

Stillness and Dancing: some thoughts on ‘sustainability’

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“Here is a place of disaffection”

“Distracted from distraction by distraction
Filled with fancies and empty meaning”

“At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,”

(T. S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*, Four Quartets)

This paper, which offers some thoughts on ‘sustainability’, is in two main parts. The first explores ‘a place of disaffection’ ‘filled with fancies and empty meaning’, the second seeks out ‘the still point’ where ‘the dance is’.

1. Disaffection

When a new word enters the language or an old one is given new meaning, something is afoot. For it is hardly that a word can be discovered like a new kind of beetle not previously known to exist. Rather, it is likely that the new word is a response to a shift in perception, a response that seeks to express something *felt* but not entirely *known*. So that, given this unknowing, you might suppose that before we began to put this word into action, finding things for it to do, we might have spend a moment or two noticing where it had come from. ‘Sustainability’ is just such a word.

It was only in 1987 that the Bruntland Report first gave us the now familiar definition of ‘sustainable development’. That is:

development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Since then, the first Earth Summit (Rio) of 1992 and the second Earth Summit (New York) and the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change of 1997 have brought ‘sustainability’ into common use with ‘indicators of sustainability’, a literature of ‘sustainable cities’ and much else. Indeed, the government has recently sought views on a rethink of its ‘sustainable

development strategy’ and even talks about ‘sustainable growth’. The use of the word is, of course, closely associated with environmental concern in general and, more specifically, with environmental management. Most recently, in part through the development of Agenda 21,¹ it has stimulated a discussion of the links between the environmental, the economic and the social – sometimes, given our present devotion to financial accounting, referred to as the ‘triple bottom line’.

But if this word is much used it remains little understood, and my task, therefore, is not to look again at what ‘sustainability’ might *do* but rather to explore what it might *mean*, what it is that the word is seeking to express.

In this first part of my paper, therefore, I want to suggest:

- that the quest for ‘sustainability’ is the halting expression of a deeply sensed *unease* that goes to the core of our being;

and

- that the exploration of this concern requires a movement away from conventional notions of reality towards a new perception of reality, a *reality of relatedness*.

Unease

Let us start with this sense of unease. If we look carefully at the literature, we find, at first, what appears to be a wide and diverse range of matters that are deemed to be the subject of ‘sustainability’.² However, closer examination reveals that despite this apparent diversity, there is a set of concerns that are repeated again and again. These are: health; personal safety; transport; bio-diversity; the consumption of natural resources; and the production of waste.

It is clear that these concerns reflect a common unease – a sense that all is not well: that the future is being compromised by the present; that the

¹ Agenda 21 was one of the declarations signed at the Rio Earth Summit (1992) providing for sustainability to be delivered at the local level.

² David Cadman and Sarah Willis, *A Review of Sustainability Indicators*, School of Public Policy and Jackson Environment Institute, UCL, 1998.

present has been compromised by the past; and that our well-being, the well-being of our children and of the planet are at risk. If we probe to see where this concern lies, we find all sorts of feelings and emotions, not least feelings of fear. With salmonella, BSE, and genetic manipulation, we are fearful of what we eat. With pesticide run off and other kinds of leaching, we are fearful of what we drink. We monitor the quality of the air that we breathe and the beaches on which we play. And perhaps most alarmingly, we begin to see the catastrophic consequences of global warming and climatic disruption. 80% of us now claim to be concerned about 'the environment' and 60% of us would like to do more to help protect it.³

All of this has been discussed and set down at length and I am sure that it is familiar to you. But associated with this unease and, in part, its cause, is another product of the latter half of the twentieth century - a special kind of restlessness. This restlessness, sometimes captured in the phrase "time is money", is, of course, itself the product of a particular form of possessive materialism or craving, most often expressed in a narrow and crude language of economics and financial accounting in which the individual is reified, albeit as mere consumer. You know the story. Despite our supposed freedom (ominously referred to as our 'freedom of choice' as though the world was a market stall), both individually and collectively, we are urged, required, to consume. Furthermore, we are required to be dissatisfied with that which we have and to yearn for that which we have not. 'That which we have not' is then, of course, subject to continuous and deliberate reformulation, leading to endless dissatisfaction, a dissatisfaction that leads to anxiety and therefore to fear and unease. Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that the car has become such a powerful symbol of our age, for we are both literally and metaphorically driven in all that we do!

Relatedness

What is perhaps less well understood (or at least admitted) is that the way *things* are (sometimes called reality) is a consequence of the way *we* are - that reality is shaped by our way of being. To be more precise, in the context of this paper, we have still to learn (or at least admit) that the degradation of resources and the pollution of land, sea and air, are not an

³ The Harris Research Centre, *Concern About the Environment*, 1995.

accident but the direct consequences of this condition of restless materialism.

