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**BECOMING BRIDGE-BUILDERS IN
PERIODS OF TRANSITION
Towards a Communion of Civilizations in
Our Times**

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The Context

To be one with the world is wisdom (Tirukkural).

With the world becoming more and more globalized, we are moving into most exciting times. Economy is taking new directions, innovations in communications are bringing peoples and communities together, international solidarity offers indefinite possibilities of self expression; good ideas generated anywhere have opportunities to reach out to the remotest parts of the world; and good values preserved in any civilizational tradition can offer inspiration to persons and societies in any place on the planet. There

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is every possibility for cultures, civilizations, and faiths to dialogue with each other, to listen to each others' insights, *and learn from each others' wisdom.*

1. Violence

Violence is flourishing. Pride is at its height! Violence produces more wickedness (Ez 7:10-11). Violence is suicide (Mahatma Gandhi).

However, that is not what is actually happening. Tensions are mounting: nation against nation, class against class, ethnic group against ethnic group, majority against minority and vice versa. The strong usually have their way. No wonder that dominant nations and groups are perceived as exploiting the weaker. Those who feel that they are unjustly treated take to violence in response. There are also enough people to foster anger against every perceived injustice. Struggles in the name of culture, ethnicity, minority status, gender, colour, go even to the point of violence. All slogans are about 'rights'; there is not enough reference to duties. Every claim of rights seems to be valid until exaggerations make its limitations evident. Meantime peace keeps eluding the human race.

All religions have taught peace, impartiality, and fairness. And yet there are conflicts in the name of religion in any number of places: Israelis-Palestinians, Serbs-Croats-Muslims, Indians-Pakistanis, Singhalas-Tamils, Catholics-Protestants (N. Ireland); tensions in Chechnya, Somalia, Sudan, Philippines, Indonesia. Nor can we forget the 'secular religions' (ideologies) of our days. Eric Hobsbawm calls the ideological wars of last century "the most militant and bloodthirsty of the religious wars," which were linked with secular pieties like personality cult and promise of permanent solutions to human problems.¹ Solutions however never came.

Wars in ages past were between kings, emperors, dynasties or sovereign nations. Today they are often between ethnic groups and local activists. There have been civil wars in Angola, Bosnia, Chechnya, Croatia, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Iraq, Liberia, Mozambique, Somalia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Uganda.² There are battles going on between fundamentalists of various types: religious, secular, cultural, political, economic, and ideological. The political scientist

¹Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, New York: Vintage Books, 1995, 563.

²Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, London: Penguin, 2011, 303.

Stanley Hoffman says he had fondly hoped for an era of peace when the Cold War ended. But his hopes were soon shattered when he kept hearing news only of violence, terrorism, suicide bombings, displaced people, and genocides; of civil wars, battles between militias, guerillas, paramilitaries; 'new wars', 'low intensity conflicts', and genocide, ethnic cleansing.³

The situation has grown so alarming that Norman Podhoretz brought out a book called 'World War IV'.⁴ Hobsbawm argues that the weakening of state power during the second half of the 20th century led to the "democratization or *privatization of the means of destruction*."⁵ Studying the present trends, there is no way we can feel confident that the age of Holocausts, Hiroshimas, and bloody revolutions is over.

2. Human Beings Evaluated in Market Terms

There is none high or low amongst you. You are all brethren and therefore strive altogether to attain prosperity (Rig Veda 5,60,5). They themselves are slaves of destructive habits (2 Pet 2:19).

Slavery and absolute poverty reduce human beings to levels *less than human*. Violence takes them one step lower. But when people are evaluated only in market terms, when they are classified merely as 'labour' or evaluated solely in reference to the 'market', their status goes down lower still. In other words, when their worth is calculated only in terms of their use to the economy, they become less than human beings and bearers of dignity. And yet, the tragedy today is that entire nations are opting for this form of self-abasement by making economic growth their sole goal.

This process is assisted by the dogma of 'free choice' propagated by Big Business. They have an evident interest in promoting the dogma; it benefits their profit-making strategies. Meantime Big Corporations are making themselves less and less accountable to anybody. They manipulate mass media, impose uniform ways of thinking and acting on society, seek to monopolize knowledge, subject people to consumerism, imprison them in artificial environments and isolate them from nature. Those who fall victims to their mesmerizing and psychologically numbing influence, lose their concern for society,

³Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, 296.

⁴Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, 295.

⁵Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, 560.

commitment to compassion and solidarity; they lose sight of ecological responsibilities and grow in their greed for wealth,⁶ often acquired unethically.

(1) Eric Lott says, "The much trumpeted freedom of choice has no much room in modern corporations and military giants."⁷

3. Need for a Dialogue of Civilizations Leading to a Communion of Civilizations

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid... Nothing vile or evil shall be done (Judaism: Isaiah 11:6-9). All people are a single nation (Koran II).

In the face of these and other difficulties, we must not act as though we have no resources to count on. Our civilizational heritages provide enormously valuable assets on which we can build, making use also of the dynamic new ideas of our times. We are not helpless. We make ourselves helpless only by isolating ourselves from each other or wasting energies in constant rivalry. As Thomas Berry said, "We live immersed in a sea of energy." This energy primarily belongs to the community, and a big portion destined for each person is to be found in the other. It has to be discovered and tapped, not by violent snatching, but by drawing it forth gently from each other: sharing thoughts, evoking emotional support, eliciting collaboration.

We are legitimately proud of our rootedness in our own culture and civilization (each one of his/her own). But we are also happy to reach out to other heritages which too have a proud history deserving our respect. We know that we are mutually dependent. Our destinies are interlinked. Historians tell us that civilizations that grow side by side are locked in relationships that are mutually acknowledging and mutually sustaining, even amidst tensions. It is hard for any civilization to maintain high standards in isolation.⁸

Nor can we limit ourselves to the wisdom of the past; we must remain open to the new insights of our own times. It was Confucius who said, "If by keeping the old warm one can provide understanding of the new, one is fit to be a teacher" (*Analects* 2.11).

⁶Mark Hathaway, & Leonardo Boff, *The Tao of Liberation*, New York: Orbis Books, 2009, xvii.

