
Brief Report of the Gathering in Asilomar:

The Role of Contemplative Practice in Transforming Society

To Advance the Collective Wellbeing

The Contemplative Alliance –

An interfaith alliance of experienced contemplative practitioners who deeply believe that contemplative practice can help guide the transition to a more caring, peaceful and sustainable society

The third gathering of the Contemplative Alliance, organized by GPIW, was held at the Asilomar Conference Grounds in Monterey, California, from the 11th to the 15th of October 2010. This meeting was designed to explore how to foster specific shifts in the collective mindset that will strengthen spiritual unity, help cultivate a new understanding of prosperity and national wellbeing, and bring a commitment to achieve a more balanced, sustainable and clean energy economy. We considered whether and how a contemplative culture might help envision and guide society to manifest such changes.

We began by creating the ‘spiritual container’ for the gathering through shared spiritual practice, offering prayers, chants, and silent meditation for four hours. Each day began with practice – yoga or meditation, and each session began with a prayer or chant and concluded in the same way. These practices brought us back to center or essence, helped with clarity, and increased awareness of the presence of unity or oneness. Swami Veda Bharati, Founder, Association of Himalayan Yoga Societies International, guided meditation and told us of the commonality of breath awareness across traditions and the importance of the Name of God or Source, how the Name is used to become so silent that we reach the interior silence, eventually the silent Divine chamber between the breath and the Name. He asked us to gently return from meditation without breaking the flow of unified consciousness, reminding us that the silence and speech can be the same. This gathering, he said, can become the seed of a change in society and the seed of many such gatherings. We can meet in the chamber of silence even though we may not always be able to meet in the physical. Swami Veda very kindly gave us each a gift of his new book, *What Is Right with the World – Human Urge for Peace*. At this beginning time of the gathering, Dena Merriam invited us to use our contemplative practice to help give vision for the collective wellbeing and to see more clearly the transitions that are taking place.

We were asked to consider deeply what is going on in the world – these session titles were seed thoughts for our dialogue together:

- Principles of a Contemplative Culture and How It Can Aid Transitions Underway
- Visualization and Actualization – Bringing into the culture new language to articulate spiritual unity, “prosperity” and sustainability
- Developing the Values to Shape a New Global Society
- Re-Envisioning Prosperity
- Awakening the Consciousness of Americans to the Sacredness of Our Relationship with the Earth

- Secular and Religious Aspects of a Contemplative Culture
- Diffusing World Tension as a Collective Contemplative Community
- Intergenerational Dialogue on the Role of Contemplative Practice in Transforming Society
- Next Steps for the Contemplative Alliance

There was so much richness in the silence and the speech over the days together – a brief report can only hint at this – perhaps what little is shared here may be deepened by going into the silence and tapping into the report there

In reflection on the meeting, the conversations may be described in three streams: aspects of contemplation and consciousness; key concerns; and contemplative actions.

Contemplation and consciousness

Transitions are underway in society; there are positive signs and much evidence of change. Contemplative practices (for example, meditation, yoga, and prayer) are growing in the population broadly as well as in fields such as conflict resolution, law, education, and medicine. Contemplative practice offers the prospect of a greater vision – to see more clearly what is going on and what is needed, to understand more deeply other people’s ‘social location’ and concerns.

Through contemplation one can enter into a beneficial silence. As Swami Veda told us, “in such a silence, an expression of divine oneness is experienced – not a unification of parts but a part of the unified field.” “Through contemplative practices”, Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee explained, “you create doorways to light, and you can bring this light out for yourself and for others.”

The nature of oneness or unity consciousness was emphasized as a phenomenon that maintains and treasures the rich diversity in human experience. As Sraddhalu Ranade expressed it, we are in a subjective age where we turn inward – yet survival of the fittest is still a key cultural principle. Our inward turn is incomplete – we must keep going to oneness. Peace will come when we recognize identity in consciousness but not in anything else (look at the fact and delight of having five different versions of the English language to choose from). From this place of unity in consciousness we can still express the full diversity of our uniqueness. We seek harmony, not homogeneity.

