How to Improve the World
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How to Improve the World

Three attitudes to help us cope with our planet's conflict-ridden condition and one strategic, long-term way to change it

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Audio

Recently a group of devotees lamented to me about the dreadful condition of the world, asking my opinion about the best perspective those on the spiritual path can hold. It is certainly on everyone's mind, with all the unusual problems we face.

My answer was that there are multiple viewpoints we need to hold. One is that, yes, it is good to try to improve conditions, while keeping expectations reasonable. A second point of view we can remember is that trying to change the world is a little like trying to straighten a dog's tail. It keeps going back the way it was, no matter what you do. The key is to find the right balance between working to improve the world and accepting it as it is, knowing that you can't totally transform it overnight and that change does not come easily.

A third, more philosophical, view to hold is that everything is as it should be. Humanity's plights and predicaments all have a divine purpose. In striving to improve the world, we don't want to feel that things are not supposed to be the way they are. We may wish it were different but, in fact, it is a natural playing out of what has been set in motion in the past. We can, to a limited degree, direct and guide the flow of events and encourage things to play out in a better way, but the forces of past actions still continue to powerfully influence and define the present. Those with spiritual insight know that the world is in a perfect state of evolution at every point in time.

In the months after 9/11 visitors meeting with me in our guru temple here on Kauai would often ask, "What do you think about these terrible events?" Their sense was that conditions had never been worse. Reflecting back on recent history, I responded, "Well, times have been worse. All you have to do is go back to World War II. We were not just fighting terrorists who hijack somebody else's airplane. We were fighting Japan and Germany, two very powerful military bodies, with thousands of planes, who were causing havoc in the world. Over sixty million people were killed in that war, mostly civilians. That was a far more serious problem by comparison."

Europe gives us another example. For as long as history tells her story, European countries were fighting one another. But what are they doing today? They are working together as the European Union. They've joined together. Do we foresee Germany attacking England ever again? No. A change in consciousness took place in Europe. That's a good sign, and it's just one example of how the world is changing for the better.

The Roots of Conflict: The fundamental challenge is the tendency to divide the world into "we-they " rather than maintaining the inclusive "we" perspective. In the "we-they" perspective, "they" are different than we are, and we tend to emphasize all of their unseemly or negative qualities. If we strive to keep everything as a "we " and maintain the principle of inclusiveness, then we minimize that tendency. All groups have the tendency to polarize and split. Even a large family will split into "we-they." It is a natural tendency of humankind to divide into two groups that have problems with one another. "We " consciousness is strengthened by focusing on what is held in common. "We-they " consciousness is strengthened by focusing on differences.

An ultimate "we" consciousness has been experienced by several astronauts when looking at Earth from outer space, seeing mankind's commonality rather than dissimilarity. Sunita Williams' experience during her 195 days on the International Space Station space in 2007 radically altered her perspective of life. From 350 km in orbit, the earth appears a magnificently beautiful whole. She says: "It is hard to imagine people arguing down there, not to mention fighting. It looks so peaceful... so calm down on Earth. From space, there are no borders that you can see. We are lucky to live on such a planet and we should not take it for granted. After my space experience, I am a lot more tolerant of people and opinions, of everything."

How do we solve, or at least minimize, the tendency to divide us? Through persistently teaching the opposite. Our Gurudeva, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, took a simple step by creating large granite signs for the island of Kauai that say, "One Island, Many Peoples, All Kauaians." These were installed by the county at prominent locations to emphasize the unity of all the many peoples of Kauai. He created similar signs for Mauritius to strengthen unity, because in every community there is the tendency to split. In the Kauai community the tendency is to divide according to ethnic background.

Gurudeva was inspiring acceptance and counteracting the force of prejudice. He knew that prejudice toward those who are of a different race, nation or religion can start simply as distrust and then deepen into dislike and deepen further into hatred, which can turn into a compulsion to inflict injury.

Are children born with attitudes of prejudice and hatred? No. They learn such things at home, from their family and friends, and at school from teachers and classmates. Prejudice toward other ethnic groups, religions or nations is even taught in religious institutions.

The long-term solution, one that will take many decades, is to instill prejudice-free consciousness in future generations. People who are older are set in their ways and unlikely to change. But each new generation starts out with a blank slate. Children can be taught tolerance, acceptance and openness toward those who are different. With each new generation, we have an opportunity to teach positive, unifying beliefs. And one of the biggest changes that can take place in society occurs as members of a new generation mature into positions of influence and power. If they are imbued with unbiased, spiritual attitudes, conditions in the nations they serve in will improve.

This is where opportunity lies, in encouraging parents to raise their children in such a way that they are free of prejudice. And then do it again with the next generation, and then do it again and again. Do that for enough generations and we will change the world in a major way. But it takes time. We can all help in our own spheres of influence--family, friends, work, community--doing our part to instill a prejudice-free consciousness in youth and thus transform attitudes that divide peoples, neighbors and nations.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. expressed the goal eloquently, "I have a dream that one day my children will be perceived for the content of their character rather than by the color of their skin." That is the point, to see the person, not their ethnicity or their religion and impose negative generalizations on them. Even positive generalizations and preconceived notions should be avoided, as they, too, obscure this genuine interaction. For example, some say the Chinese are industrious. But, in truth, not all Chinese are hard-working, and even thinking in such positive stereotypes prevents you from seeing an individual as he or she is.

There are two cardinal principles that naturally motivate Hindus to be free of prejudice and not fall into the "we-they " consciousness. The first is that every person is a divine soul. Even a terrorist or a criminal is a divine being, though one needing many lives of further evolution. There are no people who are evil intrinsically. Their behavior may be evil, destructive, but everybody is divine on the inside. Therefore, everybody is important. Even the terrorist is important; even the criminal is important. They deserve to be encouraged to come up in consciousness. It is the duty of spiritual people to strive to lift everyone up in consciousness, whether they are for us or against us.

The second Hindu principle that inspires prejudice-free consciousness is that the whole world is a one family: Vasudhaiva kutumbakam. That is a powerful statement, because everyone understands family. When we say the whole world is family, we mean that we hold the same positive, loving attitude toward everybody that we do toward our own kinfolk. We want them to be happy, do well and prosper. Saying and believing that the whole world is our family confers an attitude that excludes no one.

Underlying these two concepts is the knowledge of reincarnation and karma. Change and evolution occur over many lifetimes. The purpose of human birth is to grow and learn in the great school of earthly experience. Karma, the law of cause and effect, is the great and always just teacher. All souls are on this wondrous journey, whether they know it or not. Gurudeva used to say, "You have to be careful whom you hate, because you might end up being born in that group in your next life." Thus you will see what it's like to be on the other end of your hatred.

Summary: I find it clarifying to hold three complementary attitudes toward the world. First: we do want to try and improve it. Second: we want to remain realistic about how much and how quickly it will change. Third: we strive to accept

everything that is as the way it should be, even though it may not be the way we would prefer it to be. It is the way it is because of what has happened in the past. A Buddhist monk put it well, "The world is perfect, with plenty of room for improvement." To gradually make the world a more peaceful place, we can spread the idea of raising children with a prejudice-free consciousness. Less prejudice means less hate; less hate means less violence. While we can't change the world overnight, we can change it over many generations.