⁷Eric Lott, *Religious Faith, Human Identity*, Bangalore: ATC & UTC, 2005, 253.

⁸Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *Civilizations*, London: Pan Books, 2001, 19.

Maybe the uncertainties of the present era is inviting us to play a bridge-building role between the old and the new.

Time has come for the West to meet the East, the North the South. The old and the new must dialogue. Commerce must be attentive to ethical values, and scientific and technological research must draw inspiration from spiritual search. The painful memories of the past need to be healed and restored, and a future of harmony constructed together. Such 'impossible' dreams can be realized, not through a 'clash of civilizations' in which the strongest will emerge on top to solve problems, but through a dialogue that will lead to a communion of civilizations. That is the only way all cultures and civilizations will be able to make a rightful contribution to human destiny.

Arnold Toynbee wrote in 1972, "The two World Wars and the present worldwide anxiety, frustration, tension, and violence tell the tale. Mankind is surely going to destroy itself unless it succeeds in growing together into something like a single family. For this, we must become familiar with each other; and this means becoming familiar with each other's history..."⁹, and each other's civilizational assets.

4. Corruption

Use honest scales, honest weights, and honest measures (Judaism: Leviticus 19:36). Keep your promises; you are accountable for all that you promise...Weigh with even scales; that is fair, and better in the end (Quran 17:35-39).

Today corrupt practices have risen to the world stage. No one can plead totally innocent. That is why all must join hands together in order to wipe out this great evil from society. Corruption is not only about the wrong use of money, but also about the wrong use of power. It is not only about taking bribe in government offices, but also about various forms of manipulation and blackmailing, political arm-twisting, pushing a particular party's or ethnic group's political interests through underhand ways, unfairness of dominant classes and castes to weaker sections, the imperceptible manner of bulldozing or marginalizing legitimate claims, silencing the voices of

⁹Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History* (one-vol ed. Thames & Hudson), Oxford, 1995, 10.

the weaker communities, physical elimination of political opponents or commercial competitors, interfering with election processes, using 'strong men' for vacating land or realizing bills, fixing matches, selling drugs. Corruption also has reference to hidden transactions, unpaid salaries, underpaid employees, unfair pressure.

The globalized world has become a hiding place for corrupt business. The global market provides distances, creates anonymity, gives opportunities for dishonest deals, enables one to take advantage of the weak, evade laws, and make an unfair proportion of profit. Let us make a distinction: 1. if greater profits are made through harder work, greater efficiency, more effective customer service or through path-breaking innovation, it is certainly legitimate. 2. But if it is made by underpaying the worker, evading taxes, ignoring safety laws, producing counterfeits, ruining the environment, abusing customer confidence, falsifying accounts or labour figures, double book-keeping, deceptive advertisements, industrial espionage, it is undoubtedly criminal. "Would it not be better for you to be robbed? Instead you yourselves wrong one another and rob one another, even your brothers!" (1 Cor 5:7-9).

Investigative journalism has often highlighted specific cases of dishonesty. But media men also can bend to mammon, and sell their services for money: cooking up stories to defame or defend a party leader, distorting facts to press an argument, presenting allegations as proven truth for minor favours. Plagiarizing, pirating cassettes, and violating intellectual property rights are very common in our days.

We may take a message from Buddha's times. The economy had grown brisk in his days: credit, debt, interest and market—nothing was absent. There were rich people going bankrupt and poor people gathering a fortune, honestly and in other ways. A warning against corruption was timely. A passage from early Buddhist poetry says, "Let no one deceive anyone else, nor despise anyone anywhere. May no one wish harm to another in anger or ill-will" (*Samyutta Nikaya* 146-8). And a Taoist teaching says, "When rulers live in splendour and speculators prosper, while farmers lose their land and the granaries are emptied; when governments spend money on ostentation and on weapons; when the upper class is extravagant and irresponsible, indulging themselves and possessing more than they can use, while the poor have nowhere to turn. All this is robbery and

chaos. It is not in keeping with the *Tao* (*Tao Te Ching* 53). Are we in such an age?

5. Economy

Invest money in foreign trade, and one of these days you will make a profit (Eccl 11:1-2). If you love money, you will never be satisfied; if you long to be rich, you will never get all you want. It is useless (Eccl 5:10).

Corruption has something to do with economy. It is precisely in this field that ethical values are often lost. If they are threatened, they must be defended; if they have been lost, they must be re-acquired and restored. Science and technology have given us good things, but they must be regulated by the norms of wisdom contained in our cultural traditions. The *Tao Te Ching* has this message, "The sage does not accumulate. The more he does for the people, the more he saves. The more he gives to people, the more he has" (*Tao Te Ching* 81). In Confucian tradition, a gentleman is concerned with what is right; the inferior man with profit, with material welfare. Mencius too looked down on the profit motive. In the West, the first generations of capitalists were models of asceticism. Their aim was to earn, to accumulate, and not to overspend. In fact, Weber and Keynes refer to high accumulation and low consumption.¹⁰ Today's capitalists on the contrary are prone to profligacy: they believe in lavish parties, weddings, anniversaries, election victories. Hyper commercialism has thrown up a class of super-rich and dumped the weak in dire poverty.¹¹

We agree that economy has its own importance. It plays a central role in world affairs today. Anyone who neglects economy will have to pay for it in due time. However, economy is not everything. Economic success cannot be made the ultimate goal in human affairs. It cannot be allowed to entice and enslave human beings, wipe out cultures, and ruin the environment. Just as the political empires of the past brought some advantages to subject people even when they exploited, the commercial empires of multi-national corporations too bring some advantages to people (cheaper goods and efficient dispatch of affairs). Meantime they exploit. As the political empires of old took advantage of weaker nations, in the same way the commercial empires take advantage of weaker people. The subtle

¹⁰Jeffrey Sachs, *The Price of Civilization*, London: The Bodley Head, 2011, 150.

¹¹Jeffrey Sachs, *The Price of Civilization*, 152.

manner in which this is being done is becoming more and more evident today.

