

# Parables for our times

By Siddhartha

I get deeply worried when I read a report on global warming. Sometimes I have difficulties sleeping after poring over a learned article in the Ecologist or some similar journal suggesting that we are perhaps witnessing the penultimate gasps of human life on the planet. The idea that we may be destroying not just ourselves but innumerable other species and forms of life is disturbing. There are others who suggest that the situation is indeed serious but that technological breakthroughs might see us through this seeming impasse. Each of us can draw up a list of three or four of the most serious problems of our age, and I have my own list. The differences between my list and some others may be small, but unlike the doomsayers I am a cautious optimist.

Topping my list of problems is our incapacity to generate Utopias that inspire and guide our actions. We may almost certainly not reach our particular Utopia, but all human beings need enabling myths, dreams and ideals to measure their lives against, even if in the end these are found inadequate. Although the mystery and wholeness of reality cannot be captured by words, good poetry can open doors to it and art may give us a glimpse of it. But poetry of this kind is read less and less, and so much of art is now just another investment or a marketing exercise.

The modern tendency to debunk even modest dreams and ideals leaves us little scope to re-enchant our world and give it flavour, colour and purpose. Some of us are worried about our incapacity to forge lasting friendships, and we have a hunch that we may have become more calculating about the value of relationships. Increasingly, we place our faith within virtual reality, where we stave off despair with fantasy and illusion. The challenge, however, is to be inspired by reality, not virtual reality.

Some of us 'return' to selective modes of cultural xenophobia, where we believe that the traditions of our forefathers will save us from the impurities of modernity. For those of us who do not fall into the above slots there are still other negative responses, sometimes confused, rarely insightful. In the ecological sphere the potential to self-destruct is intrinsic to the all-consuming consumer life we are hurtling towards. Increasingly, we are content to sit in a corner of McWorld and sip a bottle of Karmacola.

But cynicism is also a mind-set that overlooks hope as intrinsic to human existence. It is easy to be cynical; so easy, in fact, that it does not need much effort or discipline, and it has the added attraction of giving its proponent the illusion of being 'realistic' and 'mature.' Hope, on the other hand, is an art that has to be practiced with conviction and diligence. It has to be a daily practice, involving a commitment to find the good even in a world that seems to have little of it, and it needs strength of mind and compassion. But the point is that **we are indeed people of hope** and in the end it is hope that gives life its finest moments.

Thankfully, when we peel away the layers of confusion that cloud our consciousness we are startled to discover a robust and healthy zest to survive. It is my suggestion that this ontological impulse to survive is so strong that it may see us through the crisis. Not only do we wish to survive, but we also wish to find happiness and fulfilment. In fact, these are non-negotiable conditions for human existence. There are, fortunately, considerable numbers of human beings who are busy finding creative solutions, and I cannot but feel that the tide will eventually turn and look more hopeful and joyous.

For my part I offer a few parables as a way out of the present impasse. They are attitudinal journeys that open the wellsprings of compassion and fulfilment. These parables, of largely unverifiable origin, came to me at different periods of time.\* They have lain dormant in my subconscious for quite a while. Eventually they transformed themselves to serve my own quest for meaning and purpose. I have spoken about them for some twenty years and they have always gone to the listener's heart. I claim no authorship, except that of interpretation. An uncommon wind blew them in my direction.

Let me begin my narration with the parable of the frogs.

## **The Parable of the Frogs**

It was a pleasant morning in a remote village in interior India. And in this village was a field which had several wells and each well had hundreds of frogs. And the wonderful thing was that the walls of each well had a different colour. The frogs all knew this though they had never ventured into the other wells, because the birds which flew around everywhere had told them about it.

One well had pleasing saffron walls. A few frogs floated restfully on the surface with their big black eyes popping over the surface. Some frogs sat on the walls of the well. A gentle breeze stirred the few plants that clambered on the inside walls of the well. Life is good, thought one frog to itself.

In another well, a little distance away, other frogs were feeling the same way about life. This well had vibrant green walls. And in the well that had yellow walls, the frogs were similarly happy. The same scenario held good for the frogs in the blue and the white wells, and in all the other wells of other colours. All the frogs seemed happy and content to sit on the walls of their wells or float on the surface and breathe the cool fragrance of moss and herbs that thrived on the walls.

One summer's day it was especially hot. This was the hottest summer in many years, and even if the morning had been bearable, by afternoon the climate changed and the sun had got very hot. By about one in the afternoon the frogs began to feel restless with the heat. Some of them sat directly under the sun, on the walls of their wells, trying to catch a whiff of air. But it was very still without even a trace of wind.

