

Reflections on the State of the World — 6

Political Freedom and Spiritual Liberation

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

Proposition 1: “Politics and spirituality don’t mix.”

Proposition 2: “Take care of your inner life and the rest will fall into place automatically.”

Proposition 3: “An apolitical spirituality is short lived.”

In my teens, when I first set foot on the self-transcending path, I wholeheartedly subscribed to Proposition 1, which I heard many times in so-called spiritual circles. I was optimistic about the possibility of attaining enlightenment in this life and regarded politics as one of the most noxious and obnoxious aspects of material existence, an untrammelled exercise of the ego and therefore as being by definition contradictory and inimical to spiritual life. Subsequent experience taught me to modify my naïve enthusiasm. I came to appreciate the formidable challenges on the spiritual path and that enlightenment requires a long, sustained effort of self-transformation. But I wrongly continued to think that the spiritual path could and even should somehow be trod apart from the world.

For most of my adult life, I believed that if only I took care of my spiritual life, everything else would neatly harmonize with my transformed mind and psyche. I spent many years studying the *Bhagavad-Gita* in depth, because I sensed that the intrusive world could not be ignored but had to be dealt with in some ways. I didn’t feel altogether comfortable with Krishna’s militaristic solution and had a difficult time justifying his Karma-Yoga on moral and spiritual grounds. I concocted all sorts of extreme situations in which I could see myself jump into action to defend myself or my loved ones with full martial vigor and conviction. I envisioned an invasion of Earth by utterly evil-minded aliens from outer space and asked myself how I would respond in such an imaginary scenario. In particular, could I see myself killing those aliens to save my own life, that of my family, or our human civilization as a whole? I came up with contrasting answers at different times. In the end, I still felt qualms about taking someone’s life, even the life of an ugly, terrifying alien being who had no sensibilities or emotions that I as a human could recognize or identify with. I always ended up dismissing the whole issue, because the scenarios I created simply seemed too fantastic or far-fetched.

What about the inhumanities of a Nazi concentration camp? Would I have taken the life of a Nazi functionary to save my life or that of fellow inmates? Again, I balked at the hypothetical nature of those questions. At the root of my reluctance was a deep-felt reverence for all life and the conviction that I ought not to sit in judgment of others but trust the moral law of karma (“As ye sow, so ye shall reap.”)

It is perhaps easier to adopt a pacifistic stance when one firmly believes, as I do, that the present life is not one's only lifetime but that there is life after death many times over both in the material world and more subtle regions until finally spiritual liberation ends the tedium of such a reincarnational cycle.

Surprisingly, well over two millennia ago, Krishna cited the exact same repetitive cycle of births and deaths to justify his militaristic morality. He felt that, given the right inner attitude, his disciple Prince Arjuna had the right to slay his enemies and without running the risk of reaping undesirable karmic consequences for his actions. Krishna also reassured the prince that Arjuna should not fear being slain himself, because this would necessarily only affect the body and not his immortal Spirit.

When I turned to practicing Buddhist Yoga in the 1990s, I felt immediately at home with Buddhism's strictly pacifist ethics and started to seriously question the militaristic bent of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. At one point, I concluded that Krishna's ethics left the door wide open for ordinary mortals to commit evil actions that would have long-lasting karmic consequences. Who, I wondered, could truly kill an enemy even in a so-called just war without egoic motives and emotions being involved? Would it not require a fully enlightened being to be free from egoic reactions? If so, would such a being need any counsel about how to act?

Obviously, it behooves a moral individual to oppose war, oppression, exploitation, unlawful coercion, and so forth. There is no justification for doing harm to others at any level of intensity. In the same vein, I think, there is no justification for armed conflict in order to achieve peace. In fact, history shows that peace achieved by violent means is transient, just as mighty empires assembled by aggressive actions tend to be ephemeral.

As a spiritual practitioner, I have long had an innate resistance to engage in politics, which seemed to me the darkest, murkiest, and most sinister part of worldly existence. It smacked to me of power-hungry, ruthless egomaniacs and their weak-willed, opportunistic minions. I felt disturbed by the mere existence of such people. Yet, as it slowly dawned on me, politics is inextricably enmeshed with so-called civilized life. Politics, I recognized, has shaped millennia of cultural experience often for the worse. For the longest time, however, I refused to assume responsibility in the political domain. At that time, I was relieved to be unable to cast my political vote in the countries in which I opted to reside but never wanted to become a citizen of.. I was slow to learn that humans are political animals and that politics won't go away simply by ignoring it.

Now, in my sixties, I see most clearly the inescapable truth of Proposition 3. We cannot escape the political reality, and if we do not watch out, the political reality will get the better of us. I am referring to World War I, World War II, and all the other wars before and since. These tragic wars all interrupted mainly peaceful lives, as well as maimed, killed, and caused great devastation. Not least, they gave rise to fear, insecurity, and unrest. The majority of people, as ever, did not have their hearts set on conquest, glory, or even unlawfully obtained bounty. They wanted to live in peace and to be allowed to go about their own business without interference and the kind of hardship that is associated with war and its aftermath.

