

Aligning Awareness and Action For the Future We Want

Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University and the
Call-of-the-Time Dialogue Network

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In August of 2010 the office of the Secretary General of the UN released Harmony With Nature (doc A/65/314), a report following the narrative of the global environmental discourse that has unfolded over the past forty years. It reaches back through ancient history to illuminate the intimate and sacred relationships between humanity and nature in early civilizations and ancient sacred texts. The report reminds us of fundamental concepts, such as holism and stewardship of the global commons. It also offers distinctions between the limited notion of nature conservation and the more expansive one of sustainable development, touching on the three pillars of sustainable development: social, economic and environmental. The Secretary General recognizes key contributors and calls for better information, education, and communication in this domain that is so crucial for our collective future. He invites further research on metrics to assess true progress, updating of our knowledge about systems thinking and the integration of the three pillars.

We offer our paper to progress the concepts and recommendations relative to sustainable development. We propose a reset of the terms of the environmental debate, and present an archetypal model that offers an opportunity for all of us to transform how we think and relate to our selves, one another, and the larger living world. This would in turn transform the way in which we live, offer methods to achieve this change required, and ultimately move us towards the future we want.

The subject of sustainable development has catalyzed reflection and debate in every sector of the world. It has drawn the collective attention of the human family to consider how we could have missed something as profound as global climate change and how we can address what appears to be a breakdown involving every system of our interconnected world. Scientists, economists, educators, politicians, civil sector leaders, and business people have taken strong positions. Many cite the fragmenting effects of Cartesian thinking and call for holistic solutions. But it seems that finding our way back to a unified vision of the world is not as easy as we had hoped. Fragmented thinking has become embedded in our minds and continues to affect our vision of the world. Today's environmental debate turns on negotiations among the social, economic, and environmental "pillars" rather than considering a genuinely holistic perspective that embraces them all.

We suggest looking beyond the metaphor of the three pillars to a framework that mirrors nature's organic and dynamic character. The static notion of pillars reinforces the separateness of what are inextricably related phenomena – the health, well-being and resilience of humanity (social); the well-being of nature (environmental), and abundance and prosperity (economic). To reset the framework of this global dialogue, we need a fresh metaphor that helps us to fully grasp the universal principles and unifying dynamics that are at the heart of the living system of the earth and humankind.

We believe a spiritual framework best serves this conversation. We define spirituality as living life based on inner guiding principles, the foundation of which is a deep understanding of the self, the Divine and the law of cause and effect (karma). We suggest that a spiritually aligned life naturally embraces the well-being of one's self, one's family, one's community and the world. As Emerson noted, "every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact...the world is emblematic. The laws of mother nature answer to those of matter as face to face in a glass". Universal principles and natural laws such as cooperation, living cycles, cause and effect and nonlinearity apply to the spiritual, energetic world and to the outer natural world, because they are really one world, appearing to be two.

A Spiritual Interpretation of the Environmental Crisis

To understand the environmental crisis in spiritual terms, it is helpful to consider two factors: the quality of thought energy or awareness sustained by the various actors in the world, and how it affects subsequent actions undertaken in relation to society, economy, and nature. The quality of awareness is variable and, for the sake of clarity, can be given three distinct designations: Pure (and holistic), mixed (and changeable), and impure (and fragmented).

When one maintains a pure and holistic level of awareness s/he will move through the world considering the self and the natural world as part of one deeply connected system. S/he will hold an attitude of trusteeship and be moved by nature's self-renewing cycles, living easily in a way that supports these. S/he will move through the world with a feeling of benevolence, care and gratitude.

Someone with a mixed or fluctuating level of awareness will be easily influenced by others and find it difficult to maintain a stable inner state and clarity. In one minute s/he will see with a unified vision, sensing a loving connection with all things, and in the next s/he will be influenced by attachment and desire, using the natural world for personal gain.

When someone has an impure awareness and attitude, s/he will be isolated from feeling unity with the natural world, and be absorbed by her/his own wants and desires, and influenced by feelings of righteousness, want, and frustration around her/him. Upon entering a forest, for example, s/he would see the trees as an instant commodity to be cut, used and sold for personal gain. S/he would not see the great long-term social, environmental and economic value of a tree left in its rightful place.

These different levels of awareness are aligned with the quality of thought. Certain kinds of thoughts produce these levels of awareness, and these levels of awareness in turn produce a certain quality of thinking. The highest level of awareness is aligned with the notion of purity. A "pure" thought flows from the highest principles, from a unified awareness, from universal virtues such as love and peace. It is unadulterated by greed, anger, or blame. It is unsullied and imbued with deep dignity and virtue.

Seen through a spiritual lens, the current environmental crisis is the result of a loss of pure and unified awareness. It is the inevitable result of a widespread degradation in thought, a dilution of the original integrity of human awareness, and so the natural world. This is why metaphors of separate pillars and solutions that negotiate among these ostensibly separate domains fail us. They don't address the prime mover of these phenomena; the life-force of awareness that moves subtly, in energetic currents through the world.

