

## **Soil, soul and society**

SATISH KUMAR

Many historical movements in the world have three key words that express their spirit. During the French Revolution, for example, the key words were *liberté, égalité, fraternité* and in the American Declaration of Independence you find the words “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”. “Liberté, égalité, fraternité” is a very nice trinity but it is very human: human liberty, human fraternity, human equality. In the same way, in the Declaration of Independence, life is primarily human life, liberty is human liberty and happiness is human happiness. So these three words represent a more human-centred world view. We have come to think that somehow human beings are at the centre of the universe, as the most important species, and the earth’s other species are all in the service of the human species. Indeed, we have a human-centred world view.

But that world view is no longer valid. We are realizing more and more that we are interdependent on other species; we are not separate, we are not the rulers of the world, here to do what we like, but we have to take care of the other species because we are all made of each other, we are all related, we are members of one earth community. Therefore, we need a new trinity to replace human-centred ones. Even the trinity adopted by the New Age movement: “mind, body and spirit”. Again, it’s the human mind, human body and human spirit. We need a new trinity that is holistic and more inclusive, which embraces the entire planet earth and not just the human species. We need a philosophy, a science, a religion, and a legal system which is for the benefit of all living beings, for everything not just for the benefit of humankind.

So I propose a new trinity. At the top of the trinity is the soil. Now soil does not only mean dirt; soil represents the entire natural world, since without soil there is no food and without food there is no life, no trees, no forests. So soil represents life on earth. The sun nourishes the soil, which nourishes the other species. The rain nourishes the soil and then from the soil we get other nourishment. Soil represents in one word all of natural life, including human life. So we need to learn to take care of the soil.

In our human-centred world view, in our education, our science and technology, our universities, we think soil means dirt, and dirt means dirty. But dirt is not dirty; dirt is the source of life. Without dirt there is no life.

Soil means all natural life. And that natural life means that we are related to and dependent on the soil. We think food comes from the supermarket; we don’t grow food these days. If somebody grows food, we think: “Oh poor man, peasant, labourer; he is not educated so he has to grow food.” If you are educated then you don’t grow food. You sit at

your computer and your food comes from some poor country. You don't want to grow food because growing food is a sign of backwardness. If you are advanced, educated, rich, then you manufacture cars or you manufacture televisions or computers or some other gadgets.

Growing food has become a sign of backwardness and underdevelopment, something that only peasants do. The word "peasant" has become an insult, more or less: "undereducated peasants". I want to change that. I want to say that we must touch the soil; we must put our hands into the soil. How many times do you touch your mobile phone every day? Maybe a hundred times? How many times do you touch the soil?

Your mobile phone will not keep you fed. But by touching the soil you get food and nourishment. Food will not come out of the computer or a motor car; this is very simple and elementary wisdom that we have forgotten. Of course we want food, and somebody must grow it. We don't know where it comes from, we just go to the supermarket and get our food. So by saying that the soil is important, we are changing the whole world view. The scientific, technological, modern world view must change: while it is important to go to university and sit in the classroom, and it is important to do your shopping, it is also important to enter the garden and sow seeds and to see plants grow; to see flowers blossom and the fruit ripen. That is as important, if not more important, than sitting in the classroom and in the office.

Soil is the source of life. If we take care of the soil, the soil will take care of everybody else: animals, forests, trees, humans, even birds. Birds can fly in the sky but they have to come down to the earth to eat. If they just remain in the sky flying, they won't get food and so even the flying birds have to come to the soil.

Soil is so important, yet we have forgotten about it. Yes, we humans are important and precious but the human species is only one out of the 7.8 million species on earth and we are only one of them. We are not the kings, we are not the imperial power. Japan was once an imperial power, as was Britain, but all those imperial powers are now fading and even the ultimate imperial power – human imperialism over nature – has to go. At the moment humans are behaving as if we are the imperial power upon this earth and we can do what we like. We can cause global warming, we can change the climate, we can alter the soils, we can destroy the rainforests, we can overfish the oceans. That attitude must change.

