

Why Our Spiritual Traditions Have Failed to Respond to the Global Crises – And How We Can Change That Now

I. This World is Also Sacred: Evolving a New Spiritual Paradigm That Can Save Us

Given that the loss of the sense of the sacred in our lives – our relationship with the Earth as well as our values, our world-view, our systems – is clearly destroying the Earth and driving us to extinction -- one would think that religions and spiritual paths would be the first to respond, to restore the sacred in our lives, to be on the front-lines in regenerating our planet and society. Yet both the traditional religions and New Age, post-modern spiritual approaches have failed to respond effectively to the global crises. Instead of challenging and transforming patriarchy, materialism and capitalism, the sources of the crises, they have often become complicit with them, both directly entwined with them and complacent about changing them. How can we bring spirituality, then, into a direct and powerful response to the existential crises we face, rather than simply serving the forces of escapism, fatalism, elitism and complacency?

In light of the ways our present forms of spirituality have fallen short of, even impeded, the robust response to the crises so much needed today, how we can create a new spiritual activist paradigm that can truly rise instead to the challenges of these times -- the clarion call from nature herself and our own evolutionary imperative for radical transformation, both of our consciousness and our systems -- in a fresh and effective way?

Today the climate emergency, and impending social and ecological collapses it augurs, can no longer be ignored. Even the schoolchildren are rising up for their survival; it is a sacrilege to pretend not to hear their cries. If our spiritual orientations have been too weak or obsolete to defend them and our Earth, it is clear we need new visions. So what would a new sacred vision look like that supports and guides with its wisdom heartfelt, impassioned and clear-sighted action, reversing and healing the effects we have caused by the de-sacralization of our world?

First of all, we need to know that going beyond our ego is not about disappearing into a void, a detached transcendence from the world, but going beyond the illusion of separation *between* ourselves and the world; and further, that that illusion itself is built upon a still deeper illusion that either are ever separate from their own eternal Source. What does this mean? That both we and the world (we and “the Earth”, we and the “other”, human or non-human) are held in an infinite space of light, peace and joy that, as we evolve, flows powerfully through both, healing the illusory rift between them. This evolutionary unfolding from the depths of our own true being lifts the veil not only between ourselves and the “other” but also between the present moment and

the eternal Presence in which it is appearing, the here and now of our crisis-torn world and the infinite light of healing and guidance that bathes it, washes through it.

A true non-dual realization does not pit our own liberation against compassionate action or caring for our world. It suffuses us with the love and wisdom to heal our ravaged planet, and also breaks open the time-space matrix and delivers us to our true nature, which is boundless, endless and whole. Taken in this way, our crises themselves are transmuted into an extraordinary stroke of grace, a source of salvation on both counts, worldly and eternal, of this world and beyond it. The seeming curse of destruction that has fallen upon us becomes a portal of blessing, redemption, an opening into the deathless.

I said “first of all”, but really, if we begin to see this, we have the key to all: both healing our crises, planetary transformation, and a true spiritual awakening -- the key that can crack open the illusory divisions that separate us from each other, our precious Earth, and, in the same stroke, our own infinite Source; the stroke of grace that can break open the grid of illusion, the prison bars of time and space, that keep us separated from our own limitless true nature, both in its formless Essence and all its myriad forms. In this most portentous of crises, we are being handed the master-key to the mystery of who we really are. There is a mercy in this crisis, unfathomable to our minds, but which if we meet it empty-handed, showers us with its light.

I believe the challenges we face today, tremendous as they are, are calling us to no less than this total awakening – an awakening that can empower the healing we need both personally and collectively, at both inner and outer levels. We are called, as never before, to an awakening that spans all the dimensions, and thus heals all the divisions, of our being; that heals all divisions within us and all the divisions between us. We have never needed to heal these divisions – between ourselves and the other, the personal and the collective, the inner and outer – as powerfully as we need to today: our backs are up against the wall, it is truly now or never.

