

Looking after our world

Introduction

Planet Earth is a closed system. There are no physical inputs from outside our biosphere. There is nowhere for all the output of life on this planet to go except into the biosphere itself. Our atmosphere has the same relative thickness to the Earth as the skin of an apple to an apple - in other words: extremely thin and limited. Very few realize that there is no new air or water. No amazing "atmosphere creator". No new explosion of hydrogen in the presence of oxygen to produce H₂O. What we have is all there is and will be.

Our atmosphere is like a big bathtub. There are the innumerable 'taps' that pour all sorts of substances into this bath from activity on our planet, with a large contribution from human-inspired activities. The only practical 'drain' is the process of photosynthesis, which requires enough chlorophyll in sufficient plants (including algae) and trees to do the job. If the input from the taps is less than the ability of green nature to do its work, we will continue to have relatively clean air. If it is more, we are in serious trouble - especially if we forge ahead dispensing so many toxic substances into this bath, while at the same time cutting down the forests.

This is at the heart of the ecological/economical dilemma that we have been facing increasingly for the last fifty years.

For most of the history of human beings on this planet, there was always somewhere else to go. If things got tough due to illness, famine or war, we could always find another habitable place over the horizon. We would take it by possession or invasion and all those denominated as 'lesser' beings had to live with it.

Our idea of the planet as a lonely blue, white, green and brown pearl whizzing through empty space really only dawned on us comparatively recently. When satellites were able to take colour photographs of the planet Earth and send them back to us. Its fragile beauty has inspired many to have greater care for it.

Now, however, there is practically nowhere else to go, not just because of immigration restrictions prevailing in this politically unstable world. Borders are closing up as each nation holds up the flag of self-interest. There are practically no new places. We are thrown upon ourselves to test our ingenuity to solve two basic problems:

- Can we design systems that diminish the toxic input into the atmospheric bath?
- Can we help the trees and plants do their work better?

Many individuals and organizations are trying their best to haul us back from these two brinks.

The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, however, has been exploring the following question since its inception in the 1930's:

- Can we change the way we think and act so that we can guarantee the future of our planet and ourselves?

This article deals with the connection between a change in our consciousness and its effect on our personal and collective worlds.

Change of paradigm regarding Nature

An afternoon on a deserted beach. A sunset seen from a majestic mountain. A walk in a virgin forest. Who would not feel a sense of identification with the beauty of nature? The dichotomy for those who are residents of the great metropolises, is that the weekends and vacations in our favourite refuges finish and we are thrown back to our work posts from where we contemplate 'Nature' as something far from the noise and chaos around us. Many of us just remain at this rather wistful and disconnected level, dreaming of the next opportunity to get back to it.

We perceive Nature romantically as a sort of utopia that contrasts with the dystopia of the urban spreads and their frenzied materialism. The image of the 'noble savage' depicted by Jean-Jacques Rousseau¹, living harmoniously with nature, free of the 'evils' of selfishness, inspires many environmental fundamentalists until today.

On the other hand, the anthropocentric and unfortunately still very much current view, is that man, being the main component of creation, has the right to exploit *ad infinitum*, the natural resources of the planet, that were predestined to him by some divine decree. Even so, we cannot deny that other species have their own place as well. There are more microbes in a cubic centimetre of soil than there have been human beings in all of history.

Only recently, we have started to question these two extreme positions to find the point of balance. Businesspersons, politicians, scientists and common citizens try to make a bridge between the preservation of the inherent beauty of our fragile blue planet and the rational use of its resources.

The difficulty however, is that the very dialectic for both these extremes that reflect our position regarding nature is mistaken. It is not Man against Nature or that he has been fighting with it for a long time and now has to dress himself with another mentality in order to 'save' it. Even our bodies are made of the same elements; it is the same air, water and food that sustain each of the body's molecules. The cities are also just transformed Nature - the rocks that have become cement and steel, the trees that have been converted into beams, flooring and furniture, the ancient forests have ended up as petroleum and later as plastic. Nature is not something that starts where the cities finish. It is everything we can see, touch and feel.

It is worthwhile to reflect on the implications of quantum physics on our world vision. More than 80 years ago, it abandoned the division between observer (typically a human being) and the observed (typically inanimate matter). Both form one whole. One influences the other.

Admittedly, this does not only refer to Matter, but what we do with it in the construction of a society. This does not mean that the conscious entities called souls are Matter, but together they form all situations that compose our reality here.

