

Spiritual Reflections on our Relationship to the Environment

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Abstract: Earth's environment is deteriorating day by day and that there is a need for change in our mind-set towards our planet as a home, not as a commodity. The aim of this paper is to rebuild our relationship to the environment through enlightenment of our spiritual values as affirmations at individual level and develop sustainable relationship with nature for its conservation.

Keywords: Environment, Ecology, Spirituality, Religions, Values, Awareness, Sustainability, Affirmations.

Introduction

There is abundant evidence that the earth's environment is deteriorating and that there is a need for change. We observe nature also signalling the need for a shift of awareness and a return to the values that sustain and nurture the planet and its inhabitants. There is the need for a profound shift in awareness in order to transform the nature of current conversations and actions addressing environmental problems. Real change begins in the hearts and minds of people. Therefore the time has come for individuals to act with conscience and treat our planet as a home, not as a commodity. Otherwise it will be difficult to stop or slow the forces harming the environment. We have to support community values through personal empowerment and inner resilience. Spiritual perspective will help in greater manner for this noble cause.

To create responsible society taking care of environment we have to go up to subconscious level of each and every one. Spirituality is the only way to change old mindsets and create responsible minds at subconscious level. Adding a spiritual dimension to the existing environmental drive will enhance the clarity, calm, stability and power of activists. Fundamental human values and spiritual perspective of life will develop sustainable relationship with nature. It will also encourage changing mindset of peoples to our planet as a home, not as a commodity.

Environmental issues and our response

Today's environmental debate turns on negotiations among the social, economic, and environmental "pillars" rather than considering a genuinely holistic perspective that holds them all. Current environmental protection actions are reactive focusing more on cure than prevention. We are easily accepting the issues related to environment on account of development and human comfort. Current solutions to these problems are more reactive incurring more cost and huge impact on nature. Due to financial interest and political matters, adverse impacts on nature are always neglected.

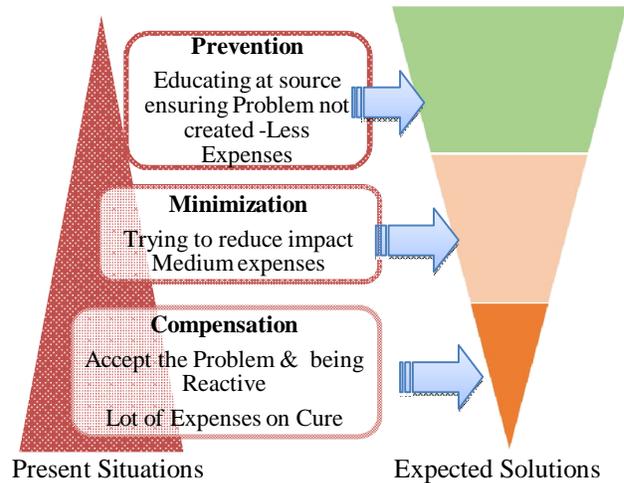


Figure 1: Solutions Pyramid

It is clearly indicated in above pyramid that education at source to eliminate the problem is not favorable solution in Present Situations. Prevention is not base of our present actions towards conservation of ecology. If we reversed the pyramid of present situation then prevention will be base of our actions & less problems will be created. We have to include environment based value education in our schools and citizens have to be trained to achieve expected model of problem solving. We have to change mindset of each individual to see nature and its elements respectfully.

Religions & their ecological beliefs

Hinduism: The Vedic traditions of Hinduism offer imagery that values the power of the natural world. Scholars of the Vedas have held forth various texts and rituals that praise the earth (bhu), the atmosphere (bhuvah), and sky (sva), as well as the goddess associated with the earth (Prthivi), and the gods associated with water (Ap), with fire and heat (Agni), and the wind (Vayu). They have noted that the centrality of these gods and goddesses suggests an underlying ecological sensitivity within the Hindu tradition. In later Indian thought, these Vedic concepts become formalized into the Samkhya denotation of five great elements (mahabhuta): earth (prthivi), water (jal), fire (tejas), air (vayu), and space (akasa).

"Do not cut trees because they remove pollution."

(Rig Veda 6:48:17)

"Do not disturb the sky and do not pollute the atmosphere."