Some say it is too late, but I believe it is our own choices that can make us or break us. It is our own intention to heal, both ourselves and our planet, an unstoppable commitment to do whatever it takes; and paradoxically, deep surrender, to the unseen powers of guidance that can help us through this dark and unknown terrain, infusing every step we take with the light of that higher intelligence that has created the entire cosmos.

There is a mystery moving through us, and we need to meet that mystery with both dedicated, fierce willingness and the sweet grace of surrender. In these extraordinary times, we are called to meet our situation with clarity, awe and integrity, all in equal measure. We are called beyond the opposites; to alchemize grief and fear into gratitude, courage and strength; realism and disillusion into inspired vision; humility

and unknowing into the power of a collective transformation at a heroic, out-sized scale, a magnitude off all known charts. Something else is charting our way, calling forth a new world from within us, but we have to give ourselves to it, letting go of our hubris, letting go into its hands. And in this total surrender to the forces that made us out of nothing, we become naked channels for the next evolutionary unfolding; mysticism meets action.

When we can see through our chattering, self-identified thoughts, the prison of our own story and mind, and drop deep into our heart, we come to know ourselves as nothing, and everything at the same time; we come to know who we are really are; the infinite, deathless space that contains the whole of creation. This is the key, and power, to healing our own suffering and the rifts between us, the rifts between us and our Earth, the key to our transformation and ultimate liberation. Our liberation is not from life on this Earth, but from the illusion of separation between us and all of existence, in this world and beyond it. When the veil of mind is lifted, even the seeming separation between life and death dissolves. This is the true birth that beckons us, to Heaven here on this Earth and at the same time eternal.

All of this is implicit in the wisdom traditions, but now more than ever before we need to make space for it to come forth, space within ourselves and outer spaces of dialogue, sharing and exploration between us. We have to dust off what no longer serves and clear space for the new to emerge, where the guidance and wisdom most needed today, in response to our unique crises, can become clear and explicit.

For those of us especially who practice Eastern spiritual traditions, we need a more profound and relevant understanding of their true import than we have needed before, a truly non-dual understanding that overcomes the seeming division between spirit and matter, the transcendent and immanent, our infinite true nature and its manifest forms. We are called now to go beyond the illusion of separation itself, from our own formless Essence and also all its forms, here on Earth, in the present. Spirit is not somewhere else, someplace we need to transcend to: it is here and now, pervading all its own forms, our own forms and all nature. I believe these forms are collapsing now – the forces and forms that sustain us, the rhythms and cycles of nature – because we have not recognized, or failed to honor, the sacredness that pervades them.

This is true, of course, of the Western traditions too – the split between the sacred and the secular has been at the root of our denigration of the Earth, and the gross materialism of our cultures, that has led to our current crises. Creation is the outer face of the Divine, and, as indigenous people have always known, must be treated as sacred, not (from the religious side) some mistake or delusion or vale of woe to be escaped, or (from the secular side) merely a source of resources to be rapaciously extracted, exploited, and wasted.

Yes, it is all a dream, but we need to embrace this dream in love in order to awaken it. We need to embrace in total surrender and love this precious gift of life on Earth, this mystery, not seek to escape it or torture its secrets from it. In this deepest surrender, an inversion, and conversion, takes place; the mystery envelops us and takes us into itself; we enter into communion with its secret power, we merge in the sacred fountain of creation. This is the key that can turn the nightmare we have landed in into a dream bathed in bliss and, deeper still, revelation; the boundless light that streams from our heart, and the heart of all being, the deepest source of our own inner illumination.

Our way forward will be lit from within, and the wisdom we find there, and not the outdated ideas of our mind that have gotten us into our predicament in the first place. In the famous quote from Einstein that has become the slogan of our times, we cannot solve our problems from the same state of consciousness that caused them to begin with. We need to move from a consciousness of separation, which has gotten us into our crises, to a consciousness of our true unity, which can heal and transform them. The ultimatum to awake to the ultimate truth of our being is unequivocally clear.