Economy organized on a vast scale, whether controlled by the Government (State capitalism) or by Corporations, tend not to respect persons, human concerns, families, communities, values, natural environment. Gigantism always has its victims. We are not opposed to the bigness of things, but are anxious that its weaknesses should be recognized. Correctives should to be sought. The manner in which some companies compete looks more like an expression of the aggressive and destructive streak in human nature than of its constructive instincts. They ignore the inner worth of human beings, underestimate persons, communities, cultures, ethical and aesthetic traditions. After having invaded millions of human lives and damaged them, when things go wrong, the only solution that profit-makers can propose are drugs, tranquilizers, sedatives, stimulants, and antidepressants;¹² not silence, reflection, self-criticism or self-improvement.

We are moving into an age when it is technology, not human beings, that decides values. Human destiny has gone into the hands of big corporations. Kalle Lasn said, "A corporation has no heart, no soul, no morals. It cannot feel pain. You cannot argue with it... no sorrow or remorse."¹³ What is said of corporations would be true equally of state-owned business concerns. Meantime consumer goods are in abundance, and most people are happy. They do not know what they are losing out and what their fate ultimately will be.

Gradually speculators take over the economy. And then, of course, there comes the collapse. If a collapse had not taken place, no one would believe that it was possible. But it has taken place. The reasons for the recent economic meltdown are not hard to find. John Maynard Keynes said years ago, "Speculation may do no harm as bubbles on a steady stream of enterprise. But the position is serious when the enterprise becomes the bubble on a whirlpool of speculation."¹⁴ The market is considered a 'self-organizing system', ensuring efficiency and preventing waste. But it does not always work that way. The 'invisible hand' many times remains truly invisible! Milton Friedman

¹²Samuel Fleischacker, *The Ethics of Culture*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1994, 16.

¹³Mark Hathaway, & Leonardo Boff, *The Tao of Liberation*, 44.

¹⁴Mark Hathaway, & Leonardo Boff, *The Tao of Liberation*, 46.

said, "I believe that we economists in recent years have done vast harm—to society at large and to our profession in particular—by claiming more than we can deliver."¹⁵

And when, during periods of recession, corporations and banks come down and are gasping for breath, it is the tax-payer's (the average man's) money that is used to bail them out. It is as though the poor are rushing to the rescue of the rich. This may sound contradictory, but there may be some truth in it. It is similar to the paradox about International aid that has not reduced inequality or brought the needed assistance to the poor. International aid so often turned out to be the poor in rich countries coming to the aid of the rich in poor countries, and then the poor in poor countries being compelled to pay back the debt to the rich in rich countries. Thus, even plans formulated with good intentions go wrong in unforeseen ways. Truly, "A gentleman takes as much trouble to discover what is right as lesser men take to discover what will pay" (*Analects* IV,16).

Economy is important, but it must be made 'human' in order to be meaningful to human beings. In fact, Wilhelm Ropke spoke of the need for 'humane economy', e.g. not to victimize customers through exaggerated advertisements. Hans Küng keeps insisting, "Being human must be the ethical yardstick for all economic action," which means giving importance to human dignity, mutual respect, tolerance, compassion, care for nature, rule of law, justice, solidarity, truthfulness, reliability. We must hold up new icons before our eyes for imitation.

6. Environment

These classes of living beings have been declared by the Jinas: earth, water, fire, wind; grass trees, and plants; and the moving things, both the egg-bearing and those that bear live offspring, those generated from dirt and those generated in fluids. Know and understand that they all desire happiness. By hurting these beings, people do harm to their souls. Plants are beings possessed of natural development. Their bodies require nourishment, and they all have their individual life. Reckless men who cut them down for their pleasure destroy many living beings. By destroying plants, when young or grown up, a careless man does harm to his own soul (Jainism: Suttrakritanga, 1.7.1-9). A wise man should not act sinfully toward the

¹⁵Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point*, London: Flamingo, 1983, 199.

earth, nor cause others to do so, nor allow others to act so (Jainism: Acaranga Sutra, 5).

Unquestionably the technological age has brought us many blessings: e.g. reduction in infant mortality, lengthening of life expectancy, literacy, access to healthcare. But along with these blessings there have come also the destruction of ecosystems and erosion of traditional cultures, and undermining of the quality of life.¹⁶ We may well recall how the great empires of Mesopotamia, Crete, Greece, Rome, Maya, and the Indus Valley collapsed because they ruined the very environment that brought them into existence. Deforestation has always had disastrous consequences. Felipe Fernandez-Armesto says "...civilizations commonly exploit their environments, often to the point of self-destruction."¹⁷

Lester Brown's "*Mobilizing to Save Civilization*" speaks of poverty, depletion of resources, falling of water tables, drying up of wells, shrinking of forests; of collapsing fisheries, eroding soils, grasslands becoming deserts. The list of disasters can be made longer: loss of forests, release of carbon dioxide, hole in the ozone layer, undermined the fertility of the soil, chemicals in the air, soil, water; wiped out species; overuse energy.¹⁸ There has been consistent neglect of traditional systems: of healing, cultivation, child care, family relationships, community living, problem-solving. Though genetically modified species can add to quantity, quality remains uncertain. Moreover, corporations control the production, supply, replacement, and storing of those varieties.¹⁹

The insensitivity that prompts people to overuse resources also inspires them to exploit the poor, reducing them to the status of 'labour' and 'market'. The tragedy today lies precisely in placing quantitative growth before quality of life. And we gloriously lose out between different choices. This is an hour when we need to preserve the mental balance taught to us by the Wisdom of the Ancients, give attention to human Dignity affirmed by the Moderns, and look towards the Beauty that reminds us of our eternal destiny.

¹⁶Mark Hathaway, & Leonardo Boff, *The Tao of Liberation*, 17.

¹⁷Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *Civilizations*, London: Pan Books, 2001, 17.

¹⁸Mark Hathaway, & Leonardo Boff, *The Tao of Liberation*, 6.

¹⁹Mark Hathaway, & Leonardo Boff, *The Tao of Liberation*, 42.