Two Energies At Work

As purity has reduced over time, we have witnessed crises and systemic collapse. The environmental movement is a response to the dawning awareness that the condition of the world is degrading at a startling rate. The evidence is everywhere. Physically rainforests are disappearing and ice-caps shrinking, disasters are increasing and weather patterns changing. Economically there is an escalating divide between the rich and poor, and socially the numbers of people experiencing poverty, displacement, hunger and disease is increasing. The myriad conferences, policy sessions and treaty negotiations are emergency attempts to moderate behaviors that are compounding the environmental crisis. But they are so far unsuccessful at addressing the interrelatedness between underlying awareness, inner thoughts and feelings, and outer behaviour. As a result, many people are not cognizant about the imperative need to address the alignment between these three, to facilitate real change.

However, the very existence of environmental summits, peace movements and spiritual conferences tells us that there cannot be only degradation and decline in the world. Though there is a highly visible downward trend, there is also a counter-trend. At this time there are two energies at work in the world; a descending energy and an ascending energy. Contemporaneously, there is the energy of degradation and decline, as well as the energy of restoration and renewal.

We have an opportunity now to become fully cognizant of these two energies. Each of us has a choice to make in every domain of our lives, as to whether I affiliate with the pure energy of ascent or with the impure energy of descent. Do I want to be a part of what is ascending or of what is declining? Once we see the phenomena in the world through a spiritual lens, then we can feel the certainty of ascent. This determined thought invokes our original pure energy. As this pure thought dawns within us, it affects our relationships with ourselves, with others, and with nature. Pure thought creates energy that uplifts, elevates and ascends.

Methods to Support the Transformation of Thought

Systems thinker and MIT lecturer, Peter Senge, has said, "Most people's mindset is on the policy, but policies that don't get implemented aren't worth very much. What is the strategy? This is a profound call for collaboration (among all) people of the world

It presents an opportunity for human beings to act together in alignment with a global imperative to transform how we live. This will only be possible by transforming how we think and relate to ourselves, one another, and the larger living world.”

Policies and procedures need to be negotiated, decided upon and adhered to. Education, awareness raising campaigns and training at all levels of society is important. However, the methods we need to rise to this opportunity are those that help us to transform and synchronize how we think. The most important methods for inner transformation are meditation, contemplation, and prayer. What will change the self, and in turn the environment is for each of us to take time to sit in silence, and focus our thought energy in benevolent and constructive ways through meditation, focused contemplation, and prayer. These silent methods will support the ascending energy that is already at work.

Dadi Janki, administrative head of the Brahma Kumaris has said, “One approach is to keep things in order with force, but another is to keep things in order with love. If someone tries to force things to work a certain way, it is not pleasant, but when nature stays in order because of love, it is very powerful.” The thoughts and understandings that come to us in the silence of spiritual contemplation connect us with the original, pure, and ascending energies we spoke of earlier. They align us with the natural renewing force that is subtly at work at this time. They support a real method of qualitative change.

Metrics to Gauge Progress

One interesting metric that attempts to reconcile qualitative notions of well being with quantitative indices of environmental impact is the **Happy Planet Index (HPI)**. The HPI is an index that challenges well-established and possibly outdated indices of countries’ development, such as Gross Domestic Product and the Human Development Index. GDP is particularly seen as inappropriate now, as the aim of most people is not to be rich, but to be happy and healthy. HPI takes into account the environmental costs of pursuing those goals.

Another set of metrics to consider is the **Global Peace Index (GPI)**. GPI is an attempt to measure the relative position of nations’ and regions’ peacefulness. Launched in May 2007, its most recent index was announced on 25 May 2011. GPI is claimed to be the first study to rank 153 countries around the world according to their peacefulness, considering factors like external wars and internal violence. Kofi Annan, the Dalai Lama, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari among other religious and world leaders, have endorsed this Index.

A third is Bhutan’s often discussed **Gross National Happiness Index (GNH)**. In 1972 Bhutan’s then King, Jigme Singye used the phrase ‘Gross National Happiness’ to signal his commitment to serve Bhutan by building an economy based on Buddhist spiritual

values. The Centre for Bhutan Studies subsequently developed a sophisticated survey instrument to measure the population's general level of well-being.

The Opportunity for Aligned Awareness and Action

The current threat to our environment is a profound call for human collaboration on an unprecedented scale, in the inner dimension of thought as well as the outer dimension of action. If we respond solely by attempting to coordinate action, we lose the opportunity.

For a challenge of this epochal scale, we need the collective grace that we witness in nature as massive flocks of birds or schools of fish soar and turn as one. This kind of unity emanates from an inner coordination, a fine-tuned alignment, a tacit understanding. It will not happen merely from agreements taken. These are blunt instruments compared with nature's subtle alignment with universal principles and humanity's alignment at the level of thought and awareness.