¹ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. (1987) "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality." In D.A. Cress (ed., trans.), Basic Political Writings (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing): 25-82. (Originally published 1755)

While we continue to see Nature as something separate, a passive subject like an unconscious patient on an operation table, we will not understand the depth of the interrelationship and interdependence between ourselves and our planet that has been a like a long-standing marriage, which has gone sour. The dance between the observer and the observed implies that the external problems in Nature and therefore in society are the manifestations of the contamination and confusion that reign within us. They are inseparable.

Einstein's famous phrase is important here – *"We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them."* The handbook, *World Resources*, a co-production from the UN Environmental Program, the UN Development Program, the World Bank and the World Resources Institute has put it very clearly²:

"Our knowledge of ecosystems has increased dramatically, but it has simply not kept pace with our ability to alter them. We can continue blindly altering Earth's ecosystems, or we can learn to use them more sustainably."

Our capacity to change ecosystems is proportional to our capacity to change our own consciousness.

Our true work goes way beyond of cost-benefit discussion of environmental programs. It also goes beyond the discussion about the needs of other living beings or the debate about what sustainable development really means.

In 2008, the world reached a historical milestone. For the first time, more than half the human population, 3.3 billion people was living in urban areas – many of them dreaming nostalgically about the Nature that used to exist in a more pristine state and forgetting that they are part of it. Destroying nature is destroying ourselves – literally.

The obvious starting point to consider change is to understand the whole picture.

Looking after all our houses

The prefix *eco* comes from the Greek *oikos*, which means *house* or *building*. It was used for the first time by Ernst Haeckel in 1868 to describe the connection between a living species and its environment. *Ecology* implies the study of our house. *Economics* is related to the rules for looking after or managing our household. So much so, that adjective *economical* is very much connected with how thrifty we are in discharging our household responsibilities.

Most economist however stick to the modern definition: *"that which is concerned with the production, consumption, and transfer of wealth."* Or even by Adam Smith's narrow definition as the "study of wealth".

From a more holistic approach, we see there are many houses that we need to both understand and look after. They are all interconnected and interdependent.

- The **first house** is the spiritual state of the self.

² World Resources 2000-2001: People and Ecosystems: The Fraying Web of Life, p. viii

- The **second house** is the mental *field* where we think and organize the strategies of our lives.
- The **third house** is the body, which directly bears the positive or negative effects of our mental activity.
- The **fourth house** is the physical structure of the address where we live – our “home”.
- The **fifth house** is our social systems, which involve all our relationships, laws, customs and traditions.
- The **sixth house** is the environment, which most obviously reflects the condition of the other five houses.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defined health in its broader sense in its 1948 constitution as “*a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.*” An even broader vision of health includes two other factors, which in fact, are the beginning and the end of ecology and economics:

- the state of being or spirit
- the state of the environment

The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University has been researching and applying concepts related to how these two aspects act together interdependently in order for us to be better stewards than we have been.

The quality of spiritual energy

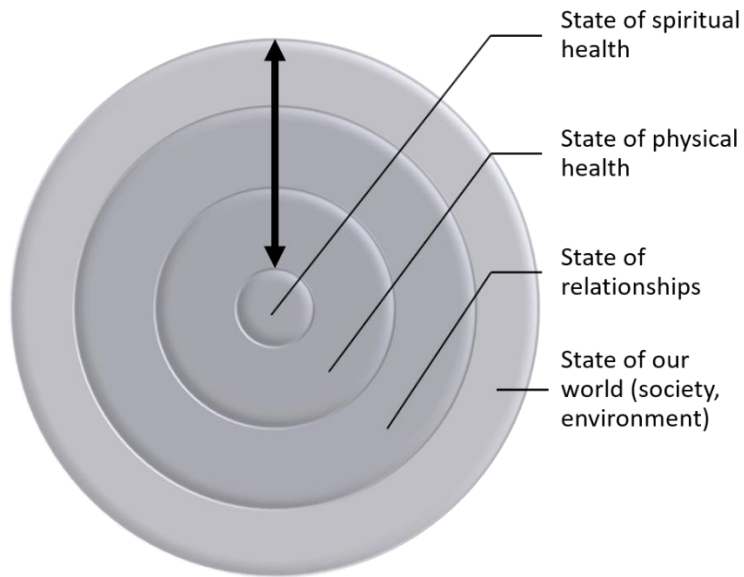
The connection between the self and the body is the same as exists between a driver and his car; without the car, the driver cannot go anywhere even though he continues to exist. Without a driver, the car cannot go anywhere either. It remains without *life*. If a tyre is punctured or the clutch breaks, the driver is affected only until the problem is corrected. If the driver is angry about something, he may even abuse the car by crunching through the gears or driving at a maniacal high speed. The state of the car affects the mood of the driver and vice versa. Analogically, the *car* in question is not only the body, but also the social state, its system and laws, as well as the environment. The relationship between the driver and the physical, social or environmental *car* is interdependent.

