

## With our thoughts we make the world

Nearly thirty years ago, in his now classic treatise, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Really Mattered*,<sup>1</sup> and in a chapter entitled 'The Proper Use of Land', Fritz Schumacher put it as follows:

Study how a society uses its land, and you can come to pretty reliable conclusions as to what its future will be....

... 'The Proper Use of Land' poses, not a technical nor an economic, but primarily a metaphysical problem.

In the simple question of how we treat the land...our entire way of life is involved, and before our policies with regard to the land will really be changed, there will have to a great deal of philosophical, not to say religious, change.

And so, in such a quest, in the journey to unravel this dilemma of values, I take as my guide the opening lines of the Buddhist *Dhammapada*, which are as follows:

We are what we think  
All that we are arises with our thoughts  
With our thoughts we make the world.<sup>2</sup>

And again, in another translation:

What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind.<sup>3</sup>

In this way, it seems to me, that the language that we use to describe our relationship with the land is made concrete in all that we build, in the way that we farm and in the ways in which we care for the Earth. What we do is a function of what we think, and thought, captured in the beguiling snare of language, defines and can constrain, and even distort, our reality.

For language, laden as it is with explicit and implicit values, does more than describe, it *governs*. Thus it is that it gives meaning and worth and, thereby, defines and circumscribes that which we take to be real. In this sense, 'reality' is not absolute but dependent, dependent upon the

---

<sup>1</sup> Fritz Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As If People Mattered*, Abacus, London, 1974, p.p. 84-96.

<sup>2</sup> I came across this version in a book on someone else's bookshelf and did not make a note of the source.

<sup>3</sup> *The Dhammapada*, Translated by Juan Mascaro, Penguin Books, England, 1973, p. 35.

language that we use to describe it. Furthermore, it is not simply dependent upon our own particular and chosen language but, most importantly, dependent upon a language that others have framed and that, knowingly or, more probably, unknowingly, we have accepted.

Thus, an engineer, a banker and a poet will survey the same landscape and see it quite differently from each other. To one, it is configured according to its geological form; to another it is property and collateral; and to the third it calls forth memory and imagination. With our thoughts we make the world.

If, then, we find that much of what we build is mean, ugly and out of place; if we find that our food and water is degraded and unclean; if we come to burn our cattle on funeral pyres and pillage the seas until they are exhausted; if we fear for the Earth and doubt our capacity to live in harmony with the rest of nature; we can not find our way out of the dilemma other than by challenging the very language and values that have brought us to where we are.

Our present language, the language that has come to shape our world, has, perhaps, two main characteristics. Firstly, it is *reductionistic*, which is to say that it is a language of parts and not of wholes. It is a language that encourages us to see ourselves as 'separate from' rather than 'a part of'. And, secondly, it is overwhelmingly a language of *economics, accounting and finance*, which is to say that it is a language of prices. It supposes that those things that are real, and of real value, are only those that can be measured by price. By contrast it implies that those things that are not readily priced are in some sense unreal and of no real value. Whatever the matter, at every place, we are urged to be 'hard-nosed' and to focus upon 'the bottom line', as though our whole lives could be measured in the columns of profit and loss and all that we value captured in a balance sheet.

Most especially, this language is based upon the proposition that what is expressed as 'the *real* world' is that which is tangible, concrete and fixed. It is made up only of those things that are capable of being measured, possessed and consumed. And the real dilemma is that this language, useful and productive in its own way but nevertheless limited in its relevance and usefulness, has come to be taken as having universal application. It is applied not simply to some kinds of science and to some kinds of market transaction but to all that we do. It has come to define and limit our experience. It is everywhere and governs all.

Thus, to paraphrase the *Dhammapadda*:

With our thoughts [of separateness] we make the world.

And:

...our life [has become] the creation of our [accounting] mind.

