

The Role of Contemplative Practice in Transforming Society

**A Program of the Global Peace Initiative of Women
Asilomar Conference Grounds – Pacific Grove, CA
October 11 to 15, 2010**

The idea to form a Contemplative Alliance, bringing together deeply committed meditation practitioners from across the religious traditions, emerged from the recognition that a new spiritual voice is needed, one that reflects the changing spiritual landscape of America. It was also felt that as a collective we need to tap the wisdom and understanding that comes from deep contemplative practice to guide us through the challenges we now face.

It is clear to many of us that we are at crossroad and are being called to make significant shifts in thinking and behavior . There has been no strong voice to articulate what these shifts entail, and thus there is no model, no clear vision of where we need to go or how we are to get there. Contemplative practice can contribute to this process of creating and clarifying a collective vision in numerous ways.

American society and much of the developed world have been operating with a certain set of thought patterns that have been reinforced again and again through most of the institutions and structures of our society. These thought patterns make up the prevailing narrative of our culture: they define the values and goals of our society and what a good life should be. They define prosperity in a very narrow way focusing exclusively on economic growth and expansion, unlimited consumption, the commodification of nature and the sense that the right to pursue such growth and consumption is almost a “sacred” right, not to be challenged or questioned. We now see these thought patterns beginning to break down. This is manifesting as deepening cracks in our economic and political institutions. The onset of climate instability, the oil spill catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico, financial fluctuations, far reaching degradation of the environment, the potential scarcity of vital resources

like water – all of these are signs of shifts in the external landscape, which are but reflections of shifts in the internal landscape. To understand what is taking place we need to look more closely at the internal world and see what is coming apart and what is coming together in our collective thought patterns. There is a struggle between the old and the new, and that which is seeking to be born needs support and guidance.

Those who work in the spiritual field know that changes take place first at the level of thought and then manifest as behavior change. Thoughts have force and the power to manifest and so it is said, as we think, so we are. Collective fear, pain or anger manifests in a particular manner and shape an external reality. Similarly changing the way we regard and interact with nature would manifest certain outcomes. Changes in the way we regard prosperity would also manifest as a shift in habits and behavior patterns. A redefining of prosperity and our national wellbeing would help reshape the values and direction of our country. A redefining of prosperity does not mean denying the importance of material development but it may mean bringing into balance our material welfare with other equally vital determinants of wellbeing.

Clearly changes in the way we view prosperity would have economic implications for our country that must be considered. In Germany, for example, the government is trying to convince the population to start again a national shopping spree. The recession led to reduced consumption and now the government wants consumption to return to its pre-recession levels. But the Germans are being more cautious and have entered a mindset of conserving rather than consuming. Business will suffer unless consumption picks up . Can the society shift from one based on the production and consumption of goods to a new basis, one that is more sustainable? While this shift would produce short-term pains, it would produce long-term gains for the society. But who has called for a serious reflection of what this entails and for steps to make such a transition?

The current recession presents an enormous opportunity to redefine prosperity and reshape our values to be more in keeping with the central tenets shared by all the spiritual traditions. We have the opportunity now to balance economic growth with spiritual growth as a society and culture. We have the responsibility to work more consciously with our communities in shaping the thought patterns that can guide this effort.

As a contemplative community seeking to be of service at this time, what role can we play in bringing forth the ideas and concepts that will help transform the way we live and function as a society. This will be the theme of our inquiry when we gather in October. In preparation we ask that you reflect on the following questions:

- 1) What is the single most important change in thinking that can help move our society toward greater wellbeing?
- 2) To create this change in thinking, a few key messages must penetrate the collective -- what would these messages be?
- 3) How can we best work to foster new thought patterns that can then manifest as changes in our society?
- 3) What would prosperity look like in a more balanced society where material and spiritual development go hand-in-hand?
- 4) As we seek to envision a more sustainable society, what would it look like?