The prevailing manner of developing industries is fast leading to the degradation of environment and depletion of topsoil. Deepak Chopra quotes social scientists who claim that our collective behaviour is creating an unsustainable environment due to depletion of timber and fossil fuels, leading to devastating effects such as the greenhouse effect, changing weather patterns, hurricanes, and rising ocean tides:

On the surface these different events don't seem related, but they are. They are the result of constricted collective sense of self, and they synchronistically, simultaneously co-arise. Religious conflict, pollution, terrorism, nuclear plants, drug addiction, extinction of species, poverty, crime, drug wars, the gun industry, floods and famine, dangerous chemicals in the food chain, and wars are causally related.²⁰

Ecologists have suggested soft technologies that do not damage environment, the use of renewable resources, recycling of material. They recommend solar energy collectors, wind generators, organic farming, regional and local food production, recycling of waste. "Wisdom demands a new orientation of science and technology towards the organic, the gentle, the non-violent, the elegant and beautiful."²¹ It is gradually being realized that ethics needs to be also ecological: e.g. an ecological awareness and frugal consumption ensuring inner growth.²²

7. Media

There is a way to get the people: get their hearts and the people are won over (Mencius 4:9). He (the sage) is free from self-display, and therefore he shines (Tao Te Ching 22).

Communications have made the greatest contribution to modern age. They have assisted people to come together and co-reflect, and be of assistance to each other. International solidarity has grown in a way that was never considered possible in earlier times.

But these very same instruments of communications can also be misused. They are fast falling into the grip of Big Business and centralized Governments. "The media and the politicians are in splendid symbiosis. The airwaves promote corporate products,

²⁰Deepak Chopra, *SynchroDestiny: Harnessing the Infinite Power of Coincidence to Create Miracles*, London: Rider, 2003, 266.

²¹Quoted in Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point*, 443.

²²Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point*, 459.

consumer values, and the careers of friendly politicians. The politicians promote media deregulation, low taxes, and freedom from scrutiny of performance and public service.”²³ Power slides into the hands of a small number of transnational corporations that are less and less accountable to democratic structures. Someone has described the tragedy in this manner: humanity is made subject to the market; the corporations control the market subjecting every field of human activity to serve their interests. Mass media strengthens this effort by promoting consumerism.²⁴ Humans are reduced to the level of being mere objects.

Jeremy Sachs is certain that even his own countrymen, living in a free country, are allowing themselves to be manipulated by corporate propaganda. This is just what the propaganda machinery of totalitarian governments did a few decades ago. What today’s commercial media proposes is not serious, responsible thinking about the long term good of society, but overconsuming, overborrowing, overgambling, excessive TV viewing, and other addictions.²⁵ They are not asking people to sit back and reflect, study the consequences, or plan for the good of humanity, as Asian sages would have done. May be that is where thinking people could make their contribution.

There is a big difference between the needs of the rich and those of the poor. What the poor want are: food, clothing and shelter. But the rich want also to display their wealth. Their ‘wants’ are created for them by brand managers and advertising executives. Advertisers spend \$300 billion to manipulate minds, create cravings, whims, addictions, confusions, and quests for status.²⁶ They play on human weaknesses and aggravate them. They know that people spend less on enjoying things than for showing off what they have (for “conspicuous consumption”). Here the media rushes to their assistance. Taking advantage of this weakness of theirs, they beguile them into big spending, entice them with attractive things till they become addicted. How one would wish that media would do a more conscientious job in informing, educating, explaining, motivating, guiding, uniting, and strengthening.

²³Jeffrey Sachs, *The Price of Civilization*, 145.

²⁴Mark Hathaway, & Leonardo Boff, *The Tao of Liberation*, 16.

²⁵Jeffrey Sachs, *The Price of Civilization*, 133.

²⁶Jeffrey Sachs, *The Price of Civilization*, 134-135.

Today's TV heroes/heroines are not telling us to "buy less, think more, be critical, think about the future" as Asian prophets would have done. Drawn by the powerful pull of the TV, families have retreated from other families, and then family members, and eventually retreated from one another. It is curious that high TV viewing and low social trust go together. Scandinavian countries are low TV viewers, but have high levels of social trust. In the same way, not surprisingly, high TV viewing goes with junk food and obesity.²⁷ We little realize how vulnerable we are to manipulation by the vast Advertising and Public Relations Industry. Hindu and Buddhist traditions counselled the shedding of 'illusions'. And Jesus' mission was precisely this, "For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice" (Jn 18:37).

8. Government

When a ruler's personal conduct is correct, his government is effective without the issuing of orders (Confucius: Analects 12,5). It is because he (the sage) is free from striving that no one in the world is able to strive with him (Tao Te Ching 22).

All these evils would have found remedies if the right people were leading public affairs. Confucius thought, like Plato, that political power should be wielded by men of wisdom and virtue. For him the qualities the rulers needed most were: confidence of the people, food, weapons (*Analects* 12.7). In that order, not the other way round. If this teaching were taken seriously, how much money spent on arms by Asian nations could have been spared for food, education, and health! Even democracy does not necessarily guarantee the right priorities when elected members keep a distance from people. How much control are people given over policies, in fact over their own very destinies? Even the structures of democracy can be misused.

Rulers should make sure to consult people's interests if they wish to win their hearts. Confucius would say, "If you desire good, the people will be good. The nature of the gentleman is like the wind, and the nature of small people is the grass. When the wind blows over the grass it always bends" (*Analects* 12.19). Leaders should excel in civic virtues and their concern for the common good. Their goals should not be merely economic prosperity, but also social justice and

²⁷Jeffrey Sachs, *The Price of Civilization*, 139-141.

environmental sustainability. If they succeed in creating a set of values in society that are motivating and unifying, it will bring long-term benefit to that society.

Today governments are too closely linked with private interests, with their families, with business groups and corporations that remunerate them for their services. Jeremy Sachs feels that even military establishments are being controlled by megalobbies.²⁸ Corporate lobbies form a caucus in law-making bodies, shape policies, determine elections. They press for deregulation, cut taxes on the rich, reduce expenditure for the poor, and aggravate inequalities. Whenever in any nation the army is too closely linked with private industry, the nation condemns itself to militarization. And the better a nation is equipped for war, the greater the possibility of neighbouring nations seeking to arm themselves better still. Thus reckless military expenditure turns out to be counterproductive: it merely increases the insecurity. Meantime the poor are impoverished further, and the global arms industry thrives.