Nevertheless, despite this blindness, there are some signs of a growing recognition that reality is not made up merely of separate and unrelated parts but of relationships or, as I would prefer to call it, of *relatedness*. This is so in science, medicine, farming and even, I notice, in economics. To quote the distinguished scientist David Bohm in his book *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, it is now clear that:

...the entire universe...has to be understood as a single undivided whole, in which analysis into separately and independently existent parts has no fundamental status.⁴

Thus, it is becoming clear that ‘sustainability’, too, must express this new perception of reality - that, to be meaningful, it has to include the social, the economic and the environmental. So far, it is fair to say that whilst the link between the social and the environmental is increasingly recognised, the link with the economic is less well understood.⁵ This is, of course, not at all surprising, since in moving from a market economy to a ‘market society’,⁶ the dogma of our time has been that our present form of economy is in some strange sense omnipresent, representing a given set of value-free laws – rather like gravity. Whilst this is nonsense, now is probably not the time for it to be discussed. All we can say is that bit by bit the connections are being revealed.

There are even some reasons to feel mildly optimistic.⁷ A recent report commissioned by BT and entitled *The Responsible Organisation*⁸ suggests that the corporations of the new millennium will increasingly recognise that in undertaking their commercial activities they have to meet social and environmental responsibilities. And, indeed, that this will be to their economic advantage

Consider, also, the following quote from the 1998 Environment Report of the public company P&O:

For business, sustainable development demands far-sighted vision, one that goes beyond economics and requires the balancing of a broad range of social and environmental issues which are affected by business decisions.

⁴ David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, Routledge, 1980.

⁵ Op cit *A Review of Indicators of Sustainability*

⁶ John Gray, *False Dawn: the delusions of global capitalism*, Granta Books, 1997, 12.

⁷ See, for example, the growing acceptance of the need for environmental management as part of good corporate governance shown in the Building in the Environment survey of the FTSE 100 companies.

⁸ This report was prepared by The Future Foundation and copies of the report can be obtained by writing to them at 14-16 Cowcross Street, London EC1M 6DG (Tel: 0171-250-3343)

And, in the same report, the Chairman says:

I remain convinced that improving the Group's environmental performance contributes directly to the fundamental value of the business.

So, to summarise the story thus far:

- 'Sustainability' has emerged as a new word.
- In line with the ethos of our time, we have focused almost exclusively upon what it might do.
- We have not given attention to what it might express.
- It seems to express a common unease.
- It may give expression to a growing understanding of the way in which the economic, the social and the environmental are essentially inter-connected.
- I have called this perception a *reality of relatedness*.

2. Stillness and Dancing

We come now to the second and, for me, the most difficult, part of my paper. In our quest to understand that which 'sustainability' seeks to express, I have proposed a reality of relatedness. Not, perhaps, an elegant phrase. But leaving aside the limitations of language (or at least my limitations!), how might such a reality be understood or, rather, how might it be *experienced*? For it seems to me that there is a danger that unless we directly explore this question of meaning and meaningfulness we may simply take on the new word and attach it to our old bad habits.

I want to suggest that in trying to answer this question we may be helped by the teachings of the Buddha and, in particular, by the practice of stillness.

As background, perhaps I should say that I was brought up as a Quaker which, as you may know, is a form of Christian worship based upon the belief that there is 'that of God' in each one of us and that there is therefore no need for a priest to stand between us and the Divine, to be there to interpret the Mystery for us. Quaker worship takes the form of meditative or prayerful silence, broken only by spoken ministry from the body of the Meeting. Moderation and non-violence are dear to the hearts of Quakers. At their best, they are a gentle, kind and tolerant people. At their worst, they can be somewhat overly worthy and a bit of a wet blanket! They have a reputation for being sensible and pragmatic.

I am a birthright Quaker. My parents and my grand parents were Quakers. My father was an Elder of the local Quaker Meeting and a devout man. As a child, I was taken to Meeting each Sunday, for which my father would prepare by studying the scriptures. He would often speak at Meeting and I remember his strong voice as he read from his Bible, especially from the Psalms. From the age of 11, and until I was 18, I went to a Quaker boarding school. Silent reflection was therefore my daily bread as a child, as was a belief in moderation, tolerance and non-violence. It is not surprising, therefore, that, in later life, I should have been attracted to Buddhism, particularly to *zazen* or ‘just sitting’ and to *vipassana* with its teaching of tranquil alertness. However, I do not profess to be a Buddhist, only that I try to follow the teachings of the Buddha and to maintain a daily meditation practice.⁹

And so, in our search for this experience of relatedness expressed by ‘sustainability’, there are three particular aspects of the teaching to which I want to refer – the first relates to *livelihood*, the second to *perception* and the third to *reflection*.

