

Earth spirituality - a new eco-social paradigm

By Siddhartha

The underlying thrust of this piece is that the vocation of each human being is to be pro-human and pro-earth at the same time.

Poverty, industrial pollution, climate change, acute water scarcity, population explosion, religious conflict, and the commercialisation of values- these are the major challenges of the 21st century. Where do we find the vision and the political will to deal with these awesome tasks! As our secular ideologies appear to flounder there are many who believe that the earth, from whom we have evolved, is likely to give us the strength to deal with our many afflictions.

This is hardly a new idea although, as we shall see further on, modern evolutionary theory has come forward to give it firm scientific backing. The dalit poet Siddalingiah recently spoke to me of an old Kannada folk song:

Waking at dawn
Whom should I remember with reverence?
My first thought goes to mother earth
Who grows sesame and cumin.

In 1854, from another part of our planet, the native American Chief Seattle, was asked by the American President to sell him some land. It was a strange question to put to a red man for whom the earth was sacred, beyond buying or selling. In an inspired rejoinder, amounting to a rebuke, Chief Seattle purportedly told the President, "... the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves. This we know: The Earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family."

The notion of dependent co-arising, or *paticca samuppada*, which is central to Buddhism, reaffirms the idea of interconnectedness. It suggests that no one is an island, that we are all "interwoven threads in the intricate tapestry of life". Using the image of the Jeweled Net of Indra to explain these interconnections the Buddhist writer Joanna Macy says, "In the cosmic canopy of Indra's Net, each of us, each jewel at each node of the net, reflects all the others and reflects the others reflecting back. This is what we find when we listen to the sounds of the Earth crying within us- that the tears that arise are not ours alone; they are the tears of an Iraqi mother looking for her children in the rubble; they are the tears of a Navajo uranium miner learning that he is dying of lung cancer." Interexistence does not mean that we have no identity, that we are merely part of an undifferentiated whole. What it means is that we are autonomous beings and parts of a larger whole at the same time.

A new vision.

An influential body of opinion all over the world is now stressing that the cause of our civilisational crisis lies in our disconnectedness with nature. We have forgotten where we come from. We see the Earth, from which we have evolved, as little more than a mere 'resource', a storehouse of minerals and other raw materials, inert matter which we need to use in the

furtherance of our physical and material needs. The earth is a mere producer of food and a garbage dump, not our larger body. Obviously, nothing could be further than the truth; nothing can exist as an outsider, in isolation. Quantum theory has revealed that even subatomic particles are not things, but connections between things.

What is needed is a change in our cosmovision, to see the earth as our mother, like indigenous peoples all over the world have done from the beginning of time. There is no question we have deviated from our nature by exclusively worshipping the technological creations that so passionately stir and preoccupy us. Science and technology are not inherently wrong but if we humans do not encapsulate them in the right vision we will use them to manipulate and exploit the earth and other fellow beings. We already see the emergence of an aggressive win-lose mindset, where some are positioned to win and others are fated to lose.

We can veer away from this malaise through the recovery of the nurturing bonds that connect us to the natural world. Each day that we walk on the grass, on the hills, through verdant fields, desert wastes and even our garbage-strewn city pavements, we are walking on our mother. Walking is thus a respectful and meditative act, where we reiterate our commitment to the earth. If the earth is our mother, it follows that we cannot violate her or her human and non-human offspring.

Two contemporary thinkers, Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, have attempted to build a new cosmovision through integrating evolutionary theory and a spirituality of connectedness with the earth and the universe. As already mentioned this spirituality is not new; most tribal societies are even today familiar with it. What is new is the integration of evolutionary theory with it in a new teleological paradigm. Let me paraphrase Miriam MacGillis from Genesis farm, New Jersey, who has attempted to summarise these evolutionary ideas: The universe came into being 15 billion years ago. First there was hydrogen, which was around only for about seven seconds. From the union of hydrogen atoms came helium. From helium came carbon. The process of differentiation continued. Our earth was formed about five billion years ago. This is a long long time ago. For purposes of elucidation let us say that 5 billion years equals 12 months. Then, in these twelve months of the earth's existence life appeared only in the last four months. From single celled organisms the process evolved and differentiated into more and more complex forms of life. Again, this took a long time. If the earth was born 12 months ago the human came into being only in the last day, in the last twenty-four hours! We know hardly anything about these twenty-four hours. Most of it is buried in a great tribal age where no detailed record exists. We only have some information on the last five thousand years or so- the period of the great civilisations. In the 24 hours that the human has been around our great civilisations are only 30 minutes old. And our modern scientific age is only about a couple of minutes old!