When corporations grow into giants (or when the government assumes the same role), they move away from workers and shareholders. Thus they lose credibility before those very persons who are most closely associated with them. All the more, average citizens, less informed and less interested, develop an attitude of distrust towards governments and corporations. So it happens that there is a growing suspicion in society about all institutions. This in turn has led to exaggerated views about personal freedoms, ignoring common norms and collective decisions: to let every individual pursue his or her satisfaction without restraint, and to accept the result as the best that can be achieved.²⁹

9. Communities and Cultures are Sources of Ethical Principles

A better understanding of the way that societies have evolved over the centuries can help. Let us look at the early days of human existence. May be, the communities that we call 'primal' (tribal) today can teach us how human society used to be at an earlier stage of its evolution. Each of them (tribe, ethnic group, 'volk') constituted a coherent, singular, unique group of people with its own internal norms. Each had its own set of beliefs, values, customs, and

²⁸Jeffrey Sachs, *The Price of Civilization*, 105.

²⁹Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, Vintage Books, New York, 1995, 565.

traditions. These traditions, rooted in culture, were inherited, not reasoned out (1), not debated and consciously developed. They are a ready source of ethical principles for each community.

(1) It is good to remember in this context that “reason (itself) may depend on something unreasoned,” though it may sound like a paradox.³⁰ But it is true.

Buddha’s immediate followers were members of tribal communities. He wisely recommended to each group to follow its own ancestral morality and tradition. He was fully aware that people’s values were closely linked to their own history and culture. Recognizing their usefulness and relevance, he brought some of those values and traditions into his monastic traditions (e.g. that of concord, unanimous decisions, respect to elders and to inherited code of behaviour). The intention of Confucius too was to build on traditional values in his times.

In recent years, several anthropologists (Margaret Mead, Melville Herskovits, Clifford Geertz) have been insisting on the validity of ‘primal’ traditions, and proposing them as correctives to the counter-values proper of modern society, like individualism, material-mindedness, insensitivity to nature, lack of community sense. Pride in one’s ethnic identity and culture does not necessarily lead to fanaticism, fascism, racism or fundamentalism, as it has occasionally done. As every community is proud of its own individuality and heritage, it should respect similar sentiments in others.

Everyone has the duty of making space for self-criticism. A broadminded person, while questioning his own ethnocentrism, understands and accepts a measure of it in others (people of other castes, tribes or communities: Brahmins, Hutus, easterners, westerners, Christians, Muslims, Hindus). Self-criticism is important because we know that no one is perfect and no culture is complete. Moreover, the more worrying problems of life are not ultimately economic or academic, but existential. They call for serious reflection. That is what made insightful Asians long for apartness, silence, contemplation, peace of mind, community-building, self-realization.³¹

³⁰Samuel Fleischacker, *The Ethics of Culture*, 54.

³¹Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point*, 440.

10. We Belong Together: Community, Family

Never in this world will hatred cease by hatred... hatred is ceased by love (The Buddha). In order rightly to govern the state, it is necessary first to regulate the family (Confucius).

We spoke of the need for beginning with our own individual tradition and community. However, we cannot live in isolation; we belong to each other. Nature gives us models of several patterns of inter-relationships and integrated systems: atoms, molecules, organs, body; individuals, families, tribes, societies, and nations. As the material world is made up of an inseparable network of linkages, and as the human body and nature itself are self-regulating systems, in the same way we belong to each other in an intimate fashion within the human family.

In this broken world today (broken families, damaged communities, fragmented society, divided humanity) we must return to the spirit of primal communities which were characterized by love, relationship and solidarity. We should invite each other into a fellowship of co-belonging. We need to construct new narratives to strengthen the bonds of our togetherness, building on what we have inherited.

It is precisely when we feel helpless that we begin to hear an inner voice, a soft whispering. A new inspiration awakens in our minds. A new insight is churned out from the running stream of the cultural wisdom that comes to us from our ancestors who were a little closer to the origin of things than we are. It is a spark that flies out of a mysterious collective mind (collective psyche, collective unconscious). It takes shape in some form of co-thinking. When we say we have a 'gut feeling', it is as if the Universe is revealing a secret to us. Things that look like chance, coincidence, or casual inspiration, have been pre-ordained towards an undefinable goal in some unutterable manner even before the foundation of the world. These are the ways in which our lives are shaped and our societies led forward. We cannot be blind to this Higher Energy that guides the course of history even amidst the ordinariness of our daily lives.

The true meaning and purpose of life is to realize the potential of every human being as a creative, active life-enhancing participant in life's festivity. The deeper the interiority of an individual and the clearer the collective identity of a community, the stronger the society to which they belong. Such persons know that they are participants in

the subtle mystery of an unfolding cosmic destiny. They know that when they do what is good (e.g. show an extraordinary gesture of generosity, make a unique discovery, have an intense experience of the divine, hit a target with perfection, write an inspired poem, give a spiritual message) they are in harmony with the Universe, and they are fulfilling a plan formed long ago (Eph 1:9-10) without realizing it. They will not allow any narrow self-interest to limit, diminish or trivialize this perception of reality.

When several scientific discoveries take place at the same time, we know that they come from the collective unconscious of humanity where those ideas had been floating for some time. An awareness of this truth itself translates into energy. Today's science tells us that subatomic particles are more like waves of information and energy than matter. Collective thought and energy, when used for positive purposes (in a human assembly, a team, a group, a community, country, in the world at a particular moment or era), the future is being built up. When we develop a holistic outlook, we see clearly how one reality completes another, and how one vision of life enhances another: economy with ecology, physics with psychology, scientific research with spiritual search, technology with mysticism, social struggle with self-realization. Thus we see that one gleam of truth is not complete without the other.

11. The Greater the Challenge the Greater our Determination

People in their conduct of affairs are constantly ruining them when they are on the eve of success (Tao Te Ching 64). If you shed tears when you miss the sun at night, you also miss the stars (Tagore).

If we feel that the world situation is in a bad shape today, that is no reason for being discouraged. It only gives us an additional stimulus to gather up our energies, clarify our goals and commit ourselves to remedial action.