The heat was enough to irritate any frog. As their exasperation grew they heard voices in their heads. The frogs in the saffron well heard this: “You are right to be upset. But it’s not actually the heat that is upsetting you. There is a more serious reason. Although your well is the best one, and the waters the purest, the frogs in the other wells do not recognise this truth.” The frogs in the green well also heard similar voices suggesting that their well was the most pristine, and that the lesser frogs from the other wells were loathe to accept this conclusive fact. The frogs in the other wells heard similar ‘truths.’

Soon the frogs began to croak aggressively at each other, each trying to outdo those in the other wells. The aggressive shouts had only one message: “My well is the best one and my water is the purest.”

They went on croaking till they got hoarse and thoroughly exhausted. And when they could croak no more a few of them decided to get down from the walls and take a dip in the waters to cool themselves. That day they were more tired than usual having done more than their usual lot of croaking. The frogs knew that the water right at the bottom was always cooler. More than a few swam deep into the waters. A few frogs even reached the bottom, and swimming around discovered passages where the water was even cooler. These passages were so delightful and pleasing that several frogs got lost in them.

When they had had enough of the cool waters they rose back to the surface. Most of them were happy to see the walls of their wells again. But for some it was the most painful surprise in their lives. A few frogs from the green well found that they had surfaced in the saffron well, and a few frogs from the saffron well found that they had emerged in the green well. The same trauma was faced by some frogs in the yellow, blue and white wells. Instead of surfacing in their own wells they had popped out in the enemy’s well!

But word of the discovery that all the wells were connected by deep subterranean canals spread with the swiftness of frog-chant. They realised that as long as they remained on the surface they experienced the illusion that the wells and the waters were unique and different. But deep down they were the same waters which flowed into the green, saffron, yellow, white and blue wells.

The metaphor is self-explanatory. Saffron, green, white and so on are the colours of our different communities. But we forget that we come into the world first as human beings, and only then, without our consent, do we grow up as Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists or Tribals. Or we grow up as Indians or Pakistanis, Israelis or Palestinians; or blacks, coloureds, whites. Some of us grow up to suspect our neighbours because they practice a different faith, belong to a different culture or have a different skin. And when we get restless, due to poverty and oppression in one context, or loneliness and alienation in another, we are willing to turn into aggressive demagogues. We desecrate the shrines of “other gods,” even kill and rape in the name of “our own god,” or watch people live in poverty as we would watch another soap opera.

The parable of the frogs in the wells amply illustrates that there is a potential for all of us to experience the common ground of our humanity. On the surface we may look divided. The surface waters may look misleadingly different but the deeper we go, we touch the common waters, the common ground of our humanity. In the end we are part of a single unitary earth.

Therefore, when we respect another well we nurture our own, for as Chief Seattle said, "All things are connected."

And now to another parable.

Every fibre in me revolts each time I try to be a 'person.' I have been primed to succeed, primed to get to the top, primed to be an 'individual.' And yet each cell in my body recognises that there is more to life than the compulsions that drive me; that caring and being cared for are more desirable than the 'dog eat dog' attitude that has come to plague our civilisation. The individual cannot care; only the person can. The individual is fulfilled when he or she wins and others lose. The person is fulfilled when everybody wins to some degree or other and nobody loses.

There is the story of a teenage ant that reveals the difference between the individual and the person.

## **The Parable of the Teenage Ant**

This teenage ant, flush with energy, wanted to do something significant with his life. Young people search for ideals and our young ant was no exception. On this particular day he walked down the main shopping boulevard to see if there was anything that could inspire him. Of course there were the well displayed shops, selling things that teenagers are attracted to. But our ant wanted something more.

As he strode past the well stocked shop windows he suddenly heard the faint tune of a mesmerising chant emerging from the bottom of the boulevard. It was like nothing he had heard before. Drawn by the haunting quality of the chant he hurried in the direction it came from. With each step the chant became stronger and he could see the outline of a structure, further down, that seemed to resemble a church or a temple or a mosque. He now began to run, feeling sure that this was what he was looking for. He did not know what to expect, but the outline of the church-temple-mosque and the passionate and rhythmic chant convinced him that he was going to find the answer to his questions.

When he finally got close enough he noticed that the structure was not a church or temple or mosque, but a pyramid of ants. There were hundreds of thousands of them and they were in a heightened state of excitement. They were jumping over each other, elbowing and kicking in frenzy. He could now make out the words of the chant he had heard in the distance. The words went: 'Got to get to the top! Got to get to the top!'

The teenager was overwhelmed with emotion. He jumped on to the pyramid of ants and began kicking and clambering as he desperately tried to head for the top. Soon he began to chant with the others: "Got to get to the top! Got to get to the top!" He felt an extraordinary surge of energy rush through him. This was the vision he had been searching for, and now he was fully a part of it.

