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The Multiverse Story and Our Common Humanity

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At Fireflies Ashram I tell visitors that the Earth is our mother. If you ask any villager around she will not hesitate to say that the earth is 'Bhoomi Thai' or 'Mother Earth'. People have learnt over millennia that it is the earth that feeds them, like a good mother would. Modern science confirms what the villagers have sensed intuitively, that all human beings emerged from the planet Earth over billions of years. This same earth that we today refer to as real estate, resource, mineral, and a commodity to be bought and sold on the market! It is an utter tragedy that we have lost the sense of the earth as our first mother. The earth is no longer sacred, as a mother would be. With the loss of sacredness there is little motivation to stop the aggressive exploitation and shaming of the earth.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Let us start at the beginning.

From the viewpoint of science we are stardust, emerging from the thermo-nuclear fusions of the Big Bang. If we overlook the fusion bit, stardust is a nice and romantic way to define our beginning!

Scientists now say that it is likely we live in a multiverse, not just a universe. This means our universe may not be the only one. We already know that there are around a hundred billion galaxies, and that our own galaxy, the Milky Way, contains hundreds of billions of stars. All this is mind-boggling; there is so much we do not know of our own galaxy, let alone distant ones, or other universes in the multiverse!

The Big Bang happened about 13.7 billion years ago. Our planet Earth came into being about 4.54 billion years ago. All life on Earth sprang from single celled organisms about 3.5 billion years ago. Anatomically, modern humans are only about two hundred thousand years old.

Sadly, the Earth will not exist forever. In about 1.75 billion years all life on our planet will cease to exist. (Of course, with Climate Change human beings may eliminate themselves from the planet much earlier, in as little as a few hundred years!). Eventually the Earth will travel out of the solar systems habitable zone to the hot zone where all the water on the planet will evaporate. Of course, all life on Earth would have ceased to exist much before the Earth enters the hot zone.

We still don't know whether human life on the planet will disappear in a few hundred years due to Climate Change or whether the inevitable forces of entropy will ultimately take over in a billion years or so. We also don't know whether some of us would have migrated to another planet to keep the species going, as Steven Hawking suggested. In the end, sooner or later, one way or the other, Homo Sapiens will disappear (unless we find a habitable planet without entropy, which is highly unlikely). Even our Gods cannot prevent this!

So, should we fret in anxiety about the meaningless of human existence? Or is there a way to find meaning and purpose?

From the beginning of time we have had many meaning-providers like The Buddha, Christ, Mohamed, Kabir and many others. The great religions were meant to usher in peace and compassion, but they also do the opposite by provoking conflict, violence and war. Few people bear in mind that the Gods did not create our religions and our spiritual systems. We humans emerged before our Gods and we created our versions of Gods and religions. If there is intelligent life on a distant planet 'people' there might have created their own gods and religions, if they are bedeviled by meaning and purpose as we are. Or, in their wisdom, they might have settled for something larger, like cosmic or multiverse spirituality

The Buddha was the only one of the great religious teachers who avoided speaking about metaphysical questions, or even God. The Buddha was once challenged by one of his students to answer the ten unanswered metaphysical questions.

Majjhima Nikaya 63 & 72 in the Pali canon mentions these questions:

1.The world is eternal. 2.The world is not eternal. 3.The world is (spatially) infinite. 4.The world is not (spatially) infinite. 5.The being imbued with a life force is identical with the body. 6.The being imbued with a life force is not identical with the body. 7.The Buddha (a perfectly enlightened being) exists after death. 8.The Buddha does not exist after death. 9.The Buddha both exists and does not exist after death. 10.The Buddha neither exists nor does not exist after death.

The SabbasavaSutta (MajjhimaNikaya 2) also mentions 16 questions that are seen as "unwise reflection":What am I? How am I? Am I? Am I not? Did I exist in the past? Did I not exist in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, did I become what in the past? Shall I exist in future? Shall I not exist in future? What shall I be in future? How shall I be in future? Having been what, shall I become what in future? Whence came this person? Whither will he go?