This is true non-duality, the way we must go to overcome our sense of division between ourselves and others, between ourselves and the Earth, between ourselves and the greater infinite Source of our being that creates and holds all of these, that is their very own nature. Our failure to do so has been at the root of our ecological crises, acute social injustice, economic inequity, loss of hope and meaning, physical and mental health epidemics, cultural degradation. If we are to reverse these, we must return to a Oneness with all that is, and reverse and transform the systems – social, economic, governance, ecological as well as religious -- that have been built upon that core error, the sense of separation. The time has come to break open the bubble of this massive delusion that, if left uncorrected, will lead us to mass self-destruction.

When we realize our Oneness with all that is, when the boundaries of our separateness become transparent, we are automatically initiated into the boundless, the deathlessness of our true nature. We are both the infinite and the moment, the infinite space that gives rise to all forms and the forms it gives rise to, the ocean and its waves. Each moment is an entryway into the infinite; non-duality means to realize ourselves as both, and not to set up a false division between them. This is the only way to go – into our true Wholeness – if we are to go forward. Paradoxically, our future depends upon our connection with the timeless, which alone can infuse us with the ageless wisdom we need to survive and thrive.

This vision is at the basis of sacred activism and, as I see it, is closely connected with the spirit of the Divine Feminine that is also asserting itself more and more powerfully in these critical times. First let me say that the rise of the Divine Feminine does not just involve the empowerment of women; it also vitally includes men. It is about a vital change in the collective consciousness to a more integrative, inclusive, inter-

connective approach -- not about polarization, either of gender, culture, race, nationality or any of the other bases that have been dividing us.

The Divine Feminine, in its highest expression, embraces and reconciles all the oppositions that divide us, the schisms of mind and body, the borders that set us apart. As the Mother of all, She is our very Source: all existence is Her creation, borne of Her infinite fertile space, in visible forms and invisible, life here on Earth and beyond. Though She is formless and ageless, She encompasses all space and time. She is not only the Earth as opposed to the sky, the immanent as opposed to the transcendent, nature as opposed to spirit, but that which interconnects both: the union between life on Earth as we see it and the unseen, unborn, unchanging dimension that gives it birth, sustains it and re-absorbs it into Herself. It is She that delivers us, into this life, and beyond it. She is the Mother who never ejects us from her infinite body.

Embracing this all-inclusive spirit of the feminine re-unites us not only with our own Source, but with our Earth and each other. As macro-cosmos, so micro-cosmos; as the feminine spirit rises, so do women and girls. Along with men inspired by this same spirit, they are rising up and uniting today, leading the way to the healing of our global society, a true evolutionary re-birth. It is not surprising that so many women, especially women of color, won seats in the last U.S. Congress election, and that they are offering new progressive platforms, addressing climate change, environmental destruction, racism and social injustice – for one, the bold New Green Deal promoted by Alexandria Ocasio Cortez. Or that young girls like Greta Thunberg and other youth around the world are standing up with consummate courage and integrity, confronting the powers-that-be with the truth of our crises and demanding radical change.

This, the highest spirit of the Divine Feminine, demands that we care just as much about our precious Earth and each other as we do about the Infinite, because we are all expressions of That – Her Creation, and Her own Self. This is the highest avatar, especially called for in these times, of the spirit of interconnectedness, which heals and transcends all division. Whether it is explicitly recognized as such or not, this spirit of all-inclusiveness and caring is powering a wave of rapidly rising action, non-violent but uncompromising in its demands, despite and in response to the backlash from the bastions of power. We are seeing an upwelling of passion, compassion and truth-telling such as we have not seen for years, a new culture of fierce love.