The Brahma Kumaris has a number of ongoing experiments that work in aligning awareness with action. These include yogic farming whereby farmers harness the power of concentrated positive thought, with organic farming techniques, which is bringing real social, economic and environmental change in their communities. Large solar energy installations are drawing disparate agencies together in a collective vision of change, providing green jobs and utilizing the energy of the sun on a massive scale. A twenty-year initiative for global meditation on world peace each month harnesses the collective positive thought and good will of an expanding population in more than 110 countries. The Brahma Kumaris have a 75-year commitment to what is now a growing movement embracing a vegetarian diet, a simple lifestyle, and a commitment to service. The organization has grown and expanded from 300 members in one country to almost a million members in more than 110 countries, on the basis of a "gift economy," in contrast to a market economy.

This kind of subtle alignment of thought and awareness, expressed as mindful action, is deeply practical, grounded as it is in the universal principles that are constantly at work in all of nature. The ranks of individuals and institutions working in alignment with principles and elevated awareness are expanding, and the calls for collaboration are becoming more persistent. In engaging with the global stakeholder community around sustainable development, and human wellbeing we look forward to further collaborations in experimenting with these premises about elevated thought and aligned action on the vast scale required for a meaningful response to our times.

For references regarding any of the information contained in our paper please contact our office at bkun@bkwsu.org

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<i>Rosa Alegria</i>	NEF Nucleo de Estudos do Futuro (SaoPaulo Futures Studies Center), Brazil
<i>Arnold Beekes</i>	The Netherlands
<i>David Cadman</i>	Quaker, Economist and Writer, author of "A Way of Being", UK
<i>Valeriane Bernard</i>	NGO Representative to the United Nations, Brahma Kumaris, Switzerland
<i>Tom Callanan</i>	Program Officer, 1440 Foundation, USA
<i>Jacqueline Cambata</i>	Jacqueline Cambata, Jacqueline Cambata Designs, LLC, USA
<i>Rita Cleary</i>	Partner, The Learning Circle, USA
<i>David Cooperrider</i>	Fairmount Minerals Professor of Social Entrepreneurship, Professor, Organizational Behavior, USA
<i>María Eugenia Estenssoro</i>	National Senator, Senado de la Nacion Argentina
<i>Luciana Ferraz</i>	Coordinator, Brahma Kumaris, Brazil
<i>Julia Grindon-Welch</i>	NGO Representative to the United Nations, Brahma Kumaris, USA
<i>Tex Gunning</i>	Member Executive Committee, Akzo Nobel, The Netherlands
<i>BK Janki Kirplani</i>	Chief Administrative Head, Brahma Kumaris, India
<i>Jayanti Kirplani</i>	Main NGO Representative to the United Nations, Brahma Kumaris, UK
<i>Samuel Leal</i>	Brazil
<i>Rodrigo Loures</i>	CEO, Nutrimental, Brazil
<i>Mark Milton</i>	Founder, Education 4 Peace Foundation, Switzerland
<i>Gayatri Naraine</i>	NGO Representative to the United Nations, Brahma Kumaris, USA
<i>Mohini Panjabi</i>	Main NGO Representative to the United Nations, Brahma Kumaris, USA
<i>Armoogum Parsuramen</i>	G.O.S.K, Chairman, Global Rainbow Foundation; Minister of Education, Arts and Culture and Science(1983-1995); Director and Representative UNESCO(1998-2011), France
<i>Sonja Ohlsson</i>	Coordinator, BK Environment Initiative, Brahma Kumaris, Denmark
<i>Mauro Oretti</i>	Italy
<i>Tamasin Ramsay</i>	NGO Representative to the United Nations, Brahma Kumaris, USA
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<i>Peter Senge</i>	Founding Chair, The Society for Organizational Learning (SoL) and Senior Lecturer Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), USA
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<i>Leticia Shahani</i>	Former Senator and United Nations Assistant Secretary General for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, Philippines
<i>Jim Schneider</i>	Independent Consultant, USA
<i>Kumarasamy Somasundaram</i>	Retired Director of Education, Sri Lanka
<i>Ricardo Young Silva</i>	Businessman and International Reference in the areas of Social Responsibility, and Sustainable Management and Development, Brazil
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<i>Andrew So Kwok Wing</i>	Educator, Hong Kong, China
<i>Henning Wolf</i>	Germany



Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University

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<http://un.brahmakumaris.org>

OFFICE FOR THE UNITED NATIONS

Suite 436
866, UN Plaza
New York, NY 10017
U.S.A.
Tel.: +1-212-688-1335
Fax.: +1-212-504-2798
bkun@bkwsu.org

SPIRITUAL HEADQUARTERS

Pandav Bhawan
Mount Abu 307501
Rajasthan
India
Tel.: +91-2974-238261
Fax.: +91-2974-238952
abu@bkivv.org

INTL. COORDINATING OFFICE

Global Cooperation House
65-69 Pound Lane
London NW10 2HH
U.K.
Tel.: +44-20-8727-3350
Fax.: +44-20-8727-3351
london@bkwsu.org

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