That is why I put the soil first. We are part of this healthy web of life. It makes us humble; to be human is to be humble. The word "humus" means soil. "Humid", "human", "humility" and "humus" all come from the same root. And so the soil is fertile yet humble.

Once the Buddha was sitting in meditation, with his right hand above the palm of the left hand, and someone came to him and asked: "Lord Buddha, you teach compassion, forgiveness, love and forbearance – from where did you learn all these wonderful qualities? Who is your teacher?" And the Buddha lifted his right hand in a pose called *Bhūmiśparśa mudra*, or "touch the earth" posture. In other words, he said: "I learned my forgiveness, compassion, friendship, kindness and all the wonderful qualities of love, beauty, unity and generosity from the earth." The word "*bhumi*" means soil; touching the soil.

If you visit some temples, you will see Buddha with one palm facing up and one palm facing downward. He is pointing towards the earth and soil. So what do we do with the soil? We dig it, we plough it, we walk on it and yet it forgives us. When you sow one seed, how many seeds do you get back? Take one apple seed, a tiny, tiny seed. You can barely see the seed, it tastes bitter and when you break it, there is nothing inside. But in that seed is a whole tree! The seed that you plant in the soil grows into a tree and how many seeds will it give you back? In one apple, you get three or four seeds and if you planted one and you got four seeds from one apple, how many apples would you get and for how many years? Not one, five or 10 but 50 years! From one seed, 50 years and thousands and thousands of apples. Look at that apple, the generosity of that seed.

Do you know where the Buddha was enlightened? While sitting under a *Bodhi* tree. My mother used to say that Buddha got enlightenment because he was sitting under a tree. And we don't achieve enlightenment these days because we don't have time to sit under trees. We are so busy! We have no time to sit under a tree. We have no time to touch the soil because it is too dirty.

A tree has intrinsic value. That is, a tree is good not only because it gives me aesthetic pleasure – in that I get aesthetic experience by seeing beautiful cherry blossoms, therefore the cherry tree is good – no, the cherry tree is good in and of itself, even if nobody goes and looks at it, if nobody goes and says: “Wow, cherry blossoms!” Even if no one goes to see it, still it is blossoming. It is divine grace appearing on the earth. It has intrinsic value. Trees, animals, plants, rocks, mountains, rivers, worms, butterflies, honeybees – every creature upon this earth has intrinsic value and the right to be as they are, who they are. We talk about human rights, and that's fine. But nature also has rights. The trees have a right to exist. We have no right to cut them down without proper purpose.

So nature has rights; we should have not only human rights but we should also have the rights of trees. When you recognize the rights of the trees, then you are an ecologist and you have understood the meaning of the soil.

We think we're great teachers. We are academics and scholars. We have published so many books. We have the title “doctor” and so many degrees. That's all fine. But if there is no “1,” then these are all 0, without any value. One is the soil. If there is soil, and it is 1, then you add 0 and it will become 10, 100, 1000 or 1,000,000, but 1 is necessary. Without 1, zero has no meaning. So at the moment we are adding zeros, PhDs and 0000, computers and mobile phones, 0000 and no 1. The soil is 1. Put a 1 before it and then all your zeros will have value. Your poetry, your scholarship, your intelligence, your books, your architecture; everything will have value if the soil is there. And the nature is all soil but we don't know how to cultivate it. Our universities teach us scholarship but they don't teach us how to garden. The Buddha says: “If there is no soil, no earth, there is no Buddhism!” Buddha is not just the name of one man; the noble truth and the eightfold path is not just an intellectual theory. The truth is in the kindness, the forgiveness and the generosity of the earth. We should be humble

humans and forego our arrogance, forego thinking that we humans are so wonderful, that the earth can be sacrificed for the benefit of humankind and we can do what we like.

The second word is “soul,” which sounds similar to “soil”. Soul is something you cannot see. Soil you can see, touch and measure; you can love it and hold on to it, but what is inside the soil? The human body you can touch, hug, kiss and admire but in order to touch your soul I have to close my eyes. It’s not something I can see. Everything – trees, animals, worms – has a soul. We are more than our bodies, more than what eyes can see. There is a third eye needed to see the soul.