Several significant conclusions may be drawn from this explanation. We have evolved from the earth and the earth is therefore our primary mother. Nothing in the scheme of evolution has stated that there is a hierarchy in the universe. If at all there is a reason for according the human a special place it is because it is through the human that the earth has finally attained consciousness of itself. This places a serious responsibility on the human- to be true to the consciousness that is given him. The possession of this consciousness necessarily means that the ontological vocation of the human is to enhance the journey of the universe through time. By polluting and violating the biosphere the human is going against the unfolding of the universe. This violation is not only against the earth but to all her human and non-human offspring.

Enhancing the journey of the universe means that we move away from a linear and mechanical understanding of progress and market fundamentalism, and the false values of consumerism that tell us that one is human only in the measure that one can buy, sell and accumulate.

Earth spirituality may be the only way out. The sense of fulfilment that accompanies a reverential relationship to the earth may give us the strength to frequently step back from our man made world of gadgets and consumer seduction and see their serious limitations. In 2000 the world spent 435 billion dollars in advertising. Advertising deludes us into believing that unless we buy what is being advertised we are condemned to be lesser human beings. The power of advertising is such that many millions of people now feel that we can be free and democratic only if commercial advertising is curtailed and governed by ethical norms.

Earth spirituality does not imply that we turn our backs on the scientific and modern world. That would be futile and uncreative, apart from being regressive. But modern science and technology can find their true purpose only when they enhance the journey of the universe. Enhancing the journey of the universe means being pro-human and pro-earth simultaneously. The failings in our present cosmivision do not allow us the conviction to align with this journey. One may argue that the origin of the present global crisis does not stem from inherent human weaknesses or human evil. The roots lie in a serious defect of vision that allows us to be callous to the earth and our fellow human beings.

The journey of the universe further tells us that we must be humble and accept that all our gods and religions are only about five thousands years old, or half an hour in the life of our planet (i.e. if we take 5 billion years, the age of the earth, to be one year, as mentioned earlier). We will have little or no justification to wage religious wars when we realise that human beings have been around for hundreds of thousands of years before our present religions were formed. The human is much older than our present gods and religions! Besides, the universe journeys from simplicity to complexity, from single celled organisms to more differentiated life forms. Religious intolerance is therefore wrong because it goes against the diversity principle of the unfolding universe.

Religions and ecology.

The major religions are not unequivocal in their appreciation of our interconnectedness with the universe, but all of them offer valuable insights and experiences. The Thai Buddhist monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu said: "The entire cosmos is a cooperative. The sun, the moon, and the stars live together as a cooperative. The same is true for humans and animals, trees, and the earth. When we realize that the world is a mutual, interdependent, cooperative enterprise . . . then we can build a noble environment. If our lives are not based on this truth, then we shall perish." A Western Buddhist has referred to Buddhism as a "religious ecology."

The Hinduism of the Vedic period is replete with texts and rituals that celebrate the earth (bhu), the atmosphere (bhuvah) and sky (sva). Gods and goddesses are also associated with the earth (Prithvi), with the water (Ap), with fire (Agni) and the wind(Vayu). These Vedic insights were later formalised into the mahabhuta (the five great elements). They were the earth (prithvi), water(jal), fire(tejas), air(vayu) and space(akasa). The tree was considered sacred from very early on. From the Indus valley seals to the edicts of Asokha to the Chipko movement the tree was nurtured and protected. Many families and communities have their own sacred trees and show

particular attention and reverence to them. My friend Dr. Shivshankar, an agronomist, tells me that his family venerates the pongamia tree. He has two of them now growing in his garden.

More than any other tradition the thinking of indigenous peoples all over the worldwide is permeated with the notion, so eloquently expressed by Chief Seattle, that "all things are connected." In 1933 Luther Standing Bear, the Lakota thinker, wrote: "All this was in accordance with the Lakota belief that man did not occupy a special place in the eyes of Wakan Tanka, the Grandfather of us all. I was only a part of everything that was called world." Commenting on Standing Bear's reflections John Grim (Bucknell University, USA.) states that, " To distinguish the human 'camp' is not an ontological separation of beings, or an ethical judgement about superior and inferior relations between species. To think of human, animal, plant, and mineral bodies as separated by consciousness or personality is a category error." Not only did the human not occupy a special place but the human is also not separate from the earth and the universe.