Our teenage ant finally kicked and scratched his way to the top. When he got there he looked around in dismay. "But, there's nothing here! There's absolutely nothing up here!" he exclaimed. "Hush!" said the ant that came just after. "For heavens sake don't tell anybody there's nothing here!" Clearly, staying at the top only made sense as long as the others below believed there was something special up there to strive for.

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*This dotted line should be a line of ants in the booklet.*

The historical significance of the story needs to be explained further. An intellectual stream of great import, known as The Enlightenment, emerged in Europe in the 18th century, which profoundly altered the notion of the human being. Up to then the churches, the feudal lords and the restrictive guilds held a stranglehold on human advancement. The liberal and intellectual currents of The Enlightenment, with their emphasis on reason and intellectual progress, took the human being out of the shadow of the church, the feudal structure, the family and the clan. The natural child of the Enlightenment was the philosophy of Individualism that declared that the individual was an end in herself/himself and this alone was the supreme value. All individuals were in some sense morally equal, and no one would ever be considered solely as a means to the well being of another. This philosophy also justified a certain degree of selfishness.

Individualism, which at one point in time was a progressive current, finds itself today in crisis, because of its identification with the fiercely competitive attitude of 'win-lose.' It is an axiom of post-industrial society that some people will win and others lose, that some will rise to wealth and fame while others are trampled upon and even eliminated.

Today the individual is geared to compete from primary school through university to professional life. She or he is geared to reach the top. The prevailing vision of human existence is vertical, to climb over each other to get to the top. Only one set of human drives is to the fore: those of power, possession and competition.

Other human drives, the horizontal ones, concerned with being a person, of caring and nurturing, fellowship and interconnectedness, are neglected and showing signs of atrophy. A person is certainly an autonomous being. But she or he is also an interdependent being, and her or his destiny is interwoven with the destinies of others and the very earth herself. The person is one who is aware that there is nothing there at the top, that the quest for excellence cannot be confused with the paranoia to get to the top. She or he knows that excellence comes from our ability to pay attention to detail and to value 'rigour' in all that we do, and also from being connected with our neighbour and with the earth. We need not be aggressive or competitive to excel.

The original meaning of competition was ‘running along with others.’ If we need to compete at all, we need to return to this original meaning and give up the present understanding of eliminating the other.

Nothing is permanent, and the cause of all suffering is to hold on to the illusion of permanence. The consumer goodies I buy are not permanent; the modest or giddy heights I aspire to are not permanent. Each cell in my body is racing to extinction. If I were to grasp this central truth I would be a happier person. But the notion of impermanence is usually so frightening that I prefer not to think about it. I am instead drawn to the make-believe world of consumer advertisements, of the daring shown by the world of fashion, the excitement of the new cars in the market.

I am not against the idea of the full nirvana, the complete one. But perhaps not everyone can get there, and certainly not in a jiffy. For many of us it may be a good beginning to experience small joys and ‘little nirvanas.’ Only a person, as distinct from the individual, can experience the wonder and the transcendence of little nirvanas. The individual, a product of our material wasteland, was pronounced spiritually dead some time ago. Fortunately, we are aware that absolute individualism would drive us crazy, and even the rabidly individualistic amongst us value the time they spend with their children, companions, friends and nature. Many of us are aware that there is much more to life than the low-grade stimulation that mere ambition, power, money and information can bring us. We also realise that we need not become saints to tilt the balance in favour of compassion and joy.

And so, finally, to the last parable.

### **The Parable of the Trekking Sage**

There is the apocryphal story of a sage from a distant land who visited a remote shrine in the forests of India. It was a region inhabited by forest people, whom we in India call adivasis, the first people. The sage was accompanied by a number of his perceptive followers and they had to trek through the forest for a day to reach the shrine of the Earth Goddess. It was customary for pilgrims to engage tribals to carry baggage as they had to walk through unfamiliar pathways. The sage and his followers made arrangements with a handful of strong young men to assist them in carrying some of their personal belongings. They bantered cheerfully with the tribals as they wound their way through the forest to the shrine.

But the pilgrims were soon disconcerted by the tendency of the tribals to make unscheduled stops every now and then. By the time they reached their destination they had made more than twenty-four stops although they were all carrying relatively light items and the day was cool and balmy. When the tribals made these stops they delayed the rest of the pilgrims, who were eager to reach the shrine well before sunset. The stops, a few minutes each time, saw the tribals sit under a tree and talk heartily to each other.

Some of the less patient pilgrims muttered under their breath that the tribals were a lazy and undisciplined lot and did not take their work seriously, although they were going to be handsomely paid for their help. But the sage kept his counsel and did not want to arrive at any hasty conclusions.

That evening, as they sat around a campfire eating their frugal dinner the sage asked the tribals if they were tired after the long trek.

“Not at all,” the tribals intoned together.