In India, we have the idea of “third eye”. If you see illustrations of Shiva, you find that Shiva has a third eye. When you are meditating you have to close your two eyes and open your third eye. In meditation you see something that you cannot see with your two eyes. That is the eye of the soul, the eye of the heart and the imagination.

We need to take care of the soul, as well as take care of the body. We feed our body three times a day and in between we may have morning coffee and afternoon tea, and before going to bed we may have a little drink – all for the body! But if someone says: “Please take 10 minutes for meditation,” a common response will be: “Oh, I have no time! I have to see my email, make phone calls, write papers.” We are busy doing something that we can handle with our bodies. But there is something missing. And that missing thing is soul. You can take care of the soul only when you slow down. No computer, no car. Just sit in your room with tea and flowers: elegantly simple, without clutter. Go in a room without noise, no mobile phone. Take time for yourself.

You represent the totality of the universe. There is nothing in the universe that is not in you, and there is nothing in you that is not in the universe. The universe is the macrocosm and you are the microcosm. You are earth, air, fire, water, imagination, creativity, consciousness, time and space – you have this all in your genes and in your cells. You are billions of years old. You have been recycled and recycled. You are a beautiful example of the total recycling principle of the universe.

So if you want to take care of the universe, you start with yourself. Care of the soul is for self-realization. Meditation is for self-realization. As is gardening. In gardening you are in meditation. When you are cooking you are not just cooking to feed yourself or your family, you are cooking for self-realization: taking care of yourself, being at ease with yourself, being happy with yourself, being fulfilled in yourself. Whoever I am, I am. Self-realization will make you at ease with yourself – you won’t want things. Everything you need and want is within you. You are capable of solving every problem in the world with your inner wisdom. Wisdom is a soul quality, as are generosity, love and friendship, unity and beauty.

All you need is here: the air, fire, water, trees, soil and sky. What more do you want? If you want mobiles and computers, more possessions and more clutter, it is because you have lost touch with your soul. That’s why your soul is hungry, thirsty or empty. That emptiness will not be filled by computers, cars or mobile phones. You must slow down and take care

of your soul. When you are fulfilled within yourself then you can have a mobile phone – I'm not against it. But don't have all those gadgets without caring for the soul. Without a happy soul you are the poorest of the poor. Spiritual poverty is the greatest poverty, greater than any physical poverty. As you take care of the soil, you take care of the soul. Your outer body is soil and your inner being is soul. When you take care of both you have self-realization, you have wellbeing.

Caring for the soul has nothing to do with ego. This is why we immediately include the third word of our trinity, that is Society. First and foremost, we are members of the earth community. Then we are members of the human community. I have walked from India to America. On the day I came to the border between India and Pakistan, where three wars have been fought, my friends, family and colleagues – some 35 people – came to say goodbye. One of them said: "At least take some food with you." And I looked at the food and I said: "Thank you, but no thank you. I'm going for peace. And peace begins with trust. These packets of food are not packets of food, they are packets of mistrust. What would I tell my Pakistani hosts? That I did not trust that you would feed me." My friend was in tears. I said: "Why are you crying, my friend?" He said: "Satish, this might be our last meeting. I may never see you again. You are going to Muslim countries, Christian countries, capitalist countries, communist countries, mountains, jungles, deserts, snow. No money, no food. Walking. How are you going to survive?" At that moment, I said: "My friend, from today I'm not afraid of death. If I die by walking for peace, then that is the best kind of death I can have. And I'm not afraid of hunger. If I don't get food, I'll say this is my time and opportunity to fast."

Then I walked into Pakistan and to my utter surprise, there was someone on the other side of the border waiting. He said: "Are you the man who is walking into Pakistan for peace?" I was surprised. "How do you know?" I asked. He said: "I read about you. And I thought that if you are coming for peace to Pakistan, then I should welcome you. This war between India and Pakistan is complete nonsense." At that moment, I realized the unity of the human family. If we come here as Indians then we will meet Pakistanis. If we come here as Hindus then we will meet Muslims. But if we come here as human beings, then we meet human beings.