It seems to me, then, that if we are to check, or even reverse, the present degradation of the web of life we must challenge the universal application of this language; put it back in its place as a useful but partial language and seek another way of being. And might it be that this 'other way' can be 'a sacred trust?' I believe this to be so and I am encouraged in this conclusion by the words of Seyyed Hossein Nasr:

...the environmental crisis ... requires a very radical transformation in our consciousness, and this means not discovering a completely new state of consciousness, but returning to the state of consciousness that traditional humanity always had. It means to rediscover the traditional way of looking at the world of nature as sacred presence.<sup>4</sup>

It should be noted that Nasr refers to "the traditional way of looking at the world". And since it is HRH's insistence upon the importance of 'tradition' that is most often ridiculed and misrepresented, it is perhaps worth emphasising that in the context of 'the sacred' it has particular meaning. Here, and I believe in much that HRH has to say, the word 'tradition' is not *primarily* a matter of an aesthetic but rather an 'outlook' and a 'way of being', a way of being that is based upon reverence and upon compassion, and an outlook that sees in the manifest world of nature a glimpse of the mysterious and awesome order and harmony of the Divine. In this sense, the word 'tradition' is not determined by time, but by a set of values which testify to the existence of timeless principles – a living and not a dead tradition. This tradition is not 'of man' but 'of God'. And, ironically, this 'tradition' is, today, a radical, even dissident, proposition and one that is most upsetting to those who would have us accept the narrow and dismal confines of their exclusively secular world!

The 'tradition' to which I refer is not, of course, that which is represented by the sentimentality of nostalgia or pastiche but bears the much more profound sense that Marco Pallis refers to in his book *The Way and the Mountain*.<sup>5</sup> In a discussion of the relationship of the Active Life and the

---

<sup>4</sup> See Chapter ... above

<sup>5</sup> Marco Pallis, *The Way and the Mountain*, Peter Owen, Revised Edition, London, 1991.

Contemplative Life, he contrasts the ‘traditional outlook’ with the ‘anti-traditional outlook’ in this way:

...whereas the traditional outlook fosters a habit of always looking to the cause rather than to the effect in all orders...the anti-traditional [and we might say modernist] attitude encourages precisely the contrary tendency, namely the paying of more attention to applications than to principles, to effects than to causes, to symptoms rather than to the disease.... *This mental habit, which is all the more dangerous in that it is largely unconscious, lies at the root of most of our troubles...* (my emphasis).<sup>6</sup>

It is clear, then, if you follow this argument, that we have to change our ways and to do this we will surely have to learn to see more clearly. For since it is the case that we make our world with our thoughts, since there is an unbroken link between what we do and what we believe to be true, it seems to me that we have to accept that our dilemma is rooted in ignorance. In an age of hubris this is not at all easy. Especially it is not easy for those who have been encouraged to believe that they know what is true and, indeed, what is best for us. In this, I cannot help but quote the rather chilling words of a scientist responding last year to the thoughts of HRH in the Reith lecture:

People say we are playing God. But if scientists don't play God, who will?<sup>7</sup>

Who indeed!

Interestingly enough, by contrast, the object of the criticism, the Prince himself, had spoken of our need for humility:

Our most eminent scientists accept that there is still a vast amount that we don't know about our world and the life forms that inhabit it....<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, “Faced with such unknowns,” he continued:

...it is hard not to feel a sense of humility, wonder and awe about our place in the natural order. And to feel this at all stems from that inner, heartfelt reason which, sometimes despite ourselves, is telling us that we are intimately bound up in the mysteries of life and that we don't have all the answers.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> The words of Dr. James Watson reported in *The Daily Mail*, 17.05.00

<sup>8</sup> HRH The Prince of Wales, ‘A Reflection on the Reith Lectures’, *Temenos Academy Review*, Spring 2001, p.16.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

