order and then respect not only our fellow men but all that lives and their rights. To believe in miracles is not a superstition. Miracles did not only in some mythic past, they happen even-today before our eyes if only we keep our eyes and ears open.

A story from the 15th century Europe narrates the life of a skeptic young man who came to a monastery inhabited by monks dedicated to a life of prayer, meditation and scripture-reading. To the head of the monastery he has a simple question: "Are not you people bored by being rooted to this place all your lives?" The head asked him "Dear

son, do you see the tiny bird of golden plumage sitting atop that tree?" The young man looked at the bird and felt fascinated. The bird kept flying from one branch to another, from tree to tree as the young man kept pursuing it and looking at it. After a longtime he came back to the monastery. The erstwhile head of the monastery was no longer there. Somebody else who had taken his place told him: "Dear son, you took 40 long years just looking at the plumage of a bird." He could not comprehend its meaning until somebody produces a mirror and he discovered to his utter dismay that his hair was all gray and he had lost a few teeth. Then the head of the monastery added: "Dear son, if you took 40 years just to look at a bird and you could not even be aware of it, tell me how much can one see or know that one will be bored with the world or with oneself?"

We can take another instance from our own mythology. Vishnu once wanted to test the devotion of the sage Narada. He requested Narada to get him a pale of water as he was thirsty. Narada went looking for water. He saw a beautiful river. A beautiful damsel was filling her pitcher in that river. Narada fell in love with her, married her, set up a home and had children. Once there was a heavy flood and in its swirling waters his wife and children were washed away. Narada started weeping and then he heard the voice of Vishnu trembling from a peepal tree: "Narada, I am still waiting for you to bring me a pale of water...."

The two instances cited above go only to prove that it is a question of seeing a miracle. Even today is it not a miracle that same children still smile like gods? Is it not a miracle that the flower have such colours which no one can imitate or excel, that the sun rises and sets and rises again?

A better world can only be founded on a set of values that recognizes that we must work as if everything depended on man but we should also pray as if everything depended on God.

We need competence and more than that humility.

Today the world is getting divided into two groups. One group would like it to be a more efficient machine of progress, for producing more goods and services, stimulating higher demands and meeting them. Another group would like it to be a happier, a better place to live in. We must make our choice where we belong.

Forgiveness: Journey to Other Selves

One of the most important requirements in the long journey to cosmic consciousness—a state when you are one with the universe—is the capacity to forgive. Since all of us sin, we will be incapable of redemp-

tion unless we learn to forgive. We cannot remove the black stain of sin which only God can. Therefore it is rightly said that to err is human, to forgive divine. As Milan Kundera puts it, "Divesting a sin of its validity, undoing it, erasing it out of time, in other words, making it into nothing is a mysterious and supernatural feat. Only God, because he can work miracles, may wash away sin, transform it into nothing, forgive it. Man can forgive man only in so far as he finds himself on God's forgiveness."

The capacity for forgiving has been beautifully brought out in the Gospel according to St. John, and I cannot resist the temptation of quoting it at length: "And the Scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery and when they had set her in the midst, they say unto him, 'Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned, but what sayest thou?'"

But Jesus did not reply, and when they continued bothering him with the same question he said unto them, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." And they who heard it, being convicted by their own conscience went out one by one even unto the last and Jesus was left alone and the woman standing in the midst. Jesus said unto her: "Woman, where are those accusers? Hath no man condemned then?" She said, "No man, Lord." And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn thee; go and sin no more."

Besides the capacity to forgive, one needs to develop the capacity of love, compassion and empathy. The journey away from ego-centrism to the cosmic self, which is the essence of all religions, demands that we feel the sorrow of the entire world within our bones. Sometimes this may even result in an apparent withdrawal from man and society. When Prince Gautama left the comforts and luxury of the palace and his beautiful loving wife, he was not running away from the world. In fact he was leaving the world we all prize because he was too deeply in love with man and his happiness and had seen too deeply into the cause of sorrow which was desire. It was thus the highest love that made him renounce the known illusions of life and prosperity. True love makes one a true rebel and Buddha was and still remains the greatest lover of mankind as also the greatest rebel who said "no" to the prevailing social values.