It was skillful demagogues who succeeded in agitating the public's will and in herding them in the wrong direction. As the nineteenth-century historian, poet, and politician Lord (Thomas Babington) Macaulay expressed it in his *History of England* (vol. 1, Chapter 5): "In every age the vilest specimens of human nature are to be found among demagogues." The noteworthy skill of a demagogue lies in his ability to mimic the biased thoughts and prejudicial emotions of the masses and thereby make them believe that they are as clever as he is and that therefore they ought to adopt his doctrinaire ways of thought.

With the systematic "dumbing down" of modern society, it is becoming increasingly easy for a demagogue to convince the public of his correctness and his power-mongering ways. An ill-educated public that has lost the ability to think for itself is easily led, or misled. Witness the demagoguery of the Third Reich and the present U.S. government! The latter, under the impetus of the 9/11 tragedy and the so-called "war on terrorism," has lamentably succeeded in robbing the American people in a very short span of time of many of their hard-won constitutional rights. Yielding to political (and obviously commercially overdetermined) pressures from its neighbor to the south, the Canadian government is dangerously revealing a similar propensity.

In early 2008, the minister of Canada's governmental department of health (Health Canada), introduced a potentially devastating bill—C-51—which, if passed, would not only devastate the citizen's state of health but also their constitutionally guaranteed democratic freedom to determine their own healthcare and to exercise free speech. If Bill C-51 is passed by Canada's Legislative Assembly, it would make criminals of possibly millions of people who are presently in possession of natural products and substances that help them stay healthy or recover their health.

Once a democratic constitution starts to unravel, there is no telling where this process will stop. When freedom of speech is restricted, the government essentially has free reign to dismantle the rest of the constitution. Dissenters will find themselves in jail or become silenced by the fear of social ostracism or by the mere threat of losing their physical freedom. How long would it be before religious freedom would be seriously curtailed or be rendered null and void?

In light of numerous examples from history, it is easy enough to envision a time when it is no longer possible to safely follow the principles of one's chosen spiritual path, one's personal convictions. Thus, it is easy to see that an apolitical spirituality, which avoids the issue of personal spiritual responsibility, is not only dangerous but in all probability short-lived.

Left to their own devices, without the educated public's oversight, politicians are not known for engaging politics in favor of the people. Therefore, on close inspection, an apolitical spirituality is inherently dysfunctional, as it tends to favor the paternalism of governments and the narcissism of politicians, who are all too often in cahoots with corporate interests.

As Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States, observed long ago: "The price of freedom is eternal vigilance." Jefferson, a genius by any standards, understood that such vigilance is possible only when the public is well educated, especially about the laws of the country and the democratic process.

Mastery of oneself, as the Stoics of Greece and the yogins of India praised as the highest ideal, is indeed immensely desirable and beneficial. If, however, the pursuit of such mastery leads away from social and political responsibilities, it remains incomplete. Epictetus' notion that "No man is free who is not master of himself" is only one part of the equation. To this we must add that "No man is master of himself who is unable to set others free." And this ability to enable others to enjoy the freedom to cultivate a self-transformative life must be exercised in the context of a life of social and political responsibility. As I see it, this is precisely the ideal life of a Buddhist *bodhisattva*, whose accomplishment in the virtue perfections, like nonharming, patience, generosity, and so forth, is meant to uplift not only himself or herself but every living being on this Earth.

To put it differently, the ancient Yoga of a merely vertical, ascending spirituality may have been appropriate in days long past, but today a politically engaged spirituality is called for in order to ease the burden of all our human and nonhuman fellow beings in the midst of the present environmental emergency.

That Yoga and political responsibility are far from incompatible was made clear by the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo, who was not only a yogin and sage but also a highly educated philosopher and, for many years, a politician. There is also the exemplary example of Mohandas K. ("Mahatma") Gandhi, who observed ten months before his assassination: "[I]f I seem to take part in politics, it is only because politics encircle us today like the coil of a snake from which one cannot get out, no matter how much one tries." (*Harijan*, March 30, 1947, p. 85) Politics, I would argue, has "encircled" every human individual throughout so-called civilized history.

Recognizing this, Sri Aurobindo—inspired by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda and influenced by Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Rabindranath Tagore—threw himself into politics for more than a decade and even suffered a year of incarceration for his revolutionary activities. He was among those luminaries who laid the foundations for India's subsequent independence from the British Empire.

Today, our special challenge is to become fully aware of, and actively oppose, the all-pervasive influence of corporatism spread with particular intensity by the American Empire, which has extended itself into just about every corner of the world. By the way, one does not have to hate America or Americans to see the truth of this. Hatred is always an unhealthy manifestation of our own psychological shadow. One way of sanely countering greedy imperialism is by retracting the many tentacles of our own personal consumerist tendencies, by applying political thinking to where we stand.

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