The teachings on humility, on reverence and on the virtue of what in Zen is called ‘beginner’s mind’, are a part of all the great spiritual traditions. It is also a part of these teachings that dispelling ignorance requires a mind that is clear, attentive and still; that contemplation is the root of true action; that meditation and mindfulness are the path to wisdom. And linked to this, it is clearly taught that wisdom cannot be attained other than by practice. The parables of Jesus were always given in terms of everyday experience, and in Buddhism, too, it seems to me, we are offered not only a way of knowing but also a way of being, a way of engaging with the world:

Subhuti asked [the Buddha]: “Is it possible to find perfect wisdom through reflection or listening to statements or through signs or attributes, so that one can say ‘This is it’ or ‘Here it is’?”

The Buddha answered: “No, Subhuti. Perfect wisdom cannot be learned or distinguished or thought about or found through the senses. This is because nothing in this world can be finally explained, it can only be experienced, and thus all things are just as they are. Perfect wisdom can never be experienced apart from all things. To see the Suchness of things, which is their empty calm being, is to see them just as they are. It is in this way that perfect wisdom and the material world are not two, they are not divided. As a result of Suchness, of calm and empty being, perfect wisdom cannot be known about intellectually. Nor can the things of the world, for they are understood only through names and ideas. Where there is no learning or finding out, no concepts or conventional words, it is in that place one can say there is perfect wisdom.<sup>10</sup>

In this way, then, and in this search for a new language and a new way of being, it would seem that to talk of a sacred trust is not to talk of something that is esoteric and apart. Rather it is to engage most deeply, most immediately and most entirely with the world. This focus upon heartfelt action, upon a *practical* response that meets the deepest needs of all people and of all beings, lies very much at the heart of this Foundation and, indeed, I believe, of all that HRH proclaims.

\*

In exploring the values that lie beneath our present environmental crisis, I have so far spoken of the causal relationship between our thoughts and our deeds, and therefore of the importance of our way of being, and of the need for mindfulness and attentiveness bedded within practical action. In particular, however, I have also spoken of the need to challenge the

---

<sup>10</sup> Taken from the *Ashtasahasrika* and quoted in *The Buddha Speaks*, edited by Anne Bancroft and published by Shambhala, Boston, 2000, p. 117.

language that at present shapes the way in which we build and make communities, for it is my belief that the experience that this language defines is narrow, particular and flawed.

Firstly, in proposing *a reality of parts* it fails to provide us with a sense of the whole. As the Buddhist scholar Stephen Batchelor puts it: “This habit of isolating things leads us to inhabit a world in which the gaps between them become absolute.”<sup>11</sup> Thus it is that we are bereft of meaning.

Secondly, in proposing *a reality of transactions*, this language lacks compassion. In focusing upon rights rather than responsibilities, it distorts and even denies relationships. In failing to take account of its own ‘external’ costs, it is often blind to the degradation and misuse of nature.

Given its narrow frame of reference and evident capacity for humbug, let alone failure, it is bizarre that this language, this reality, should hold such sway, but it does; and it has coarsened our touch, dulled our eye and, most importantly, taken our tongue. In many ways, it would seem, we are, quite literally, lost for words.

\*

Finally though, I would like to add something more on ‘relatedness’. A common theme in all the talks that have been given in this series is that we must come to see the world as related, connected and whole; that all that is is part of an intricate web of causation and dependency; and, indeed, that we should see ourselves as ‘a part of’ and not ‘apart from’. I have already spoken of the relationship between our thoughts and our actions and perhaps the most compelling idea of our time is the rediscovery of a *reality of relatedness*. In physics, in biology, in economics, in medicine, in the arising of the entire debate about sustainability, the limits of reductionism and the science of parts, is being exposed. So much has been written on this new reality that for the purpose of this essay I take it as read. But the challenge now is to know how to proceed in a more integrated way, recognising and responding to the reality of contingency and reciprocity.

