

Identifying the Stakes Unleashed by the Disconnection

Our collective capacity to correctly identify problems is critical to their solution. And that faculty has been significantly weakened by the disconnecting factors already mentioned in this chapter. The consequences of our multi-dimensional disconnection may even be existential. With the combined momentum of powerful structures and rapidly accelerating technology, we are dealing with unprecedented problems in virtually every domain: human, ecological, civic, political, and economic. Just the environmental domain provides us problems that may be too daunting to solve: climate change; accelerated extinction of plant and animal species; plasticized oceans; toxic air, water, and food; deforestation; toxic waste disposal; soil erosion, etc. Each one of these conundrums brings a galaxy of its own sub-problems. The unsustainability of our systems is written on the wall. Whether we can read it is not a function of our ability but rather that of our proclivity (to face the reality). The same human vulnerabilities that made us create these problems are now thwarting our ability to even recognize their in-our-face presence.

Without denying the division and sectarianism that is openly created by this or that religious establishment, our religious traditions do provide us the theoretical and practical basis for a transformation. And that resource can be leveraged, individually and collectively. The sections below focus on the importance of referring to our spiritual teachings and some relevant ideas from those teachings that would be helpful in our social conscience.

Religious Guidance to Mitigate the Disconnection: Spiritual and Societal

As a call to find the true inner self, Rumi begins his poem *Seeking the Source* with the following words:

a voice out of this world
calls on our souls
not to wait any more
get ready to move
to the original home.⁷⁵⁰

Our spiritual traditions provide fairly clear frameworks of traits, habits, and practices that are harmful and that disconnect us from our spiritual essence (causing “rust” in our hearts). The Decalogue (Ten Commandments) are universally known. Other religions provide similar guidelines for social practices and moral observances. Societal concepts of service and sharing are also highly emphasized.

In Jainism and Hinduism, the *vratas* (vows) and the *yamas* (restraints) recommend mutually similar principles: non-injury, truthfulness, non-stealing, chastity, non-attachment (*ahimsa*, *satya*, *asteya*, *brahmacharya*, and *aparigraha*). This goes on to constitute a comprehensive framework. Jainism adds conduct and discipline vows (*guna* and *shiksha vratas*), and then there are differences in requirements separating the lay person from the monk. In yoga philosophy, the five *yamas* listed above are supplemented by five *niyamas* (virtuous observances)—purity, contentment, self-discipline, self-study, and surrender.⁷⁵¹ The Five Precepts in Buddhism as well as Taoism also provide similar teachings.

In his treatise titled *On Detachment*, Meister Eckhart writes:

After a thorough study of these writings I find, as well as my reason can testify or perceive, that only pure detachment surpasses all things, for all virtues have some regard to creatures, but detachment is free of all creatures. Therefore our Lord said to Martha, ‘*unum est necessarium*’ (*Luke 10:42*), which is as much as to say, ‘Martha, he who would be serene and pure needs but one thing: detachment.’⁷⁵²

Aparigraha (non-attachment) is a conceptual repository that provides incessant guidance and helps set a state of mind inherently conducive to every teaching of every spiritual system. Non-attachment is about release, relief, or relinquishment—bringing about a state of freedom. For the lay-person, renunciation—complete rejection—is usually not the path being promoted as the manifestation of non-attachment. By definition, the concept of Middle Way in Buddhism as well as in Islam, for example, would not be promoting extremes: the middle way is the middle way. One could

thus live a comfortable life, responsibly enjoying nature's bounty and still be practicing non-attachment.

Sikhism identifies five vices to be avoided: lust, anger, greed, attachment, pride/ego (*kam, krodh, lobh, moh, and ahankar*).⁷⁵³ The avoidance of these vices is then to be supplemented with the observance of five virtues (truthfulness, contentment, compassion, humility, love), remembrance of God (*Simran, Naam-Japna*), and complying with God's directions (*Hukam*) as well as the civic responsibilities of service and sharing (*seva, vand chakkna*). An example of *seva* (service) is found in the *langar*—community meal—which is served at every *gurdwara* without any distinction accorded to one's status, gender, religion, etc. Everyone is welcome and everyone will be served as an equal.

There is something intriguing and instructive about the five vices in Sikhism. "*Punj chor*" is the Punjabi expression used for these vices. The term literally means "five thieves." That's a novel and revolutionary way of looking at religious proscription. These vices are not just things one should avoid to meet some external requirement. Rather, these are "thieves" that, if allowed to operate within one's psyche, would steal something from that person—something extremely valuable that is inherent in, and innate to, that person.

We must therefore answer the cardinal question: what is that something these thieves are trying to steal? When deliberately pondered, we can see that these thieves are out to rob us of our potential to reach our spiritual destination. Another way would be to say that these thieves take away from us the tendency to ask the question: Who am I?⁷⁵⁴ The irony is that after the theft, one would mostly be robbed even of the awareness of a loss (though the awareness may be regained, and the theft may be undone). Simply put, these thieves reduce the human to its lower self that has lost its depth in intellect, perceptivity and spirituality—one would be left to live as another animal who functions just on its base instincts.

We'll summarize two key points here. First, it is important to realize that these simple dos and don'ts contain within them an aspect of deep spiritual transformation. To understand them

simply as ethical rituals or moral niceties would miss the point: that these injunctions are doorways to the spiritual journey and attainment. Second, in many ways, these goals are not as difficult to attain. Grasping the essence of even one such teaching inevitably leads to facility with other teachings, thus helping us overcome the disconnection.

In a way, the message of this section was encapsulated in Krishna's advice to Arjuna:

Knowing the self beyond understanding,
sustain the self with the self.
Great Warrior, kill the enemy
menacing you in the form of desire.

—*Gita* 3:43

Turning Around and Remediating the Disconnection

If we humans are willing to collectively effectuate the needed directional change, then what is our guiding approach or framework that we can agree upon? If we believe that Dr. King's formula (restructuring and revolution of values) still offers a good approach, then what "source of values" do we consult to bring about such a "revolution?" Would the Enlightenment philosophers be able to guide us? Or perhaps our current legal system or Hollywood; or perhaps the corporation, politician, and media; or even the university? If current structures are not sufficient enough to deal with the challenge, what options then do we have?

Current and the previous centuries have seen numerous movements that brought together various civic circles and spiritual traditions to achieve a common objective to serve humanity (the movement to abolish Apartheid in South Africa is an example). Such movements represented "religious" as well as "secular" elements in the society. The need of the present time also is a confluence of such waves so we may collectively enunciate, and coalesce around, shared principles that are true to the pluralistic beauty of our existence in all dimensions.