In response to the first ten questions the Buddha is said to have answered as follows: A poisoned arrow once wounded a man. When his family wished to bring him a doctor he refused, saying he first wanted his questions answered: Who shot the arrow? What was the poison? Of what wood was the shaft made? From which bird came the feathers for the flight?

The Buddha said that before his questions were answered he would be dead. He needed urgent treatment. To the Buddha metaphysical questions were not unlikethose posed by the wounded man; they were misleading and prevented the right course of action.

One of the Buddha's important statements went like this: Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment.

The poet William Blake wrote in 1803, in his poem Auguries of Innocence:

To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

If we are truly attentive we find that universes of meaning and insights are hidden in the smallest things. Infinity and eternity are part of the eternal now. (Emily Dickenson wrote that, " Eternity is comprised of nows".) To see a world in a grain of sand we need to move from our habitual conditioning of living in the past or future. The past and future are mere projections of the mind. Only the Now exists. As the Buddha said, we need to live in the present moment if we are to find ourselves.

In a similar vein a great contemporary spiritual thinker, Eckhart Tolle, echoes the Buddha. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, he says: "The present moment is your life. It's nowhere else—never, ever."

He adds: "How do you experience your past? As memories. And what are memories? Thoughts in your head. If you're totally identified with these thoughts in your head, then you're trapped in your past history."

And then : "The question is, are you using time on a practical level, or are you losing yourself in the future? If you think that when you take a vacation, or find the ideal partner, or get a better job or a nicer place to live or whatever it is, that then you will finally be happy, that's when you lose yourself in the future. It's a continuous mental projection away from the now. That's the difference between clock time, which has its place in this world, and psychological time, which is the continuous obsession with the past and the future. **There needs to be a balance between dealing with things in this world, which involves time and thinking, and not being trapped here.** There is a deeper dimension in you that is outside that stream of time and thinking, and that's the inner stillness, peace, a deep, vibrant sense of aliveness. You're very passionate about life in that state."

The multiverse keeps going on, keeps expanding. We can only find meaning and purpose in it if we take the Buddha's statement seriously, that we live in the present, without overlooking the compassion that the Buddha insisted on. This challenge of living in the present moment while embracing *Karuna*, or compassion, means that we strive to live in deep-time while simultaneously creating a caring, plural, democratic and ecologically sensitive community.

The Multiverse Story teaches us that we are all cousins on the planet, that we can trace our genes to a single mitochondrial mother. Every person, from whichever part of the planet, shares genes with human beings in other parts. Religion, race, caste and nationality, which are relatively recent manifestations, should not be allowed to divide us. The Multiverse Story underlines our Common Humanity.

The Multiverse Story also tells us that the Earth is our first mother, that we emerged out of the Earth, that the Earth is sacred and we need to honour it. Climate Change is the result of the de-sacralisation of the Earth. If human beings are not to be eliminated on the planet we need to rediscover this sense of sacredness.

Our Common Humanity also suggests that we are all equal, that we cannot go on living on a planet where some are more equal than the others, where some continue to exploit their own brothers and sisters. It is within our human capacity to fashion a global society that is just, equitable and ecologically sensitive.

Whether we will end up creating such a society is an unknown we must live with. But as the Bhagvad Gita says: We must keep acting for a better world, and not be worried about the results. In other words, the challenge before us is to act socially and ecologically without being attached to the fruits of our action. This is what *Nishkama Karma* is about.

Perhaps, all religions will have to rethink their narratives in light of the Multiverse Story. I think this is eminently possible. To live in the here and now, and be socially and ecologically engaged simultaneously, we may need to surrender ourselves to the Cosmos, or the Multiverse. The entire Cosmos/Multiverse then becomes a Buddha Field, a Christ Field, a Sufi Field, an Advaita Field, and an Indigenous Spirituality Field. The Multiverse spiritual Field will provide us the necessary personal depth to live both in deep-time and chronological time.