(Yajur Veda 5:43)

"We pray all supporting Earth on which trees, lords of forests, stand ever firm." (Atharva Veda 12:1:27)

"Don't destroy forest with Tigers and don't make forest lacking of tigers. Forests can't be saved without tigers and tigers can't live without forests because forests protect tigers and tigers protect forests." (ViratParrva 5.45-46)

Islam: In the Qur'an, Muslims are instructed to look after the environment and not to damage it and thus follow the nature designed by Allah to which he has fashioned mankind. There is no altering the creation of Allah. The color green is the most blessed of all colors for Muslims. The earth is mentioned some 453 times in the Qur'an, whereas sky and the heavens are mentioned only about 320 times. The Prophet Muhammad said that: "The earth has been created for me as a mosque and as a means of purification."

"The Earth is green and beautiful, and Allah has appointed you his stewards over it. The whole earth has been created a place of worship pure and clean. Whoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is rewarded as charity on his part". (Hadith)

"Allah is he who setup the Earth, and set thereon mountains standing firm, and flowing rivers. All this is God's creation and Muslims should therefore seek to protect and preserve environment". (Quran 2-4 and Quran 17:4)

Christianity: Christian thought derives fresh insights from reading the Bible with an ecological awareness. The Bible is permeated with a careful concern for preserving the "land" and the "earth" as an allotted heritage. Christians treat nature as having value in itself, and must be careful without being destructive. The Bible contains numerous examples of the care with which Christians are expected to treat the environment. Deuteronomy 25:4 and 22:6 indicates the proper care for domestic animals and a respect for wildlife. In Isaiah 5:8-10 the Lord judges those who have misused the land. Job 38:25-28 and Psalm 104:27-30 speak of God's nurture and care for his creation. Pope Benedict XVI has more recently added "Polluting the environment" in the modified list of sins.

Buddhism: Buddha's enlightenment experience (*MahasaccakkaSutta, MajjhimaNikaya*) as well as the content of the four noble truths insight into the cause and cessation of suffering is regarded by the tradition as an act of universal compassion. They pray "May all beings be free from hate; may all beings be free from injury; may all beings be free from suffering; may all beings be happy." According to *CakkavattisihanvadaSutta*, the ideal king is expected to protect not only his subjects but also animals, birds and the environment. King Ashoka's Fifth Pillar Law stating that he placed various wild animals under protection, is one of the earliest recorded instances of a specific policy of conservation. Buddhist extend loving-kindness and compassion beyond people and animals to include plants and the earth itself.

Positive look on Religions & Spirituality

Spirituality is something that is found deep within oneself. It is your way of loving, accepting and relating to the world and people around you. Spirituality is about loyalty to justice and compassion.

Religion: A religion is an organized collection of beliefs, cultural systems, and world views that relate humanity to an order of existence. Many religions have narratives, symbols, and sacred histories that aim to explain the meaning of life, the origin of life, or the Universe. Religion is often about loyalty to institutions, clergy, and rules. Religion tells you to follow an ideology and obey certain rules or you'll be punished otherwise.



Figure 2 : Spirituality a linking tool between Religions.

Religion & Spirituality

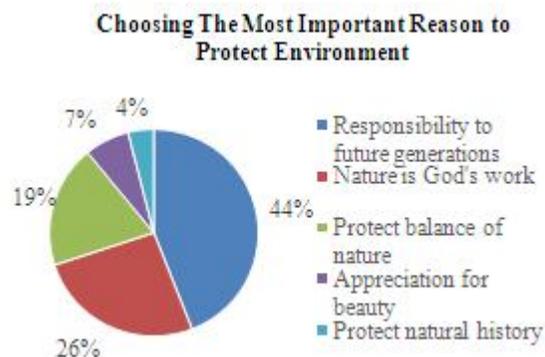
Religion talks about God. Spirituality helps to make us godly. Religion at its best is spirituality in community. Religion Applies Punishment, Spirituality Applies Karma. Spirituality sees the truth in all of religions and unites them because the truth is same for all of us despite our differences and uniqueness. It focuses on the quality of the divine message they share and not on the differences in details of the story they speak. Spirituality shows you that you don't need or depend on anything to be happy. Happiness is always found deep in ourselves and only we are responsible for it. Divinity is in us and that is why we are always worthy. The purpose of spirituality and religion is the infinite renewal of hopes.

If we summarized religious beliefs from the spiritual perspective, human beings have been given this planet in trust as stewards. We hold our own life, our own body and all that there is on this planet in trust for the Divine. And it is only if we live according to His instructions that we can continue to experience happiness and harmony and generate an atmosphere of well-being for others too. Yet when we move away from those instructions, we invoke the chaos that can be witnessed today.