The Divine Feminine is a portal to the all-inclusiveness of our true being, the fullest expression of our true non-duality. Through that door we come home, to who we always are and have been -- the infinite Consciousness that is the ground of all being, the Whole. It is only through this deep recognition that we are already, irrevocably Whole, that we can heal the brokenness of these tumultuous end-times, and transform them into a new, unimagined beginning, stepping across the threshold of our assumed identities into our own true divinity, from our long dream of exile to our eternal home.

II. Moving Into Wholeness, Moving Forward

At this critical juncture in our evolution, we are called to a new spiritual paradigm: non-dual in its basis, sacred activist in its expression, feminine in its all-embracing, interconnective spirit. A truly non-dual spiritual vision (everything is a sacred expression of the one Divine Essence) flows naturally into action (if everything is a That, we need to treat it that way) with clarity and wide vision (reversing the systems that have desecrated our world, creating together new ones that reflect our true interconnection and Oneness, with each other, our precious Mother Earth and that sacred Essence itself.)

The realization of the non-division between formlessness and form is a powerful force for healing, and the hallmark of a mature spirituality, inwardly and outwardly, individually and collectively, in our personal lives and our culture. When we understand and embrace it, the formless, infinite Source of our Being can then in-form our thoughts and our actions, even in the most direct, practical and specific details.

Many spiritual practitioners shun the social and political realms (even take pride in doing so) but we can no longer afford this. We need a clear-sighted awareness of the social, political, ecological and economic forces at play in the global crises, and an intelligent, active approach to transforming them. We cannot simply pretend to transcend them, ignore them or wish them away; they will come back to haunt us if we do not bring all our faculties into a full-bodied, full-hearted, conscious and inspired response, before the short window of time we have is irrevocably closed to us. The crises are happening, no doubt, to wake us from our false sense of separation, from our Earth and each other – it is up to us, and our conscience, to respond to the call.

It is clear then that an alchemical fusion between consciousness and action needs to take place if we are to overcome the immense challenges of our times. Why has this not been happening until now, especially in our spiritual scenes; what are the signs this is starting to change; and what can we do to accelerate the momentum?

I mentioned earlier that neither the traditional religions nor the New Age or post-modern spiritual paths have effectively challenged our systems, nor offered new coherent visions for their whole-scale transformation of the magnitude, scope and power needed now. Why is this so? The traditional religions, of course, are slow to respond, since their role is inherently conservative: to conserve and uphold the structures of society, and thus to support, in general, the social and political status quo. The New Age spiritual movements and post-modern paths, while offering new visions – non-dual, holistic, integral, evolutionary – have also, in general, failed to mount a clear-sighted challenge to the materialist system that is causing both environmental destruction and egregious social injustice; on the contrary, a comfortable marriage has

developed, during the neo-liberal decades, between spirituality and the consumerist, elitist capitalist system.

This is true both of the New Age movements, that cater mainly to well-off, white elites, looking for stress relief and personal spiritual freedom, and the integral, evolutionary scenes, that have tended more and more to move towards business and technology, superhuman and transhuman memes, and looked down their nose at anything “green”: grassroots community, the feminine, social-political movements for justice, systemic change and deep, ecological renewal. Yet these latter movements are more pertinent than ever today, for healing our ecological crises and extreme social rifts. If we are not to devolve into a dystopian, inhuman world (robotic or barbaric), we have to renew and evolve our humanity and true community.

In our current society, what we do for our livelihood, how we earn and spend our money, is often dissociated from the moral, ethical and spiritual tenets we might otherwise espouse. “Success” or “doing well” in the West has little to do with “doing good”; our worth is measured by our financial and material wealth, no matter how unjust or destructive the means by which that wealth was accumulated or gained. This is true, in general, in the mainstream culture, but also insidiously affects alternative currents too; no matter how pure their original intentions, market forces and business interests inevitably take over, vitiating the true potential for change.

