



Bridging The Spiritual and Mundane, by Bhikkhu Bodhi

As I now look at our situation, I distinguish three major domains in which human life participates. One I call the transcendent domain, which is the sphere of aspiration for classical contemplative spirituality. The second is the social domain, which includes our interpersonal relations as well as our political, social, and economic institutions. And the third is the natural domain, which includes our physical bodies, other sentient beings, and the natural environment.

From my present perspective, a spirituality that privileges the transcendent and devalues the social and natural domains, or sees them at best as stepping stones to realization, is inadequate to our current needs. Such an orientation has led to a sharp division of duties that puts our future at risk. On the one hand, the pursuits of contemplative spirituality fall to the "spiritual virtuosos," the contemplatives, mystics, and yogis, who aspire to transcend the world and express their compassion simply by guiding others to the heights they themselves have reached. On the other, the steering wheel of humanity's future is placed solely in the hands of politicians, development experts, technocrats, and corporate magnates, who are usually driven by personal ambition, misplaced pragmatism, and the tunnel vision of technical expertise. This division also opens the doors of influence over our communal institutions to religious dogmatists and fundamentalists.

As I see it, our collective future requires that we fashion an integral type of spirituality that can bridge the three domains of human life. This would entail embarking on a new trajectory. The spiritual quest, from ancient times to the present, has primarily moved along an ascending track: one that leads from darkness to light, from the conditioned to the unconditioned, from mortality to the deathless. Our task today, in my understanding, is to complement the ascending spiritual movement with a descending movement, a gesture of love and grace flowing down from the heights of realization into the valleys of our ordinary lives.

While neither can be neglected, the storms of crisis gathering on our future horizon oblige us to give special attention to the descending movement. Under the impetus of love, we must bring the light and wisdom gained from the transcendent domain back into the world in order to transform and redeem the social and natural domains. More concretely, this entails that in the social domain we must strive for modes of governance embodying justice, equity, and compassion. Social and economic policies must be rooted in the conviction that all human beings are entitled to live in peace, with sufficient access to food, water, medical care, and housing, and opportunities to fulfill their potentials. In the natural domain we must learn to look at the universe with wonder,

awe, and reverence, treat other living beings with care and kindness, and ensure that nature preserves its self-regenerating capacities.

In short, the challenge facing us is to ensure that the world works for everyone, including nature itself. We have no better guidance in meeting this challenge than our spiritual traditions, but we must draw out from them their potentials for transforming our relationship to other people and the natural environment. The task ahead will by no means be an easy one, for we can expect staunch resistance from those who profit by preserving and extending the status quo. With the right combination of skills, however, I believe we will be able to prevail.

In my view, what we must do to achieve our goal is to bring together the wisdom of humanity's spiritual heritage with the prophetic passion of the social activist. It is only when the two are united--when wisdom and love inspire and drive social conscience, and when social conscience draws its guidelines from timeless sources of truth--that we can shape our institutions and policies in the ways necessary to continue the human adventure on this fragile but beautiful planet.

--Bhikkhu Bodhi in *_Bridging the Spiritual and Mundane_* [1]

Links:

[1] <http://www.parabola.org/bridging-the-spiritual-and-the-mundane.html>