Who am I? Am I a Hindu, a Muslim, a communist, a capitalist? All these identities are secondary. My primary identity is that I am a human being and member of the human community. And then being a Hindu is no problem, being a Muslim is no problem. All those identities fall within the context of the human identity. At the moment, we are at a kind of war against each other. Chinese and Japanese have problems; Koreans and Japanese have problems. Indians and Pakistanis have problems. Israelis and Palestinians have problems. The list of problems and conflicts is long. There are so many problems around the world because we have forgotten that we are one human community. Let's remember our true identity.

Mahatma Gandhi said: "There is enough in the world for everybody's need but not enough for anybody's greed." At the moment, 1 per cent of population is greedy, 99 per cent

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are suffering. This 1 per cent wants to be the superpower. We need to embrace all of society. We need to solve problems with imagination, creativity, forgiveness. How much can you give? How much can you take? All problems can be solved by negotiations, friendship, giving in, letting go of ego and going into eco. Eco means home, eco means relationships.

If we can have a holistic view of soil, soul and society, if we can understand the interdependence of all living beings, and understand that all living creatures – from trees to worms – depend on each other, then we can live in harmony with ourselves, with other people and nature. Humans are dependent on the earth. “You are, therefore I am.” We have mutuality and co-dependence.



**Q:** How can we get others to understand and agree with the principles of the environmental sustainability?

**Satish Kumar:** As Mahatma Gandhi said, if you want to make a change from a very technological mind to a more organic, holistic, inclusive mind, then the way to do it is to be the change you want to see in the world. But you can't expect other people to change just because you believe in something. People have to make up their own minds. Just be the change you want to see and communicate it. You are not here to change the world to suit you. No, we are here to live our lives to the best of our convictions. And if we can live our ideals then we will radiate our convictions, our idealism, our values and visions, then it will affect other people. The only thing you have is your body, mind, imagination and creativity. If you can communicate to 10 other people, then you've done your job. If those 10 people communicate to 10 other people then there will be 100. And if each of those 100 communicates to 10 other people, there will be thousands.

When you see a conflict, see it as an opportunity to negotiate. Communicate in such a way as to come to a conclusion together that is good for both of you. That's the challenge. Sharpen your communications skills. Just like in cooking – don't use a blunt knife, sharpen your tools. Refine your tools of communication and learn the art of speaking in such a way that you will open the hearts of other people. Then you will be able to use a crisis as a moment of opportunity.

**Q:** How do you preserve the sense of words and the way you communicate them?

**Satish Kumar:** The question of language is always very important. When you are talking to people who are not on the same wavelength, you have to remind them of the true meaning of the words.

For example, I was once invited to speak at the London School of Economics. I asked them: "Where is your department for ecology?" And the answer was: "We don't have one." So I said: "Please tell me, what is the meaning of the word economy?" "Eco" means home, planet home. And "nomos" means management of home. And for ecology, "eco" again means home and "logos" means knowledge of home. Now you are teaching thousands of these young graduates how to manage home but you don't teach them what home is. How are you going to manage something that you don't know? It's no wonder that the world economy is in a mess because you are sending graduates around the world to manage but they don't know what they are managing.

When they say "economy", they don't even mean economy. They mean finance or they mean money. Money is not economy. Economy is management of the household.

Words are very important but sometimes the meaning gets lost and the words don't mean anything. Now everybody is using the words "sustainable" and "sustainable development" but they don't mean sustainable development. They mean financial development that should be sustained, all the time. They have changed the word around.

When you are communicating, you have to remind people what you are talking about. Take the word “nature,” for example. Nature is not just the trees, the birds, the forest and the rivers. Nature means birth. Nature, nativity, natal, native, nation – all these words come from “birth”. So nature means everything that is born and then dies in an ecological process. When you are communicating with people, you have to remind them the meaning of the words. Then you can communicate.