One explanation that psychologists give for today's tense atmosphere everywhere is overcrowding in cities. Asian cities are growing into unmanageable monsters. There should be a concerted effort to search for ways of helping people to remain 'human' in the inhuman atmosphere of megalopolises.

Recent scandals caused by leading persons in society have been shocking the world and weakening the credibility of persons holding public offices. There is a feeling that public truth telling, like ethical

business, is on the way out. As a result, even the most solemn public statements (including UN declarations, reports to the parliament on the financial state of the nation, government accounts with regard to military expenses, or impressive advertisements) find few takers. The failure of some of these public agencies has damaged the image of others as well. There is a general distrust of banks, corporations, news media, the entertainment industry, unions, government and its agencies,³² and of public organizations in general.

The desperateness of these and similar situations itself should be a motivation for a determined search for solution. We believe with John Kennedy “No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings. Man’s reason and spirit have often solved the seemingly unsolvable—and we believe they can do it again.”³³

12. Judging for Oneself, Acquiring Authority

What is man that you have been mindful of him, mortal man that you have taken note of him, that you have made little less than divine, and adorned with glory and majesty (Psalms 8:5). One ignorant of the land asks of one who knows it; he travels forward instructed by the knowing guide. This, indeed, is the blessing of instruction; one finds the path that leads straight onward (Rid Veda 10.32.7).

Scientists sometimes describe the origin all things as though the Universe came into existence and developed through a series of coincidences. The Universe could go awry any time, but it has not. ‘The sense of purpose is all pervasive and deeply ingrained in the fabric of the universe’. If this provides the cue, we have hope that every problem invites its own solution. This invitation is extended to us, and solution may be reached only through our intervention.

Solutions dawn in the minds of ‘alert’ people, people who cultivate their inner consciousness. Such people acquire ‘authority’ when they know how to make their insights to respond to the needs and agonies of the people. This sort of ‘authority’ comes not from some ego-claims or self-pretensions, but from profound convictions about what is true and good, arising out of one’s constant attention to the deeper causes of things. In consequence, the solutions they propose appeal to the deeper-selves of others and convince them. People listen to those who address their anxieties with keen interest and propose solutions that

³²Jeffrey Sachs, *The Price of Civilization*, 12.

³³Jeffrey Sachs, *The Price of Civilization*, 262.

are realistic; who also teach them to transcend their own petty interests and small-mindedness as situation demands.

We are convinced like Margaret Mead that “a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”³⁴

13. Equipping Oneself

“The Master said....But if even a simple peasant comes in all sincerity and asks me a question, I am ready to thrash the matter out, with all its pros and cons, to the very end” (Analects IX, 7). O Lord, grant me such qualities of head and heart as would endear me to the enlightened and learned among us, to the ruling class and to all that have eyes to see (Atharva Veda 19,62).

In times of persistent troubles, there emerge spontaneously persons with a strong sense of mission. The first thing they do is to equip themselves adequately for the challenge; they gather knowledge. They begin with what is already within reach. Confucius said, “At fifteen I set my heart on learning” (*Analects* 2.4). He continued, “I silently accumulate knowledge; I study and do not get bored; I teach others and do not grow weary—for these things come naturally to me” (*Analects* 7.2).

Next, they commit themselves to the cause they have chosen with unflagging zeal. They do not give up because of difficulties, even repeated failures. “He’s the one who knows it’s no good but goes on trying” (*Analects* 14,41) said Confucius. A similar teaching we find in the *Bhagavadgita* which insists on perseverance in duty, work, action...detachment from fruits, from results, from remunerations and rewards. A lack of appreciation from others does not disconcert persons who are mentally set. For them, their commitment is everything. The pleading of Archimedes while he was being attacked by invading soldiers was not to spare his life, but not ruin his diagrams!³⁵

The most important thing for persons with a sense of mission in Asia today is to be acquainted with the foundational literature of various Asian traditions. The concepts, images and symbols contained in them remain deeply imbedded in the collective unconscious of respective communities. They refer to the origins of the human race,

³⁴Mark Hathaway, & Leonardo Boff, *The Tao of Liberation*, 214.

³⁵Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, 557.

its purpose and destiny. It is a symbolic interpretation of the spiritual journey on which *homo sapiens* set out centuries ago.

14. Is a Middle Path Possible? Can We Open out a Path to Peace?

This is my servant, whom I uphold; my chosen one, in whom I delight. I have put my spirit upon him. He shall teach the true way to the nations. He shall not cry out or shout aloud, or make his voice heard in the streets. He shall not break even a bruised reed, or snuff out even a dim wick. He shall bring forth the true way. He shall grow dim or be bruised till he has established the true way on earth (Isaiah 42: 1-4). You shall speak to men good words (Quran 2,83).

Let us take as an example a problem that has been continuously harassing the world: the problem of war and violence. At the end of the World War, the leaders of countries that had for centuries been in conflict (France, Germany and others) decided they would no further adopt the path of war to resolve problems. That was to become a historic decision. In them humanity itself was taking a new direction. And they succeeded. Many other countries joined them, and today we have the European Union. The impossible became possible.

Let us now look at our own continent. Inter-national tensions keep several Asian nations continuously on the defensive against each other. Deterrence only adds to anxiety. It is a repetition of the European drama of the early 20th century. Toynbee calls an excess of nationalism 'tribalism', each nation claiming to be a universe in itself 'self-contained and self-sufficient'. "All nation states, from the greatest down to the least, put forward the same claim to be enduring entities, each sufficient unto itself and independent of the rest of the world."³⁶ It had disastrous consequences. Asian nations are tempted to make the same mistake that Europe made a century ago, easily becoming over-ambitious, aggressive, and mutually provocative. Arms selling nations and companies fan the flame. Their business would collapse if there were no international tensions. So, conflicts continue, and, in each nation, growing social tensions leave many things unpredictable for Asia's future.

Nonetheless, peace is possible. In recent times we have seen how Mikhail Gorbachev made a radical option for peace in an unbelievable manner. If such enormously great changes could be

³⁶Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 34-35.

worked out in a peaceful way, similar successes are possible for those who set their hearts on a peaceful solution.