Much in the world is presented to us as a duality – self/others, self/world, secular/sacred, transcendent/immanent. The reality is not a duality but a continuum – a continuum, for example, of the world soul: self ----- world soul. We do not have a relationship with the world; we are a part of this continuum. When we understand this, as we would not consider cutting off our own hand, we will not consider damaging the environment. At a broader cultural level, as we would not consider bulldozing the Louvre, we will not consider poisoning the atmosphere and the oceans or committing genocide.

Contemplation and action are of one piece, as Sister Joan Chittister explained. “Contemplation is the well; action is the distribution of the water. You know what you need to do: dig the well. You go there, to contemplation, to be irritated. The fullness of the human being is both contemplation and action. What this world is trying to divide, we cannot.” Contemplation is a form of activism.

Key concerns

Running across many topics was the theme of a need for new language. If a sense of unity is unfolding in our culture, new words must be used to describe it, words that will not challenge the human psyche that rebels against uniformity. Sustainability is seen to be about “lack” – new

language is needed to help reframe this so that positive change can occur more broadly. When so many people in developed countries no longer feel “prosperous”, new language is needed to describe the goals of happiness and prosperity.

Concern for the Earth was a deep and difficult thread at the gathering. Chris Peters of the Seventh Generation Fund for Indian Development expressed the concern plainly: we have overreached our natural systems. From the Native American perspective, everything is alive, life goes on and on, with the understanding that we are not prosperous, we live in prosperity. There is reciprocity in life that goes well beyond humanity. Earth has a soul and is Mother – you don’t destroy her or deplete her gifts. The dangers of “eternity theologies”, where reward is in the afterlife, and of “chosen people” religions, where non-baptized people do not merit attention, remain a serious threat to the Earth and indigenous people.

Llewellyn and Anat Vaughan-Lee spoke of the sacred nature of Earth, of remembering the feminine, and of hearing the cry of the world soul. The state of the Earth is a reflection of the state of the inner. The world is dying ecologically, a reflection of the world dying spiritually. “There is a moment,” Llewellyn said, “when the soul cries out to God about the light going out. The cry of the soul of the world has been heard, about the waning of the light. The fact that we are one with the world means that we experience the cry of the soul. When you cry in despair, how often grace appears. Our practice is a part of the world’s practice. It is a spiritual responsibility at a time of global crisis to hear the prayer of the world – ‘don’t desert me.’ Our contemplative practices belong to life and are a cornerstone of the world. We can be present within our own hearts to keep open the gates of grace so that the prayer of the world can be answered.”

Re-envisioning prosperity was a central focus. The need for a new understanding of wealth and wellbeing is clear, and spiritual traditions have much to offer about the balance between the spiritual and the material. The American Dream as currently imagined is out of reach and out of synch with global needs. Yet, its shadow remains and still invigorates some; this was expressed in contemporary young people’s language as: “be famous, get on tv, make a lot of money, and then tell everyone off.” The persistence of contorted versions of early American principles – for example, the over-emphasis on private ownership to the extent that the idea of shared bikes in cities constitutes socialism and is anti-American – makes the prospect of envisioning a new prosperity and a sharing economy daunting. With so many people below the poverty line now, some writers have proposed a “greed line” to acknowledge the imbalance in the economy. At the same time, research shows that money does help make people happy, but not beyond \$75,000 – perhaps the point of “enough”.

Some of the hazardous views of prosperity and the economy as it exists now include “the market is always right”, unlimited growth (if you’re not growing, you are dying), it’s about individuals, it’s about things, the government is the problem, create needs to make money, and continuously make things “new and improved”. Alternative views for a re-envisioned prosperity might include limits on growth, buying in relation to need – “enough, not more,” slowing down, it’s about everyone and the Earth, it’s about beauty, harmony and service, shared responsibility, new measurements, leaving a non-material legacy, and the greatest wealth is God/Spirit in the heart. In the Vedic tradition, the idea of *Mahalakshmi* relates to beauty and harmony, to the finer aspects, rather than to monetary wealth. We could phrase the American Dream in terms of the needs of spirit as well as body and mind. What are the needs of spirit? Beauty, peace, quiet, truth, enlightened mind.