**Q:** You have done so much in your life. What comes next?

**Satish Kumar:** Now I’m 75 years old, so next is death! And we must not be afraid of death. For me, the next stage is just to be. I’ve done my activism and now I’m very happy to communicate. I’ve so many friends in the world. That’s my greatest treasure. Everything else passes but friendship is the lasting thing. In friendship there are no conditions. I want to enjoy my friendships. And also, I don’t plan very much. I see life as an emergent phenomena. Things emerge. Something happens. And when something happens, I welcome it. So whatever happens, I’m happy, I’m satisfied. I have no desires of any kind. I’m happy that I’ve been blessed with so many friends around the world.

**Q:** How do you define the change you want to see in the world? How can you reconcile people’s diverse visions about the society they want to achieve?

**Satish Kumar:** Mahatma Gandhi said that any change should have one test: will this change harm anyone? Gandhi’s struggle for the independence of India was based on non-violence. We need to create change that does no harm to nature or other people, change that doesn’t exploit other people or communities. At the moment, our economy is based on doing harm and exploitation. In Australia, we are mining the land of indigenous people to get uranium. We do not know what kind of harm nuclear power will do with its waste and radiation or if an accident happens like an earthquake... so we require a precautionary principle like non-violence. Precaution of potential harm to anybody was Gandhi’s test and I think it was a very good test. What we all want is to do no harm to others. Don’t do anything to others that you wouldn’t want done to yourself. This is a golden rule that is common to many traditions and cultures around the world. By becoming greedy, by becoming burdened by attachment and desire, we do harm to ourselves. So you must think, how can I minimize harm, even if we cannot eliminate harm altogether? Will my action harm anybody at any time in the future? If the answer is no, then do it. If it’s harmful, don’t do it.

**Q:** For most of the policies we adopt, we look to the greater good. Our goal is to achieve more happiness or wellbeing for people, even though you have to sacrifice something to achieve it. How do you feel about this?

**Satish Kumar:** The greatest benefit to the greatest number, is the principle of utilitarianism. I do not agree with it. I think, even if your action is going to harm just one person, you can’t



do it. How can I decide that our interest is so important that we will sacrifice your interest for the benefit of us? If your interest is sacrificed, I think everybody will be harmed because we are all members of one human community. We are all one. There is no “us” and “them”. I want to have a system, a philosophy that advocates doing harm to no one. It may benefit some people but bring harm to no one. That is my ideal.

**Q:** How can we start to “be the change”?

**Satish Kumar:** The solution is not in the thinking. The solution is in the action. When I started my peace walk, it seemed daunting. How am I going to go without money to Russia, America, Europe, the Middle East, everywhere – how am I going to do it? I stopped thinking and I put one step in front of another step in front of another step, day after day, week after week, month after month and, after two and a half years, I was able to go around the world. In the same way, how are you going to climb Mount Everest if you stand at the bottom and look up? Mind is pessimistic, thinking is pessimistic, but actions are optimistic. Action gives you hope. So don’t look at the top of Everest. Don’t look at a society and think it is so big, so complex, that nothing can change. Don’t think: “I am one single person, what can I do?” That is despondency; that is pessimism. Instead whatever you can do, do it. Step by step.

The Great Wall of China was not built in one day. But, in the end, there it stood. Apartheid did not come to an end in one day but, after 27 years in jail, Mandela saw it come to an end. The British Empire came to an end. So lots of big changes have taken place. When the Buddha started, did he think: “How am I going to teach my four noble truths to the world?” And now his truths are known around the world. Jesus Christ was one person. You are one person, I am one person. We do our best with dedication, commitment, perseverance, without anxiety, without any fear. Do your best, serve the world. We are here to love the world. Action is the answer. Thinking is not the answer. Thinking must follow action, not the other way around. Nietzsche said: “Do not trust a philosophy or theory that has not been tested by walking.” So don’t worry about the world, do what you can to the best of your ability and in such a way that does no harm to anyone and helps someone. You will be Mahatma Gandhi.