In the New Age, post-modern, neo-liberal era, spiritual paths have made themselves comfortable bedfellows with capitalism, yet if they are going to act as a genuine force for genuine transformation, this has got to change. Business interests – making a profit with “spiritual products and services”, therapies, technologies and high-cost retreats for elites – all too often have co-opted the original, altruistic ideals of personal and planetary transformation, of spirituality as a force for change that serves the well-being of all. In fact, these are the directions -- business, tech and self-profit, divorced from real care for the Earth and equality with each other – which have gotten us into our troubles in the first place; let’s not allow our spiritual responses, which need to be incisive, inspired and robust, instead be hijacked by the same forces they need powerfully to challenge and change! The truth is “business-as-usual” is no longer an option, least of all in the spiritual world, if it is to be true to its name. (Unfortunately, even the women’s movement, holistic centers and eco-communities have often been affected by the same trends – business-mindedness takes over, and solidarity becomes privatized, hijacking deeper, more collective ideals.)

Fortunately, today, this long stagnation seems to be breaking, with some very encouraging signs. More and more spiritual and religious groups – Christians, Buddhists, yoga, mindfulness and others – are responding to the crises of climate change and social injustice, and even coming together in collective action. Yet the missing link still often remains the same: the failure to clearly acknowledge the

importance of systemic global economic transformation – not just piecemeal ecological actions, at local or community levels; or reforming business practices; or charity or social service -- but an actual, radical whole-scale, systemic transformation to a new cooperative, just and regenerative system, based on the deepest spiritual truths of our interconnection and unity. All the compassion, prayer and good intentions in the world cannot by themselves make this happen: it takes dedicated, well-informed, clear-sighted and courageous action.

A vanguard of religious groups – notably the Catholics, with the Pope’s hard-hitting “Laudate Sei”; the Buddhists, with Ecodharma, One Earth Sangha, Extinction Rebellion Buddhists, and others; and the Parliament of the World’s Religions itself, with its Climate Emergency Action – are addressing more directly the need for a deep-seated transformation of our global economic system. In these, and with others in a new spate of spiritual and religious initiatives, we see some very positive signs, and there is, no doubt, much more momentum to come. (Please forgive me for any of the wonderful new initiatives I have neglected to mention – I know there are many!) The fact that Marianne Williamson, for instance, is planning to run for president on a spiritual platform for whole-systems transformation attests to the near-miraculous speed with which things are changing now – it would have been unthinkable in the last election!

I’d also like to propose two other practical ways that we can help accelerate this vision, i.e., bringing spirituality into response to the global crises, as part of a greater multi-dimensional, whole-scale transformation. Right now, in our fragmented, polarized world, collaboration and community are crucial. We need to work together, with all our myriad and diverse gifts, as yet-unrealized potentials. These potentials become activated in the context of the Whole, through service to and support by the Whole, because we are all one family of life, a single interwoven web, with each other and nature. My two proposals are expressly designed to foster this sense of collaborative unity; first, the Spheres of Co-Creation¹, an online collaborative model; and second, the Shakti Centre Global², a sacred activist ashram, a community on the ground. Both are designed to bring about the union of inner and outer transformation, and bring us together to serve them, in inner and outer communion and co-creation.

Designed to help foster the global transition to a sustainable, cooperative and just society, the “Spheres of Co-Creation” is both 1) an ontological, dynamic model of the

1 To see a first prototype of the model (still in progress!), see <http://transformthesystem.net/spheres>. For more about the background and wider context for this project, follow the links to “A Holarchic Model for a Global Citizens Movement” and the “Manifesto for a Movement of Movements” <http://transformthesystem.net/manifesto> .

2 For more about the Shakti Centre Global, see <http://shakticentre.blogspot.com>

different dimensions of our being, from the innermost levels of consciousness to complex outer systems; and 2) an interactive, online database facilitating the collaboration of organizations working at those levels. The Shakti Centre, a sacred activist ashram bringing together spirituality, social transformation and feminine wisdom, would be a node that grounds the “Spheres of Co-Creation” as well as a new-paradigm centre for practices and perspectives that integrate inner and outer global transformation, in its daily program and also retreats and workshops for the public.