I should add, of course, that such a notion of relatedness is not in the least bit new. It was, after all, the Greek, Heraclitus, who saw reality as an ever-changing river where everything flows.<sup>12</sup> It is there in the words of

---

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, Riverhead Books, New York, 1997, p. 77.

<sup>12</sup> Reference needed

Meister Eckhart and the Christian mystics. And, most especially, in the form of *paticca samuppada* or ‘dependent origination’, it lies at the very heart of the teachings of the Buddha. For it is taught:

One who sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma; one who sees the Dhamma sees dependent origination.<sup>13</sup>

Or, again:

That is when this is; that arises with the arising of this. That is not when this is not; that ceases with the cessation of this.<sup>14</sup>

Such a notion is material for another lecture. Nevertheless, so much of our education has been counter to this view that we need to learn not just new skills but a new way of seeing the world.

At one level, for the Foundation, this means developing new approaches to urban regeneration – meeting the social, economic, environmental, spiritual and cultural needs of people in a coherent way – and developing the connection between our programmes of education and our portfolio of projects. It also means working to establish links beyond our boundaries by the creation of our new Network for Urban Affairs, which will be a ‘one-stop shop’ providing information about, and giving on-line access to, practitioners, products and projects that share the over-riding theme of integration, ‘organic’ urbanism and the celebration of traditional building crafts.

But beyond this, I am left with a feeling both of profound excitement and unease. I feel like someone standing at the very beginning of a journey and hearing what Joseph Campbell refers to as ‘the call to adventure’:<sup>15</sup>

The first stage of the mythological journey [the ‘call to adventure’] signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown. This fateful region of both treasure and danger may be variously represented: as a distant land, a forest, a kingdom underground, beneath the waves, or above the sky, a secret island, lofty mountain top, or profound dream state...The adventure may begin as a mere blunder...or still again, one may be only casually strolling, when some passing phenomenon catches the wandering eye and lures one away from the frequented paths of men.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> *Majjhima Nikaya*, Tr. by Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikku Bodhi, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 1995, Sutta 28.28, p. 283.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Note 408, p.p. 1231-2

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Paladin, London, 1988, Chpt. 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 58.

In a world so taken up with rationality and intent, with business plans and five-year strategies, is it not especially thrilling to be told that ‘the adventure’ is always there and always about to begin; that we might stumble upon it when we least expect to or “when some passing phenomenon catches [our] wandering eye and lures [us] away from the frequented paths of men”?

And so it is that I feel that this exploration of the reality of relatedness will take us to places of which we have little or no knowledge, to “fateful region(s) of both treasure and danger” as Campbell puts it. But, at the same time, I have a sense that these realms will seem familiar when we arrive. Many of our present opinions will be challenged but we may well recognise the ground upon which we come stand, for our past, our present and our future are not disconnected events but chapters in a single and unfinished story.

I hope that this series *Ecology: A Sacred Trust* will have encouraged us to accept the ‘call to adventure’, to have the courage and the determination to challenge convention, in the words of HRH, to “rediscover a reverence for the natural world”<sup>17</sup> and to be attentive to where this takes us – in all that we do.

\*

And so we come to the end of the beginning. In his great teaching on relatedness, the Buddhist sage Nagarjuna said:

I bow to buddhas  
Who teach contingency  
...  
And ease fixations.<sup>18</sup>

If we are to tackle our present ecological dilemma as if the task were a sacred trust, will we have the courage to ease fixations, like the Grail seekers taking the path of uncertainty and entering the darkest part of the forest? Or will we cling to the comfort of what we have come to accept and keep our fingers crossed? Who can say? But, as the *Dhammapada* tells us, of one thing we can be sure:

---

<sup>17</sup> See earlier quote taken from HRH’s Contribution to the Reith Lectures, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Batchelor, *Verses From the Center*, Riverhead Books, New York, 2000, p. 83.

What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind.

David Cadman, 2002.

Published in *A Sacred Trust*, Temenos Academy, 2002.

Not to be published without the author's consent.