Buddha spoke of the middle path, Aristotle of 'moderation in all things'. If people had adopted a 'middle path', could not the economic sanction on Iraq which killed a million Iraqi children and other vulnerable people have been avoided? If there was moderation in all things, the attack on World Trade Centre would never have taken place. We need to seek sobriety and balance in all things.

15. We Need Communities of Vision

I neither stood still, nor sat nor lay down until, pacing to and fro, I has mastered that fear and terror (the Buddha). Oh men, direct your energies to promote the good of all mankind. Let your relations with all be characterized by love, peace and harmony. Let your hearts beat in unison with human hearts (Rig Veda 8,49,4).

When we are satisfied with quick-fix solutions as a regular habit, permanent solutions keep evading us. A dosage of drugs will not serve as a permanent solution to psychological problems. A few personality-development tips will not take away guilt feelings from human hearts. A double share of consumer goods will not satisfy the spiritual hunger of a society. Financial compensations will not make up for the injury inflicted on the culture and identity of a dying community (tribe, ethnic group). In the same way, a list of punishments will not be an adequate response to the needs of a society that is agonizing with pain for the absence of ethical and spiritual guidance.

A new beginning takes place when we gain access to the inner chambers of our hearts and stay for a while deep within ourselves, where we discover the profound nature of things. Yes, that depth is within the reach of everyone. That is why self-reflection can be extremely educative and many Asian sages have attached great importance to it. When we reach that level of our being, the nonlocal intelligence takes over. We are admitted into a subtle cosmic process³⁷ and even the least thing we think of or do can have vast consequences. It is as if a butterfly flapped its wings here and a storm took place on the other side of the globe after a week. We need today persons of deeper insight and 'communities of vision', who are able

³⁷Mark Hathaway, & Leonardo Boff, *The Tao of Liberation*, 247.

to anticipate the future and make it come about through committed action. Asians should not forget that "For nearly all of world history the richest and most developed societies have been in Asia."³⁸ Asia has shown the way on many occasions, it can still do in the future if it will remain true its identity and to its vocation.

Gandhi conveyed his message through religious silence and ritual defiance. When a person receives the 'mandate of Heaven',³⁹ his spirit is awakened. The 'Invisible Hand' becomes visible. So we feel confident to take seriously what Alfred Lord Tennyson said, "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of," which would mean, when we connect with the Universal and the Supreme, we come to be related to everyone else, to all living organisms, and ultimately to everything.

16. A Period of Transition: a Period for New Ideas and New Happenings

First establish yourself in the good; thereafter you should counsel others. The wise man who acts thus will be above reproach (Dhammapadam 12,2). For this purpose I was born, and to spread this religion God appointed men; go and spread righteousness everywhere (Guru Govind Singh).

The early 6th century Buddha's world was in the process of rapid cultural changes: from a tribal government to political empires, village economies to commercial cities, classless society to new social classes based on wealth, Vedic sacrifices to Upanishadic meditational thinking (*Kramer 73*). He lived at the rise of a new civilization, just as Socrates did at the rise of Hellenic civilization. Old patterns were making way for new ones. It can generally be said that the decline of a culture (civilization) takes place when its ideas, customs and social organization become lifeless and its internal harmony is lost; things stagnate, society is lost in superficial issues, uncertainty and confusion prevail. It is at this juncture that creative minorities appear proposing new solutions to the new problems.

The need for this arose in Buddha's times when communities (tribes) that had lived in isolation were compelled to live with others in a wider political dispensation. Traditional patterns of thought did not seem to hold good any more. The earlier moral norms looked unrelated to the needs of the times. In the composite, impersonal

³⁸Clive Ponting, *World History*, London: Pimlico, 2001, 9.

³⁹Fernand Braudel, *A History of Civilizations*, London: Penguin Books, 1993, 38.

atmosphere of an urban world people unused to mixed societies found themselves fendless. Buddha's message came into such world.

Though very contextual, his teaching was not meant for his own community only. It transcended his culture and had a universal application. His insistence on right understanding and right action opened out a path to new possibilities. He taught the shedding of the ego, remaining unconcerned about flattery or criticism....and concentrating on the right thought and right action. The Bhagavadgita too emphasized similar ideas. Buddha's Middle Path proposes moderation, avoids exaggerations so typical of innovators, provides new insights, points the way to wisdom and peace.

17. Inter-relating Civilizational Heritages

Cultivate the friendship of the good, cultivate the friendship of the noble ones (Dhammapada 6,3). You have become a disciple in order to benefit the world (Silbhadra, the Buddhist professor of Nalanda University, to Hiuen Tsang).

We can begin taking up the issues we have been discussing only within the framework of our own individual culture (each one his/her own) that gives us an identity and a collective being. While it provides the immediate support we need for our work, our efforts can attain sustainability only by building up relationship with a family of cultures, which in turn derive sustenance from a civilization.

(1) This reality called 'civilization' has something to do with our collective identity as a 'people', the memory of its past, experience of the present, and the hopes for the future. Our respective civilizations cannot be ignored as we pursue our goals to a common destiny.

It is true, our immediate consciousness is concerned about our existence in a political society; a civilization transcends this reality. While the political society is an association for practical ends, civilization is a spiritual communion.⁴⁰ It cannot be bought or sold, budgeted or planned. It is a spiritual heritage that has taken shape over centuries. Everyone within its influence benefits from it, and can make a contribution towards its development.

Great societies like those of Asia have a variety of civilizational heritages within the context of which we work out solutions to our

⁴⁰Christopher Dawson, *Dynamics of World History*, Wilmington (Delaware): ISI Books, 2002, 53-54.

problems. There is a renewed understanding and appreciation of these great civilizations of our continent in these days. They are showing their sturdiness amidst troubles and winning the attention and respect of the world. They have been great in their own times and have played an educative role in the global society in different periods of history. It is good to remind ourselves that the inspiring ideas that have roots in our ancient civilizations will prove ultimately more precious than the volume of accumulated capital or an abundance of natural resources that we boast of.