Spirituality as a tool to create environment awareness

Aim of all religions is a world of harmony and peace, where everyone lives "in ways that preserve nature's ecological balance in an environment that is beautiful and clean". Environmental movement that speaks the need for an ecological approach founded on spiritual awareness rather than religious belief will help to take care of nature as Mother Earth. Reflection of spirituality as a tool for environment conservation is justified because firstly most lasting social change is anchored in a deep moral devotion. Secondly value based foundations for protecting biodiversity can be widely held and credible. Thirdly religion

humanizes and personalizes choices about environment and more importantly, understanding ethics backed by individuals'. Adding spiritual dimensions in awareness programs will help us make better decisions on complex issues related to human behaviours.



Source : Beldon, Russonello & Stewart, *Americans & Biodiversity, New Perspectives 2002* (A good 26% have cited in the above survey that they will protect the environment due to religion based morality.)

"There cannot be violence when there is respect and love", Understanding this universal truth, we can see how all exploitation on the planet around us has spread from a lack of respect and love. Furthermore, when contemplating the morals and ethics of food, security and climate justice, we can see that when there is love and respect, these two basic factors allow the possibility of being able to share and care, and this is how compassion can enter all interactions with others.

Trying to solve all the problems just on a physical level has not succeeded. We have tried negotiations and treaties and all manner of strategies, but coming together as a world family and a spiritual family, as children of the one Divine, recognizing our own responsibilities towards each other can make a huge difference. This step will emerge the compassion that is much needed in the world and allow us to share time, resources and aspirations with each other. A change in consciousness does not happen through laws; our awareness must mature through the power of collective thought with spiritual reflections.

Spiritual Values and Affirmations connecting with Nature

An Affirmation: Affirmation is a short, life-affirming, positive statement about the self which, if repeated regularly with feeling, will change our way of thinking and being.

Ten most important values with affirmations are given below. These can be applied to all levels of society for creating deep awareness. Actions for percolating these values for spiritual capacity-building are required within every sector and level of society, formal education at school & home, in the community and workplaces. Such education, as a creative and transformational process, will touch the heart as well as the mind and give shape to good governance and policies on crucial areas such as the use of resources, healthcare, industrialization, economic activity and technology.

1. Live Simply: When we use our mental, emotional and physical resources wisely and carefully, based on our needs rather than desires, we are able to fulfil our responsibility as trustees of the earth. Simplicity starts in the mind. When the mind is clear and calm, we are able to stop, reflect, prioritise, and see the bigger picture.

"Seeing myself as a trustee of the Earth, I use all my time, money and other resources wisely and carefully. Living a simple life gives me time and space to appreciate the wonders of this world. Focusing on my needs, rather than wants or desires, reduces the pressure on me and the environment".

"He who knows he has enough is rich". - Lao Tzu

2. Be Unlimited: By connecting with our spiritual essence and going beyond the artificial divisions of gender, race, culture and religion, we feel part of the global family and act accordingly.

"When I connect with my spiritual essence, I see everything from a new perspective. Feeling part of an amazing global family, I act accordingly. When I go beyond the artificial divisions of gender, race, culture and religion, I am moved to care about the whole human race. Thinking outside the box enables me to challenge the old paradigms and create new and powerful solutions. Seeing the connections between myself, others and environment I am inspired to make a real difference in the world".

*"Those who love and free nature are never alone"
- Rachel Carson*

3. Open the Heart: The heart is the centre of love. Love is a powerful, positive, healing energy which can overcome all obstacles. When we are in a state of love, we feel connected with everything and everyone and there is a natural desire to protect, nurture, support, encourage and empower the self and others, including Nature.

"Practicing compassion and forgiveness, enables me to heal the heart of the world. When I connect with the environment in all its many forms, my heart opens like a flower and I feel at one with everything. Love for Nature and humanity is the foundation of all my actions".

"Our task must be to free ourselves by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty." - Albert Einstein

4. Respect Life: When we respect someone we value them and treat them with care and consideration. We recognise their rights and act accordingly. The same applies to the world of Nature.

"Recognising the uniqueness, wonder and beauty of my own nature, enables me to treat all living beings with consideration and care. When I align with my true values, Nature becomes a friend to support, rather than an object to exploit. Treating everyone one and everything with consideration and care fills me with contentment and satisfaction".

"Forget not that the earth delights to feel your bare feet and the winds long to play with your hair." - Khalil Gibran

5. Be Positive: Putting a full stop to negative and wasteful thinking and choosing to use the power of our mind in a positive way is the foundation for the world transformation. Positive thoughts bring benefit to the self and others e.g. gratitude, appreciation, seeing the best in everyone and everything.

Positive thoughts uplift, inspire, enable, encourage and empower people to do their best. Being positive in our thinking is one of the greatest contributions we can make to improve the environment.