The transference of energy between the self and the environment

The quality of the energy transmitted by our state of being causes a certain effect on the world around that returns to influence the state of being. If this energy is in any way polluted at its source, it affects the whole system and suffers the return of that effect.

The lack of spiritual fulfilment, internal happiness, positive willpower and real self-respect are probably the greatest causes of illness, premature death, spoiled relationships and directly and indirectly our capacity to understand and look after our society and environment. The recuperation of spiritual strength is an individual effort that can bring benefit to the other aspects of health.

This reciprocal arrangement is shown in the following diagram:



One who does not look after the *health* of his or her spirit, body or relationships will think even less of “looking after the household” of the Earth. The lack of understanding of the above diagram can claim the greater part of responsibility for the disharmony between all six houses.

Once a negative process commences, it often leads to some form of destructive phenomenon on the mental, physical, social and environmental levels. Only the input of spiritual strength and wisdom can revert the process.

The problem is not even the mind. Just as the self uses the body to move, express its desires and experience its results, it uses the mind for thinking. The mind is just a screen where the self paints its thoughts and desires. They then go into action with different physical, social and environmental results. The problems of the environment are also indirectly psychosomatic. As the word itself suggests we have to look to the *psyche* or self to discover the seeds of any form of disease.

The understanding of ecological or economic problems and new legislation can help to treat the symptoms of *illness* of the environment. Medicine can help the body; psychology can help both the social and mental aspects. Even so, there remains the question of restoring power to the self or spirit that could have the will to make the necessary changes.

Therapeutic techniques barely touch the surface levels of this internal *sea*. A more subtle tool is necessary to re-establish the well-being of the self and therefore the capacity to deal with the confusion that exists in the external world to obtain sufficient will-power to face the other five *houses* and promote positive change.

Through the tool of meditation, the individual can recuperate inner strength, which without doubt, becomes a firm ally in treating all the subsequent forms of illness.

Authenticity

To call someone a true ecologist and economist they would have to be taking care of all six houses. They would have to be aligned around their interdependent nature starting with correct care of the self. To treat the wounds we have caused on our planet, without looking to the real and more metaphysical causes, is like using pomades and plasters on a body that is rotting internally. If our concern is only directed towards problems in the physical environment but we mistreat our own bodies, relationships or minds, then we would not have the strength that authenticity gives. It would be like complaining about the smog with a cigarette in one's mouth.

On the other hand, if we feel impotent to deal with the collective ecological masochism, then at least it is possible to take care of the environment or atmosphere created by our own thoughts, words and actions. In this way, we don't only sow benefit but perhaps even inspire someone else to do the same.

The influence of greed in our world

Mahatma Gandhi once said:

There is sufficient for the needs of man but there is not sufficient for his greed.

There are resources in the world to provide a dignified life for all, but much of it is badly employed in developing unnecessary projects, in sustaining corruption or political and economic hegemonies and so on. More than two thirds of the world's population hasn't enough to eat. Eight billionaires³ have more money than the poorest half of the world's population.

In September 2008, there was the biggest economic crash since 1929. Much was said about the cause of this being "unmitigated greed". A paper⁴ submitted to the George Washington University, encapsulates the sort of greed that is loose in our world now. The worst sufferers by far are our society and consequentially our environment:

"Greed by the managers of financial institutions led to easy loans with little or no down payments. Greed by homeowners led to the purchases of houses they couldn't afford. Greed on Wall Street led to the creation of clever new financial instruments like mortgage-backed securities and credit default swaps. Greed by CEOs led to corporate extravagances and ridiculously high executive compensation packages. Greed by consumers led to excessive use of credit cards to buy things now, rather than wait till they earn the money to pay for it. Greed by companies led to offshoring and the substitution of lower-cost foreign labour cost high-cost domestic labour."

If the resources were distributed according to the principles of goodwill and basic human rights, there would be food, clothing and shelter for everyone. There is enough food, but it sometimes reaches the absurd state of having to destroy crops to keep the prices high.