Communities whose innovative ideas turn out to be relevant and inspiring, gradually begin to make an impact on others. They transform the world. Arms assail and crush, economies entice and enslave, ideas enlighten, unite and motivate. We do not deny the fact that every civilization holds some negative elements within them as well. However, given the needed good will, the worst can be averted and the best ensured.

18. Societies must be Saved from Self-alienation

Do not walk proudly on the earth. You cannot cleave the earth, nor can you rival the mountains (Quran 17:39). A person of good acts and good, agreeable, and sweet speech, has no equal (Mahabharata, shanti Parva, 84,10).

Today civilizations and cultures are in crisis. They are in rapid transition. When the ideals and values on which they were built get marginalized, the society concerned goes through an experience of self-alienation and estrangement from its collective self. The insecurity such a process generates leads it to a frantic search for a substitute. If the society chooses to re-affirm the ideals and values on which it was established, it witnesses the revival of its ancient glory. If it fails to do that, it puts itself on the path of decline. At a moment of self-delusion, it opts for an alternative: glorification of an artificially constructed 'self', a distorted form of the original, an unreal collective identity. In the Roman Empire it took the form of emperor-worship, which ended up in statolatry. Effectively, it was the empire's self-worship, ignoring its real identity: in fact, worship of the 'false self'.

When nationalism verges on state-worship or cultural imperialism, it makes the same mistake: worship of a distorted form of a 'collective self'. Persons who advocate such forms of nationalism could learn from the mistakes of those nations who were the principal actors in

the last World War. They admitted their mistake, changed their mind and opted for peace. They hold out a message for today's state-worshippers and cultural nationalists, the fascists of the day. Those who rely on military might are placing too much trust on the strength of the "mindless fist" or the "congealed mind."⁴¹

Since every idea involves its opposite, even in the present difficult situation there is the possibility of a new hope-filled future arising, towards which we all can contribute. This paper is an invitation to do so. When cultural processes are undergoing rapid changes, very few people succeed to integrate the old and the new and make a synthesis of ideals, values, ethical norms, philosophical principles, and religious traditions. Malachi proposed to "bring fathers and children together again" (Malachi 4:6). We all can play a role in this endeavour. Jesus said, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets (*meaning*, earlier traditions); I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them" (Mt 5:17).

19. Gathering Round Great Values and High Ideals

Let my life be a life of dedication, let my vital breath, eyes, intellect and spirit be dedicated to service.; let my love and my understanding, my prosperity and my knowledge be dedicated to service. Let the service be made in a spirit of utter sacrifice (Upanishads). The journey of thousand miles begins with a single step (Tao Te Ching 64)

The unity based on the spiritual bonds provided by a 'communion of civilizations' will have the strength to bring together our diverse cultural and religious groups, economic and political interests, ideological and philosophical visions. When we begin to re-capture the spirit of our ancient civilizations, express it in today's vocabulary, and live them out in dynamic ways and relevant styles, we shall begin to regain our lost energies. When they are brought to actual life situations, they will manifest their strength and validity once again.

With growing instances of violence, corruption, erosion of culture, damage to environment, and poor governance, there is no denying the fact that our inherited ideas and values are in danger. And the threat comes from those trends in our society that weaken our moral fibre, social bonds, sense of common belonging, commitment to shared values and ideals, and those that promote sectarian thinking.

⁴¹Alvin Toffler, *Power Shift*, London: Bantam Books, 1992, 17.

Many of communities that were rural, agricultural, living generally in isolated villages, eking out an existence from seasonal labour, have moved into investment economy and global economy in a matter of a few decades. Along with these changes, new political forces (even radical ones) have arisen at national levels in a manner that could not easily have been foreseen before.

The New Economy is pulling people from their homes, families, religious beliefs, cultural roots, community identities, familiar terrain, and throwing them into the high seas of uncertainties. They have little sense of security or belonging, and experience the weakening of family and community support; no sure concept of the future, no consistent vision or convictions. They miss the cultural continuity that the presence of parents and grandparents, uncles and cousins used to give, the sanctions that the parents or the community used to impose, the certainties that a common heritage used to hand down, and the solidarity that the village community used to offer in moments of crisis. The entire value-system itself is under threat.

We need to stand aside and develop a detached view of things, withdraw for a while and reflect, move apart and meditate. We know that another world is possible. Victor Hugo once said, "There is one thing stronger than all the armies of the world: and that is an idea whose time has come." May be such a time has come for bringing human civilizations into a communion. However, this possibility can be made a reality only if we build up our inner sturdiness. Mahatma Gandhi said, "Such power as I possess for working in the political field has derived from my experiments in the spiritual field." No wonder he conveyed his message as much through religious silence, as by political interventions.

20. Gentle Action

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth (1 Cor 13:4-6). May my life, each breath of life, the eyes, the ears, the speech, the mind, the soul and all other acts and deeds, be put to the service of humankind (Yajur Veda 18,29).

I refer to Toynbee again, "In order to save Mankind we have to learn to live together in concord in spite of traditional differences of religion, civilization, nationality, class, and race. In order to live together in concord successfully, we have to know each other, and

knowing each other includes knowing each other's past... Historical forces can be more explosive than atom bombs... We must try to recognize and, as far as possible, to understand, the different cultural configurations in which our common human nature has expressed itself in the different religions, civilizations, and nationalities into which human culture has come to be articulated in the course of its history... We shall, however, have to do more than just understand each other's cultural heritages, and more even than appreciate them. We shall have to value them and love them as being parts of Mankind's common treasure and therefore ours..."⁴²

Our message is something similar. All we add is, "Be gentle as doves" (Mt 10:16); that is the 'Asian way' of communicating a message. For we know and appreciate the wisdom contained in such teachings as this: "Those who lead others in harmony with the *Tao* (Way) do not use force to subdue others, or attempt to dominate the world through force of arms. For every force there is a counterforce. Violence, even when well intentioned, always rebounds upon oneself" (*Tao Te Ching* 30). A non-adversarial approach to each other listening to other voices than our own..., readiness to accept the wisdom of the wider community...that is closer to the Asian way. Dhammapada says, "Do not speak harshly to anybody; those who are spoken to will answer thee in the same way. Angry speech is painful, blows for blows will touch thee" (X,133).

⁴²Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 47.