The wellbeing of Afghanistan was also of deep concern. Dr. Sakena Yacoobi spoke of how the people of Afghanistan are a peace loving people who have had war imposed on them for 30 years. Every day they must anticipate that someone they know will be harmed. She spoke, too, of hope, describing a peace-building program held in India that GPIW organized last year for around 20 young Afghans. Accompanied by several priests and members of the Afghan Parliament, the young people worked together with GPIW delegates over several days. Their hearts opened to the work for peace and they experienced hope for their country. Inviting others to join them on their return, now 130 individuals gather regularly in Kabul and Herat to discuss how to get leaders to work for peace and how to get problems solved. Afghan women are also becoming empowered, through education, trying to bring peace.

Sakena pointed out that around the world, everyone has Afghanistan on their mind, but they forget it. She expressed deep foreboding about what will happen if foreign troops leave her country too early, saying that women and children in particular will suffer. She also noted that Afghanistan needs to be rebuilt through peace, not war, through education, health and infrastructure. Many Afghan people are angry because they have no money, housing, roads, or water – many are living in tents. They expect America to help rebuild the country, especially infrastructure. Sakena asked the group to go to our governments, our senators and share these concerns for Afghanistan. She also invited us to share what we know how to teach with the people of Afghanistan; and to use our contemplative practices to help bring about peace there.

Over the days together, a number of words kept resurfacing, concepts that appear to need attention, to be transformed and re-balanced. The words: fear, negativity, masculine/feminine, secular, force, sustainability, wealth and prosperity reappeared like waves coming to shore. Other words occasionally invited reconsideration – equality, freedom, happiness. We even wondered how to describe participants of different ages – to include younger people as equal partners with older participants, while being able to describe differences, if it is occasionally helpful – differences like the striking and wonderful energy and enthusiasm of the younger participants present.

Contemplative actions

Along the continuum of contemplation and action, many ideas surfaced to address the concerns. The spiritual traditions have much to offer. In addition to the understanding of consciousness and a spiritual perspective on what is happening in the world today, the traditions have wisdom teachings that answer many of the pressing questions; they have techniques to manage the mind and emotions; they have practices for going within, such as yoga and meditation, which speak to many people today. Some have a prophetic voice, available to speak truth to power, as Sister Joan expressed it. They have the skills to correct misunderstandings that are at the root of some contemporary problems, whether the concern about Islamic terrorism (arising perhaps in part from misunderstanding of sections of the Koran) or the concern about gender inequality (arising perhaps from a mistranslation or misunderstanding of the creation story [let us make them from “human stuff” – “ha-Adam” – before Adam – let us make them, male and female together]).

Education and outreach can be significant contemplative actions. Educate parents about the natural ability of children to meditate and go within; encourage parents to meditate with their children. Give young people an experience of contemplation; help them have a break from technology use in order to gain insight. Have conversations with young people about life purpose; through these, young people can pause and reconsider identity, and be helped to touch something authentic in themselves – from this, their view of the American Dream can shift. Education can help to change

awareness – to recognise that we are spiritual beings having a human experience, rather than the reverse. We can help children to know what their gift is, and assist in its unfoldment. Teach young people to manage their mind and emotions; work on “being” in addition to “doing”. Help people to connect to self and the divine through service. Research history and teach about the cultures that have throughout time managed to live without war and with contemplative influences.

Many, many suggestions for contemplative action arose over the days. We spoke of looking to language for help in the transformation of society. Elevate the value of terms like love, beauty, service, unity with diversity, sacred, compassion, inclusion. Consider phrases like skilful means and circles of dialogue.