Livelihood

First livelihood,

At the heart of the teachings of the Buddha there is a set of teachings, in part summarised in the Precepts, the Perfections and the Eightfold Path,¹⁰ that help us to see how we might live. Along the path to ‘sustainability’, three may be particularly helpful. They are:

- to refrain from causing harm;
- to be generous; and
- to be patient.

The first teaching, the teaching of *harmlessness* is perhaps the most obvious. It goes directly to our relationship with the land, urging us to be aware of the adverse impact that we may have on our environment and of

⁹ I recognise, of course, that there are great similarities between these teachings and the teachings of Jesus, especially as the latter are expressed in the Sermon on the Mount, the parables and the revelation of love and compassion as being of the essence. And if I do not refer to these, it is not because I exclude them but because, in this paper, I am referring especially to the teachings of the Buddha.

¹⁰ The Five Precepts are to refrain from: injury to living beings; taking that which is not freely given; immorality; false and malicious speech; intoxicating drink and drugs. The Six Perfections are to: give without selfish motive; be moral without self-righteousness; patiently accept life as it is; be vigorous in treading the Path; be aware of every action of body, speech and mind; act wisely on all occasions. The Eightfold Path is made up of Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. (Diana St. Ruth, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, Buddhist Publishing Group, 1988.)

the need to minimise that impact. Harmlessness is, of course, also relevant to our relationship with society, both at large and in person, and whether at work or at home. It favours simplicity. More generally, it suggests that we regard ourselves as being a part of and not apart from our environment. For, in accord with the teachings of Arne Naess and his ‘deep ecological approach’, it places humanity within nature. None of us, no living thing, no river or mountain, can be isolated and set apart. “An organism,” says Naess, “*is interaction*” (my emphasis).¹¹

The second teaching, the teaching of *generosity* also addresses the nature of this relationship and speaks of what may be a rather unfashionable openness of heart. In a culture of rights it speaks of responsibilities. In a culture of taking it speaks of giving. In a culture of censure, it speaks of forgiveness. It is the sister of loving kindness and compassion and thereby exposes the harmful effects of greed and hatred. Generosity challenges the economic convention of raw competition with the merits of co-operation and understanding. Again, whilst it urges us to consider others it also suggests that we extend that same generosity to ourselves. In the quest for sustainability, it provides a foundation for thoughtful action.

The third teaching, the teaching of *patience* has a very special place in this quest and, ironically, is, perhaps, the most subversive. In the world of having, we are urged to have now. As the slogan for a recent advertisement for a credit card has it – “Don’t put it off, put it on”. So, in a restless world, we are urged to take action at once. But the teaching of patience, with its gentle quality of acceptance, recognises the limits of our knowledge and of our ability to shape the world to our needs. It points to the damage that may be done by arrogant and thoughtless action. It teaches us to listen and to attend to the close at hand. In a world bombarded with news and views, it urges against the feeling that we have to have an opinion about everything, especially about matters that are beyond our experience. It makes a place for unknowing and therefore keeps us open to the radical possibility of being different from the way that we are now.

Rilke captures the subtle quality of patience:¹²

Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions as if they were locked rooms or books in a foreign language. Don’t search for the answers, which could not be given to you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, sometime far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answers.

¹¹ Arne Naess, *Ecology, community and life-style*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, (First Published 1989), 36.

¹² R.M.Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*. (This quotation was given to me by Stephen Batchelor and for a discussion on ‘unknowing, waiting and listening’ see his book *The Faith to Doubt*, Parallax Press, 1990, p.p.43-49)

So, in our quest for this experience of relatedness, the Buddha offers us harmlessness and simplicity, generosity and compassion, and patience and humility.

And there is also resolve. As Stephen Batchelor has it:

The path is maintained as a path only because of the tread of feet. Just as others have created this path for us, so by walking on it we maintain it for those who will come after us. What counts is not so much the destination but the resolve to take the next step.¹³

So, there is livelihood.

Perception

Then there is perception.

For many of us, brought up on a diet of reductionism, it is difficult to see and experience the world as a web of relationships. But lest we should think that this is an entirely modern problem, it is comforting to know that it is a problem that was addressed by the Buddha some 2,500 years ago in the Wisdom of Emptiness. And, insofar as I understand this wisdom at all, it seems to me that it may be of great help to us as we seek to comprehend the quality of relatedness that lies at the heart of sustainability.

As I have suggested in an earlier Temenos lecture,¹⁴ conventional wisdom proposes a singular and concrete reality, a reality not only of objects but also of products that can be possessed, and an absolute self that can possess them. The Buddha's teaching stands in radical opposition to such a notion and gives expression to a robust and practical perception of reality based upon contingency or, as I have called it, relatedness.¹⁵

According to the Four Noble Truths, suffering is caused by delusion. And release from suffering is found in the ending of delusion which, in turn, is found in the wisdom of emptiness. Delusion is caused by

¹³ Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, Riverhead Books, New York, 1997, 42.