“Were the things you were carrying rather heavy?” the sage persisted.

“Not at all!” was the collective exclamation once again. “We are used to carrying ten times this weight.”

“But I noticed you stopped several times along the way. I wondered if we had overburdened you,” continued the sage.

“Oh that!” cried the oldest among them. “We always stop when we make these journeys. We always do.”

“But why,” the sage persevered.

The tribal who had just spoken turned very serious. “We stop,” he said “so that our souls can catch up with us.”

The sceptical pilgrims were humbled by the response. The tribals believed that the soul had its own rhythm. They felt hollow when they felt they were going too fast for their souls, which could not keep pace with them. Stopping every now and then allowed their souls to catch up with them.

In our modern world we live in the fast lane and make the fast buck. We have left our souls far, far behind, where they can never catch up with our restless journeys.

The big challenge is to live slower, with simpler rhythms, where we remain balanced and don't lose our souls along the way. To lose your soul is to lose the adventure of the inward journey, without which the outward one remains hollow and unfulfilling. A metaphor that is a personal favourite illustrates this, and I will now permit myself to sneak it in. It could change your life.

## **The Metaphor of the Bow and Arrow**

The big cities in India are among the most polluted in the world. On an average tens of thousands of people die in our cities due to pollution related illnesses. Our bodies have become toxic. For a society like ours, obsessed with ritual purity and pollution, it must come as an unpleasant surprise that pollution is not merely ritual, not merely a caste thing, but is materially verifiable. It invades the breast milk of mothers and kills brain cells in young children. But strange as it may seem the modern pollution of the body is a direct result of the emaciation of the soul; the two go together.

An arrow cannot shoot outward unless it is pulled inward in the bow. This is a self-evident fact. Yet this mundane fact needs to be underlined, and much of our malaise

derives from our inability to grasp this apparently obvious principle. When the arrow is drawn inward to its full length and then set free, it races towards the goal with remarkable agility and precision. The outward journey of the arrow depends on its inward journey. When the arrow is not drawn inward it cannot shoot outward. If such an arrow goes outward it is a dud, for it has had no inward journey. It is an illusory arrow trying to reach an illusory goal.

So it is with humans--the journey outward depends on our journey inward. And vice versa--the journey inward, to be significant, has to be nurtured by the outward journey. In the lives of so many of us our outer spaces are expanding, while the inner ones are shrinking. In today's cyber world the outer is synonymous with endless information, while the inner world of insight has shrivelled. And yet the truth of the impermanence of all things strikes us every once in a while, drawing us to ourselves, reminding us that we are missing the poetry and equanimity of existence. The inner journeys do not negate the world, nor take away from its beauty and wonder. Rather, they help free us from life-negating delusions. The inner-outer process frees us, helps us to genuinely celebrate life, and keeps us from the pitfalls of self-indulgence and excess.

We are today living a civilisational crisis where most of us find it difficult to live this inner-outer journey. Some of us are almost totally in the outer, not entirely out of our volition, but partly so. There is a systemic conspiracy to keep us focused on the outer, even if we are ourselves partly responsible for the conspiracy. Our outer forays are largely subliminal, the results of the hidden persuaders who succeed in making us act without us being aware of our actions. And even when we are occasionally aware, the compulsions are so strong in our psychological make-up that we often act through reflex, without giving much thought to the effects on ourselves, on others and the environment. Much of what is now called compulsive behaviour is of this order--we buy and consume and over-stimulate ourselves not because we need to, but because we are unconsciously led to believe that we would starve ourselves emotionally and psychologically if we didn't. A little effort at being mindful and aware may weaken these compulsions and give play to other positive drives that can lead to creativity and joy. It lies within us to create the psychological conditions to be cheerful and hopeful while simultaneously fashioning a society that is both humane and earth-centred.

And since everything must end properly, we need a tail.

## **Tailpiece**

An elderly friend of mine occasionally passes the night at my home. He comes in with a small bag and chats or smiles through the evening. He eats lightly from whatever is available. If I am busy he quietly settles down to read a book. Oftentimes we don't even talk. The next day he quietly leaves, as unobtrusively as he came. I once asked him how he managed to come and go so lightly. He told me his secret: "One must go through life with the lightness and grace of a butterfly. When a butterfly alights on a twig it does so without disturbing it. And when it flies away the twig is motionless. Only beauty and kindly flutter remain. Coming and going is a kindly process."

The butterfly is also a metaphor of hope in our difficult times, where we are often unable to see the currents of creative transformation. But if we look beyond the apparent we may be startled to find that the alternatives are there already, staring us in the face, even if we do not see them immediately. Often the alternatives are spaces within the mainstream. They are maturing within a chrysalis that looks inert from the outside, but is waiting to burst into a butterfly.

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