The imperative of the journey from one's limited, self-centred, windowless monad of a self, to a gradually ascending higher consciousness becomes clear when we look at some of the most profound statements on this matter. Teilhard de Chardin put it most beautifully and cryptical-

ly when he said, "To be more, one must unite more fully." Your strength, in other words, lies in extending the borders of your awareness, of your concerns and not restricting or choking your awareness to a narcissistic impulse. When once asked to express in one word the guiding principle of happy life, Confucius replied, "It is altruism." And what is altruism in its essence? It is a total orientation away from selfishness and towards the good of others, to the sharing of joys and sorrows of the whole world. The other becomes the justification for my being on this earth. Albert Schweitzer working for the sick and infirm in African jungles put it this way: "I am life wishing to live in the midst of the lives which also wish to live." Such an authentic and altruistic self becomes possible only when one is deeply aware of one's failings, one's inadequacies. St. Augustine put it in a telling manner: *si fallor sum* (I err, therefore I exist).

Inside every man there are various levels of awareness corresponding to the levels of his existence. Vidya or knowledge is not information gathered from books or manuals. Our culture defines it as *Sa vidya Ya vimuktave*: that is knowledge or wisdom which sets you free. Free from the narrow confines of ego, from one's own lower or baser nature, from darkness, from the prison-house of selfish desires.

At the root of this realization is the desire for a renewal, of a new dawn of awareness, of the infinite possibilities of the self only when it is altruistic and by that very act takes in the entire Universe, the cosmos. The cosmic self is not merely aware of the cosmos; it invokes the universe and installs it within. Before his final madness and suicide Van Gogh painted that wonderful piece wherein a group of human beings going round and round within a circle inside an enclosed closed space. But there is a gate which they could open if only they wanted to walk out into the bright moon-lit night outside. This is an image of the ego-centric self. The tragedy is, it is a refusal to open the door, a forgotten opportunity, a choked possibility. The journey to a higher self calls on us to open the door of consciousness to that wider realm, the Cosmos.

Sartre once said, hell is other people. He also said, hell is the self. That is the end product of western existentialism. A character in Sartre watches the snarled roots of a tree and feels as if it is going to expand and swallow him up. This happens when the ego-centric self is surrounded only by objects and the latter become the only true reality. It is not extending of the borders but of constriction and choking.

Out scriptures have spoken of that knowledge knowing which you know all. Cosmic awareness emerges from that kind of knowledge as a bright dawn the dark night of the soul. Knowledge is of thing which are

illuminated by light for in darkness you see nothing. The meaning of life and one's intimate and universal connectivity to all that exist comes out of the cosmic awareness. This universal presence which is the generator of cosmic awareness is beautifully described by the Svetasvatara Upanisad:

Tadeva Agnih tat Ādityaḥ, tat Vāyuh tat tu Candramāh
 Tadeva Śukraṁ, tat Brahma, tat Āpaḥ, tat Prajāpatiḥ
 Tvaṁ Strī, tvaṁ Pumānāsi, tvaṁ Kumāra uta vā Kumārī
 Tvaṁ jīrnou dandena vazācasi tvaṁ jāto bhavasi Viśvato-mukhaḥ

That, indeed, is fire. That is the sun. That is air. That is the moon. That indeed is pure. That is Brahman. That is water. That is Prajapati. You are the woman. You are the man. You are the boy and you are the girl too. You are old man tottering with a stick. Taking birth, you have your faces everywhere.

The journey to the Cosmic Self is the progressive internalization of the Universe, the world of man, nature, gods, everyone, everything. It is a journey of tirelessly pursuing the bird of golden feathers, the ultimate dream. That is the way out of the prison house of the deluded ego-centric self towards personal happiness, wisdom, social harmony and universal peace.