¹⁴ This part of the paper draws on a paper by David Cadman entitled *Lost for Words* given to the Temenos Academy in November 1996 and published *Mandala*, Spring 1997

¹⁵ For a discussion of this see, for example, Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding*, Parallax Press, 1998; C. W. Huntington, *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Madhyamika*, University of Hawaii Press, 1984; Geshe Rabten, *Echoes of Voidness*, Wisdom Publications, 1986, (translated by Stephen Batchelor); and Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, Riverhead Books, New York, 1997

ignorance and by the way in which we thoughtlessly accept and, cling to, a self-centred reality.¹⁶ But when analysed in perfect wisdom:

... no object retains its appearance of independent reality ... ‘Things’ are merely contingent...¹⁷

It is this understanding of reality, the reality of contingency, that lies at the heart of emptiness and thus of the wisdom that leads to the end of delusion. It is a wisdom beautifully expressed by the metaphor of ‘The Jewelled Net of Indra’ in which each jewel reflects all the other jewels and is reflected in them.

But, most importantly, this wisdom is something more than a matter of the intellect alone. That is it is something more than a mere recognition of relatedness in the abstract. Rather, it is a matter of experience, a matter of *being in relationship*, now and at all times. It proposes that although the search for wisdom may require both study and reflection, it will not be found until it becomes part of our being. Thus, this wisdom is said to be expressed in two parts. First, there is the dualistic knowledge of intellectual discernment. And then, there is non-dualistic wisdom. The former is a necessary step towards the latter, which only arises when wisdom is actualised or effected in practice.

The wisdom of emptiness, is, then, a radical *wisdom of being*, for whilst we may speak of ‘being with’ or ‘being at one with’, it is clear that there is no separate being, *being is always a condition of relatedness*. And it is this insight that we require if we are to discover and experience that reality of relatedness which gives full expression to this new word ‘sustainability’.

So, to summarise once more, having proposed a reality of relatedness, we find that the Buddha’s teachings on Livelihood and the Wisdom of Emptiness offer an insight into what such a reality might mean. Thus, they offer us guidance in how we might proceed towards a better understanding of that which sustainability seeks to express, both in policy and action.

3. Reflection

And, finally, there is reflection – the moment of stillness and dancing.

Reflection is given little attention in a world of restless action. But, in the teaching of the Buddha, meditation is an essential part of the practice upon

¹⁶ There is a conventional reality in which individual discrete ‘things’ “present themselves in the context of everyday affairs” but there is no such ultimate reality. Op cit., C.W. Huntington, *The Emptiness of Emptiness*, 88.

¹⁷ Ibid.

which this robust and radical form of life is founded. Waiting patiently and with attention, meditation is, indeed, the bridge between the two forms of wisdom, the intellectual and the existential. It is the way to being, the practical path to awakening, the loss of delusion and the end of suffering.¹⁸

Preceded by the cultivation of qualities such as harmlessness, generosity and patience, and now in a state of mindfulness and inner peace, the separation of conceptual thought and sensations dissolve and, at the same time, “the ‘suchness’ of everyday experience” is realised in the context of relatedness.¹⁹ Understanding “becomes no longer a matter of interpretation or belief, but one of direct perception and unhesitating action”.²⁰ So, perhaps, we might give reflection a little more attention, a little more time, allow it to become a part of our way of being.

For there the dance is! Here and now as in the garden of *Burnt Norton* there is:

... neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.²¹

It is in this condition of vibrant stillness and mindful acceptance that the reality of relatedness is most keenly felt. And it is perhaps here that we may find that which sustainability seeks to express. For in the end, of course, words fail and we are brought to silence. For Eliot: “A condition of complete simplicity”.²² For Zen: “Nothing special!”

However, it should not be thought that we have arrived at a point of inaction. On the contrary this is the point where the dance is, the source of true action. Indeed, as Philip Sherrard makes clear in his description of the Orthodox contemplative tradition:

...contemplation is essentially the action through which we are led to a knowledge of our true identity and being and hence the true identity and being of other things as well...It is not (then) that contemplation is opposed to action: not only is it in itself a form – the highest form – of action, but also unless all other actions are informed by the knowledge that it embraces they will be performed in ignorance...To act well, we must first know. Thus, while contemplation and action are complementary, they are not on an equal footing: contemplation must precede action.²³

¹⁸ Op cit, Huntington., 112.

¹⁹ Ibid., 82.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ T. S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*, Four Quartets.

²² T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*, Four Quartets.

²³ Philip Sherrard, *Christianity: Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition* T & T Clarke, Edinburgh, 1998

In a distracted and sometimes thoughtless world, such advice comes as a breath of fresh air!

David Cadman, Wednesday 11th August 1999.

Published by the Temenos Academy, Spring, 2000.

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