"Knowing the powerful impact of my thoughts can have on others and the environment, I choose to create a positive mindset. Empowering thoughts for the self and others are the foundation for world transformation. Seeing the benefit in every situation, however challenging it may be, I grow in wisdom and compassion".

"People rarely succeed unless they have fun in what they are doing." - Dale Carnegie

6. Walking the Talk: There is a lot of concern and talk about the dangerous state of the planet. Most scientists agree that urgent action is needed if we are to prevent a crisis and save the Earth for future generations. Politicians and NGOs spend millions of rupees gathering together to create and implement action plans to make things better but achieve a little.

The world is crying out for inspiring, authentic leaders who walk their talk. Like Gandhi, who apparently was once asked by a mother to tell her boy not to eat sweets. He refused and told the mother and son to come back in three weeks' time. On their return he did as requested. When asked why he had not done so before he replied that he could not ask the son to give up sweets until he had given them up himself. If we wish, we can all become a Gandhi in our own way and be an inspiring example of change. Remember, when we change the world will change.

"When I remain true to my inner values and follow my conscience, my actions bring benefit to many. When my thoughts, words and actions are as one, I can move mountains. Being authentic, I am able to open the hearts and minds of others and inspire them to action".

"Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does."
- William James

7. Empower Yourself: We are living in a rapidly changing world where all the traditional structures and supports seem to be crumbling around us - family, community, religion, the political and economic systems and the environment. In these circumstances, it is easy to feel overwhelmed, powerless, hopeless and a victim of forces beyond our control. Who can we turn to and what can we do? If we wish to become a champion of the environment (or anything else), we first have to become a champion of the self. When we are able to stand in our own power like a tree with deep roots, when we become as unshakeable and immovable as a mountain then we will be able to perform wonders.

"Realising that I am the creator of my own reality, I choose to make a positive difference in the world. When I connect with my inner qualities, virtues and powers, I am able to perform wonders. My capacity to help create a sustainable future expands enormously when I tap into my spiritual power".

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." - Margaret Mead

8. Eat Well: Vegetarian food, cooked with love, nourishes our whole being and contributes to the health of the planet. The insatiable demand for meat in its many forms is destroying the eco-system. It takes 6 kilos of grain to produce

one kilo of meat and huge swathes of the rain forests, countless tons of fertilizer and billions of liters of water are used in the process.

"Knowing that a vegetarian diet substantially reduces my carbon footprint, I happily do my best to avoid eating any type of meat or fish. Pure vegetarian food, cooked with love, nourishes my whole being and contributes to the health and future of the planet. Believing in non-violence and a sustainable future, I naturally choose to eat locally-sourced, organic fruit and vegetables whenever possible".

"Eating is an environmental act."— Alice Waters

9. Follow Your Dream: The more powerful, positive and detailed our vision of the future, the more likely we are to achieve it. If we want to live in a clean, green, beautiful, harmonious and sustainable world, we first of all have to create it in our mind.

"The more powerful, positive and detailed my vision of the future, the more likely I am to achieve it. Thinking about how I would like the world to be gives me the enthusiasm and courage to make things happen. If I do not follow my dreams, how will they come true"?

"Do not go where the path may lead; go instead where there is no path and leave a trail." - Ralph Waldo Emerson

10. Feed the Soul: Spending time alone in silent prayer, or meditation, gives us inner strength and wisdom to deal with life in a more positive and peaceful way. An understanding of the soul and its connection to the world of matter is essential if the environmental movement is to succeed. Without it, people working for the preservation of life on this planet could lose their faith and hope and become demoralised and depressed.

"Time alone spent in reflection or meditation gives me the strength and wisdom to deal with life in more positive, peaceful ways. Silent reflection helps me to connect with my deeper values and find the strength to live by them. Spending time in the company of nature calms my mind, opens my heart and enables me to be a better global citizen, mindful of the impact of my choices".

"For what lies inside the human being is the whole spiritual cosmos in condensed form. In our inner organism we have an image of the entire cosmos." - Rudolf Steiner

Conclusion

Spirituality is the Heart of sustainable development it offers itself a holistic perspective, many rich fruits & a methodology to deepen our awareness towards protection of our mother earth. We have to be proactive on environmental issues. More focus is required on training & awareness creation within every sector and level of society, formal education at school & home, in the community and workplaces. Such education with spiritual values & affirmations as a creative and transformational process will touch the heart as well as the minds, and give shape to good governance and policies on crucial areas such as the use of resources, healthcare, industrialization, economic activity and technology.

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