³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-38613488>

⁴ Suranovic, S. *Greed, Capitalism and the Financial Crisis*

Institute for International Economic Policy Working Paper Series, Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University, September 2010

What happens in the world outside happens first within the individuals. Internally there is a poor distribution of energy and abilities from the *crops* of one's own achievements. There is *unemployment* of virtues, *inflation* of negativities, a *recession* of courage, *overpopulation* of thoughts and a series of other disorders that remain the primal cause of the individual's problems. Problematic individuals make for a problematic world.

We discover our potential the moment we manage to liberate the energy that is trapped in maintaining many drains of personal waste – time, energy, money, talent, knowledge and so on. In other words, we do not know how to be economical or ecological (in their true sense) with what we have as individuals.

Where to go from here

When we look at the obvious effects of climate change and other environmental consequences of the way we live, we may be overwhelmed by the scale of challenges and stunned into a state of impotence. We may be inspired to take effective green attitudes such as:

- Use public transport more and maybe even give up our cars
- Have less children
- Eat a plant-based diet
- Use a minimal amount of unrecyclable materials
- Travel less by plane
- Use our votes more carefully and elect more conscious public officials

These may seem tiny drops of cleaner living in a sea of difficulties, but at least we would be helping with the solution rather than being part of the problem.

The main task however in an ongoing improvement in the way we treat all of our six houses so that we are not only helping the physical atmosphere but the mental and spiritual ones as well – wherever we are.

One of the practical solutions to all of the challenges that face us, especially at the level of consciousness, is to develop the sense of being trustees.

Solutions in trusteeship

At the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, all members are encouraged to have an attitude of trusteeship towards everything they are responsible for - body, mind, wealth and relationships, including that with Matter or Nature. Instead of being careless owners of the things that make up our lives, they are encouraged to look after everything in the interests of the whole. They are all God-given “goods” that have to be taking care of in an appropriate and non-wasteful manner.

Especially with regard to wealth and nature, this attitude helps to make money go further with as little damage to the environment as possible.

All activities are carried out free of charge by volunteers with an open heart and a caring attitude. Most of the more than 8.500 centres that form a global network offering courses and workshops under the banner Brahma Kumaris are self-sufficient. Each of them in their own way is doing its little bit to help not only themselves, but also all those who come into contact with them, to understand that it is possible to

live in this world in a socially and environmentally friendly way by putting into practice some of the principles shown in this article.

Through the Brahma Kumaris Environment Initiative⁵, we hope to contribute to a cleaner, greener world. This initiative encourages greater understanding of the role of consciousness and lifestyle in environmental issues, through dialogues, partnerships, participation in UN conferences and local initiatives.

In particular, in network of Brahma Kumaris centres throughout the world, we practice and emphasise the following:

- **Sustainable Lifestyle:** Adopting a less materialistic lifestyle and increasing the use of clean energy saves the planet's resources and brings greater well-being.
- **Diet:** Vegetarian/Vegan food, cooked with love, nourishes our whole being and brings inner clarity. It contributes to the health and future of the planet by reducing our carbon footprint.
- **Meditation:** Spending time in silent reflection or meditation helps us to connect with our deeper values and find the strength to live by them, enabling us to be more mindful of the impact of our choices.
- **Peaceful Living:** Promoting and living by the principles of universal peace can lead to less violent conflicts and wars, thus enabling vast resources to be redirected to creating a healthy and sustainable society.

We also support a project dedicated to renewable energy for the future as follows:

Solar Energy – India One Project

For almost 25 years, Brahma Kumaris and its sister organization, the World Renewal Spiritual Trust (WRST), a recognized scientific and industrial research organization in India, have been conducting training, research and development in renewable energy technologies.

'India One⁶', a 1 MW solar thermal power plant situated near the Brahma Kumaris Shantivan Campus in Abu Road, Rajasthan, India, was completed in April 2017. This innovative project uses 770 newly developed 60m² parabolic dishes and features thermal storage for continuous operation. The plant will generate enough heat and power for a campus of 25,000 people and is a milestone for decentralized and clean power generation in India.

'India One' is implemented by WRST with partial funding from the Indian Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE), the German Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Building and Nuclear Safety (BMUB) through the German Federal Enterprise for International Cooperation (GIZ).

A training centre has been set up at 'India One', sponsored by UN Development Programme (UNDP), Global Environment Facility (GEF) and MNRE for the promotion of solar concentrating technologies.

For information regarding this article, please contact: Sonja Ohlsson, eco@brahmakumaris.org

⁵ www.eco.brahmakumaris.org

⁶ www.india-one.net