The Spheres of Co-Creation model depicts seven levels (nested, concentric spheres) of our being, from the innermost sphere of eternal Consciousness to the outermost of Cosmic evolution: Consciousness, Energy, Psyche/Worldview, Ecology, Economy, Socio-Political Governance, and Planetary/Cosmic. The model, while representing the spectrum of dimensions of our being, also functions as a practical, dynamic database: organizations working at all these levels can enter themselves online on the database, find each other and work together in collaboration for planetary transformation.

The Shakti Centre, on the ground, would work at the same levels, combining practices for consciousness-change, like meditation, with holistic, energetic and psychological healing, as well as interpersonal communication and collaboration addressing the ecological, economic and social-political dimensions, from individual and local levels to global/planetary. The sequence of daily activities would follow this spectrum from inner to outer and back again, starting and ending each day with non-dual meditation, and in between, holistic healing; sharing and dialogue circles; ecological, community projects; and outreach for global systems-change during the course of the day.

In both cases, online and on the ground, the idea is to help those working on the inner and outer planes, consciousness-change and systems-change, find and appreciate each other’s work, enlarge their horizons, and, even as they then focus on their own sphere, work together in synergy as a unified movement. This greatly enhances both each particular focus and the entire movement, igniting the potential for a true evolutionary leap. The Spheres of Co-Creation project and Shakti Centre themselves would join together with others working towards a meta-movement, a growing “movement of movements,” bringing together diverse issues and factions into united action, accelerating the critical mass for a great planetary transition so clearly emerging today.

The Spheres of Co-Creation and Shakti Centre Global are just two ways we can bring spirituality into action, and I’d love for others to join us, both in these ways and to explore others too. Many of us are struggling to re-frame and evolve our spiritual traditions so that they respond to these critical times. Let us come together and explore this, and harness the power of Spirit, our own deepest true nature, in the healing and transformation of ourselves and our planet, resurrecting the sacred in our world.

At this critical juncture in our evolution, as I said before, we are called to a new spiritual paradigm: non-dual in its basis, sacred activist in its expression, feminine in its all-embracing, interconnective spirit. If sacred action seems in conflict with the spiritual tenets you hold, you might want to look closer. What you see there may revolutionize your world. And the more of us who can do this, the more we can redeem the blessings out of this crisis, rising out of the ashes of our burnt delusions, healing our Earth and revealing ourselves as an infinite, eternal Whole.

I'd like to repeat here, in refrain, what I said at the beginning, because it bears repeating -- because, like any paradox, it needs to beat at our heart, not just once, but again and again, until its doors break open. So I will say it again: A true non-dual realization does not pit our own liberation against compassionate action or caring for our world. It suffuses us with the love and wisdom to heal our ravaged planet, and also breaks open the time-space matrix and delivers us to our true nature, which is boundless, endless and whole. Taken in this way, our crises themselves are transmuted into an extraordinary stroke of grace, a source of salvation on both counts, worldly and eternal, of this world, and beyond it. The seeming curse of destruction upon us becomes a portal of blessing, redemption, an opening into the deathless.

We are called to something, ultimately, beyond this world we see, but first we have to answer the call to cherish this world, in all its sorrows and beauty, before those doors can open up and we step through, free. The climate crisis is an ultimatum -- for us to act, in love with all we hold sacred, before it is too late; it may also be our ultimate rite of passage, if we can rise to its call.

Many of those who understand the full danger of the crises are scrambling now, looking for ways to protect themselves, to save themselves and their own. Maybe, for a short time, this can work. But, ultimately, I believe, the only ark that can save us from the storms of these times is the infinite ocean of love itself that is our own true being, breaking through and flooding us with its light. In these strange, tumultuous times -- end-times but also pristine beginnings -- it is the ocean of love within us, vast beyond limit, that is the only ark that can save us, carrying us to our true home.

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