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## **Listening, Mindfulness and Non-violent Communication and Action.**

### **Siddhartha**

We live in a very difficult time.

There is both hope and despair on the horizon.

Never before has humanity experienced several crucial problems together, and of such great magnitude. Two significant ones are Social Justice and Climate Change.

On the justice front we find, all over the world, that the rights of people (women, peasants, indigenous peoples, religious and other minorities, human rights activists, and intellectuals, etc.) are being infringed upon or suppressed regularly. Sadly, some of the poor who have suffered injustice under authoritarian regimes, are being co-opted by the very same leaders who do them injustice. Even more tragic is the list of ruthless regimes claiming to be socialist.

On the Climate crisis there is a spectrum of people that ranges between the incremental-change advocates, and others who emphasize the Sixth Extinction in the not-so-distant future. Whatever be the case, it seems certain that things are only going to get worse, if unchecked. (Not long ago, temperatures in Western United States and Western Canada wavered between 45% C and 50 % C. Death Valley in the US even touched 54% C. Those who believed that Canada would remain largely untouched because of its proximity to the Arctic, will now have to rethink. Climate Change will affect every citizen on the planet, wherever the person is.)

For some of us there was the fervent conviction that structural changes would be necessary to usher in an era of peace and justice. Structural changes obviously imply a radical shift in economic policies to bring in a measure of equity, and political policies that engender democratic participation for redressing social injustice. Although our hopes were largely belied, the conviction that these changes are needed is even more valid today.

A few did not pay enough attention to the values and attitudes, and the accompanying behavioral changes, that were necessary to accompany the structural changes that were so necessary. Needless to say, many of us have for long been critical of the tendency that implies: 'structural changes first; changes in values and behavior later'. Clearly all changes must embrace humane and democratic methods, emphasizing unity in diversity.

Another important point to underline: In my experience social activists rarely talked about the personal dimension: how they feel (both hope and despair, confusion about future strategies, burnout etc.) and the tensions of being 'human' within the often-contradictory pulls of institutions and movements they belong to. It was even thought embarrassing to bring up these personal issues for discussion. Some even feared they might be misconstrued as 'incorrect' behavior that would weaken the goals we wish to achieve. Needless to say, until recently the inner life of social workers and activists was never discussed. It was considered taboo to bring it out in the open. Fortunately, that trend is slowly changing, and spirituality and meditation is increasingly being considered important to bring calm and detached objectivity in the lives of those who are promoting social change.

As far as climate change is concerned, time is certainly running out. I often use the analogy of a ship that is about to wreck in a storm. Everybody concerned must do their best to prevent the ship from sinking, by pumping out the water, repairing damage, getting the electricity working etc. This is not the time to figure out if there are flaws in the design of the ship, whether a better design might have prevented an impending tragedy. To an objective observer it is clear that the passengers must be saved first. Everybody must help to prevent the ship from wrecking, whether they belong to the political left, centre or right. Building a ship with a better design is important but can be taken up later. Alternatives take time and can be pursued in the long term. In the short term it is important to save our ship... save life on our planet!

Coming to the goals that are dear to us, we need both the short-term and the long-term ones. (Some might even add mid-term goals). While we must continue to work on our goals and vision from the long-term perspective of ushering in alternatives, we must also consider short-term goals for staving off the shipwreck. One such strategy is to also look for spaces and openings outside our usual milieu, wherever they exist, that may allow us to build bridges with people, who may even have partially different ideological views, to bring about changes. We need not agree on everything, but we can still get together to achieve specific results. While this may not always be easy, it is certainly possible for us to dialogue with a few from the 'other' side on issues like the water crisis, the dangers of pesticides to health, the need to quickly increase the use of renewable energy, or sectarian conflict.

To continue this point further, apart from the long-term goal of nurturing alternatives that may become a global reality eventually, we might also contemplate several short-term goals that lead to dialogue and transformation, that help us cross borders and boundaries without losing our convictions. When one meets someone with different views over a bridge, one may listen, talk and, if things turn out right, even reach a provisional understanding. Neither one has to cross over to the other side, but both can meet in the middle. Dealing with the climate crisis is one immediate goal that must be taken up on a war footing, bringing together a variety of social actors with differing perspectives.

Clearly, we must continue to work towards long term goals while simultaneously saving the ship from wrecking in the short term. It is clear that both the crisis of social justice and climate change is the result of our present market fundamentalism. Unless we change course in a genuinely sustainable direction all will be lost. The long-term goals should not be sacrificed to meet the urgent and immediate short-term crises, and vice-versa. Of course, the short-term goals will have to be worked out in close collaboration with specific movements and organisations that are dealing with subjects like water, food security, sustainable energy, gender relations, youth leadership, inter-faith conflict resolution, indigenous peoples rights etc. International organizations like the United Nations, business groups, and political leaders must also play a significant role etc.

We must clearly be committed to non-violent communication and action. As my friend Ivan Maltcheff often says, we must also learn to genuinely **listen** to the other side. This is a prerequisite. I, for one, often find that I am carried away by my own voice, and do not often listen. Sometimes we 'listen' only to argue and debate better, rather than trying to understand a different point of view. Debating and dialoging are two different things!

The capacity to listen will only come with a degree of **inner quiet**. I find that I do not have the inner quiet to arrive at clarity in my actions and my inter-personal relations. Sometimes I find myself feeling better, and acting better, when I do some *pranayama* (breathing meditation) a few minutes every morning. At other times I chant, and it seems to help. I am not religious, but I see any kind of secular spiritual practice as valuable to provide a measure of inner calm. I also have friends who are inspired and motivated by the 'liberative' religious convictions they hold. I also realize that for some secular activists and thinkers this might not be necessary, that they already have the gift of natural self-awareness and compassion.

Dialogue and negotiation are more important than debate and argument to solve a crisis. All the parties must be open and ready to come to the table and discuss to defuse the crisis, and possibly solve the problem, to a degree at least. A provisional compromise is better than no compromise at all. The aggrieved parties can always return to the table later and see if they can get more concessions, or a better deal.

To mention one area: a section of people from all the major religions have issued declarations on combating climate change. Could one interact with more leaders as well, who may not completely share our values and beliefs, to meet us midway to deal with the climate crisis... or for promoting inter-faith conflict resolution and transformation?

We could act in the context of inter-faith misunderstanding and conflict by helping both sides to listen to each other before coming to judgements. It is possible that both sides have not understood the extent of the injustice and humiliation that either party has experienced. This injustice or humiliation may be real

or perceived, or both. But without listening, and attempting to understand, no progress can be made towards reconciliation.

Likewise, in the climate crisis, one may take a rigid position that the corporate sector does not care. And then one discovers that it would be wrong to generalize, that a few companies are doing their bit to reduce the pollution, green the planet and pay fair wages. This opens up a door: if some companies can engage in responsible ecological and social action without sacrificing profit, then so can others. The strategy would then be to bring other companies around a table and persuade them to do the same.

We could go on and on. It is not impossible that every sector can be changed through meaningful and non-violent dialogue. If this is not Hope, then what is!

By 'acting' through dialogue we remain in the here and now of Hope. We are doing the best we can. To paraphrase the Hindu notion of *Nishkama Karma* : We must *dialogue* now, without being attached to the fruits of our *dialogue*. It is imperative and ethical to act, even if we do not live to see the results of our actions.

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