We can model, embody and reflect back those aspects of spiritual wisdom we seek to convey. “Remember that you may be the only Bible, Koran or Bhagavad Gita that someone ever reads.” We can speak, listen and act from heart to heart. We can encourage people to look at the places of fear; look at it closely, go into it, bring it with you – you don’t have to overcome it. We can avoid sectarianism and divisiveness; cease to “genderize”; and practice radical inclusiveness. We can nurture beauty; speak of hope, love and compassion. We can honor the body, practice harmlessness, and consider a vegetarian diet. We can remember the importance of appreciation and gratitude, and practice a heart of appreciation. We have many opportunities to invite people to silence and we can take them. We can direct people to the power of now.

We can celebrate change, be positive and make what is positive better known, through our own communication and through the media. The Contemplative Alliance could become more active in the media, particularly online via a website. We can build a contemplative movement, and create a new subculture that will ultimately seed change for the broader culture.

When thinking of fostering change, we can learn from research to focus on adding positive behaviors rather than to focus on stopping undesirable behaviors. We can learn from the success of fundamental religious groups, and we can listen carefully to those we dislike. We can encourage the replacement of aggressive force with the force of creativity, and teach that when a stopping force is needed, it must be applied without fear and without anger.

We can act on behalf of the Earth, encouraging changes in language and action, remembering the feminine, listening for the cry of the world soul. We can act in ways that recognize the sacredness of the Earth, demonstrating these to others in daily life. As seeds of action for the Earth, we can spend time outdoors, contemplating there, taking young people there; we can include the beauty of nature in all our activities, through flowers, stones, water, fire; we can watch our language to decommodify how we speak of the Earth; we can ask of everything we do: how will nature fare in this action, this decision; as we begin our activities, we can acknowledge the land and its traditional caretakers; and we can use the language of family, community and kin when we speak of the Earth, seeing nature as home and our homes as more than only our houses. We can pray for all the waters of the Earth.

To encourage the sacred in all dimensions of life, we can find out what is sacred even for those who identify as secular and help in its positive expression. We can help to find new words for the expression of the sacred, for the generation of a new prosperity, for a new understanding of sustainability.

We should kindle “any spark that can interrupt the momentum of sleepwalking” – we are like midwives for this process. Encourage simple acts of service, like helping the dying. We can be in the “we” space – knowing that what happens in Afghanistan happens in our country as well. Do

what we can and let it go – the circles ripple out. We can help evoke a feeling quality and bring forth an atmosphere, a sacred space.

At the “well” end of the contemplative continuum, we must continue to do the background work through our contemplative practices, remembering that we can assist by our own development. We can pray for a new vision, to deepen our understanding, our practice. We can listen carefully, and see if we can continue the silence into the speech. We can “be present in our own hearts to keep open the gates of grace”

The Contemplative Alliance

The Contemplative Alliance is an emerging spiritual voice. We are united by a shared commitment to contemplative practices. As one speaker observed, “the Contemplative Alliance is a nucleus of light; it already serves. Just be together from a place of the heart.” Others noted: “There is a collective field among us being born – treat it gently.” “The group is very early in its formation, and patience is needed as we move toward a shared identity.” “Something is presenting itself.”

The Global Peace Initiative of Women will continue to host and collaborate with the Contemplative Alliance as it unfolds, and will integrate it with GPIW’s international work.

Questions were raised about how to make the Contemplative Alliance more concrete in our minds and more collaborative within American society; how to bring about a deepening in the conversations in America about re-thinking prosperity; and the possibility of reaching out to evangelical and mainstream religious communities. Suggestions were offered about meeting virtually (via Skype) perhaps monthly, and perhaps holding regional gatherings.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of the Contemplative Alliance, said one speaker, is sharing each person’s essence in a spiritual consciousness, holding this space; coming from this attunement we all go back changed. Some will be moved to action – but a very diverse action. There is a deeper cohesiveness; we can make this the base from which many different kinds of action emerge. Allow each one to flow.

In conclusion, Dena Merriam summed up succinctly:

“We take this as a sacred task, and it’s evolving.”