There are many who think that we are veering to the brink of ecological and social disaster. The recent collapse of the United Nations conference on climate change (The Hague, 13-24 November 2000) is another indication that we do not have the will to steward our planet. Is this because we are inherently hedonistic and licentious as a species or does the problem again lie in a defect of vision, where we have lost the essential connections that underlie our humanity? A North American conference on Christianity and Ecology had a poem as a report. An extract reads:

How much of Earth's atmosphere must we contaminate?
How many species must we abuse and extinguish?
How many people must we degrade and kill
with toxic wastes
before we learn to love and respect your Creation,
before we learn to love and respect our home?

St. Francis of Assisi and Teilhard de Chardin represent are two of the most ecologically minded Christian thinkers. Paul Santmire writes, " Francis climbs the mountain of Gods creation in order to stand in universal solidarity with all God's creatures, both in this world and the world to come." (The Travail of Nature: the ambiguous ecological promise of Christian Theology. Fortress Press, 1985, Philadelphia). Recent Christian ecumenical thinking states that "all beings on earth make up one household (oikos) which benefits from an economy (oikonomia) which takes ecological and social stewardship (oikonomos) seriously. (Dieter T. Hessel.)

Tree cemeteries.

My brother died several years ago after a prolonged depression. He was an agnostic and he would not have wished to be buried in a cemetery. I had him cremated and a few days later, in the presence of his friends, we journeyed to my fathers farm and placed his ashes in a freshly dug pit. A few of his friends reminisced fondly about him and one planted a sturdy sapling over his ashes. The tree is now eight years old. I have nursed it with devotion, putting a row of prickly bush around to prevent goats from eating the branches. My brother now lives in the tree and I spend a few moments beside it each time I am on the farm. The tree has also made the farm invaluable to me; I could never think of selling the farm and parting from my brother's tree.

A writer friend from Kerala tells me that in her community they follow the practice of planting a tree over the dead. It is probably a practice as old as life itself. Planting a tree over one's body or ashes has other meanings as well. It recognises one's primordial bonds with the earth, our primary mother. From an ecological angle it rejuvenates the life-systems of the earth, serving as a carbon sink, converting carbon dioxide into life sustaining oxygen. (Obviously, this is only a short-term solution. Very soon, we need to go to the heart of the problem and eliminate the toxic gases that threaten life on the planet.) It also prevents soil erosion and desertification.

Instead of cold tombstones and expensive 'samadhis' we could have living trees commemorating our lives. We are now one thousand million people in India. I presume about four million of them die each year. If even a quarter of that number left instructions that a tree should be planted over their remains we would have a million new trees each year. If the same proportion carried out the practice worldwide we would have over a billion new trees each year. What better gesture to the significance of our lives than this act of greening the earth and connecting with our primordial mother.

On the subject of death the French Philosopher Pierre Teilhard De Chardin wrote: "Blessed be you, mortal matter: you who one day will undergo the process of dissolution within us and will thereby take us forcibly into the very heart of that which exists."

From individualism to inter-existence.

Extreme forms of selfish individualism now combine with aggressive commercial pursuits to create a worldview that may lead to human self-destruction. Gregory Bateson has referred to this alarming individualism as the epistemological error of western civilisation. How does one move from this corrosive individualism to the healing influence of interexistence? It seems likely that we will have to fall back on the immanent intelligence of the earth if we are to radically change course and return to the state of interconnectedness with non-humans and humans. The human does not make sense outside this connectedness. Ideologies alone, however open and non-dogmatic, cannot lead us from self-destruction. Even altruism may be unnecessary, for interconnectedness implies that when we do good to another human being or the earth we are only doing good to our selves, to our larger body.

Only the common spiritual field of our interbeing with the natural world can give us the fulfilment necessary to distance ourselves from the over-determination of material and technological props. Lamenting our tendency to neglect the natural world and to "participate almost exclusively with other humans and with our human made technologies" the philosopher David Abram writes, rather provocatively, "we are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human." He means that our humanity can be completed only through a sensuous and fulfilling relationship with nature.