

## Wood for the Trees?

**Satish Kumar**

Wholeness is as much an ancient concept as it is a contemporary one. As a young man I lived in an ashram where we sang the mantra of wholeness every morning and evening during communal prayers. It was part of my daily practice. The mantra came from the Upanishads which were composed by the sages and philosophers of India some 5000 years ago. Wholeness in Sanskrit is 'Poornam' and the Upanishads talk about all and everything being whole:



*Poornamidah, Poornamidam  
Poornat Poornamudachyate  
Poornasya Poornamadaya  
Parnamevavshishyate  
Om Shanti Shanti Shanti*

*"This is whole, that is whole  
Whole emerges out of whole  
If we take the whole from the whole  
What remains is whole  
Let there be no discord and let Peace prevail"*

A seed is a whole seed. When the seed sprouts it is a whole plant. The whole plant manifests in a new whole form, which we name as a whole branch, a whole leaf, a whole bud, a whole flower, a whole fruit and a whole seed again. The tree is in the seed and the seed is in the tree.

The whole tree is integral to many other whole forms; the soil, the rain, the sunshine, the space in which the tree stands, the time in which it grows and the air it breathes. Thus, the whole tree emerges out of the whole soil, the whole rain, the whole sun, the whole space, the whole time and the whole air; in fact the whole earth and even beyond the earth – the whole universe and the whole cosmos. The acorn is not only an oak, it is a cosmic capsule.

The principle of wholeness is universal. The Chinese called it Tao, the Aborigines called it Dreamtime, the Africans called it Ubuntu which means 'one is because everything is'. This African ideal may have been the inspiration to General Smuts who was one of the first to use the term 'holism' in the English language. In our own time, Christian theologian, Thomas Berry proclaimed that the universe is not a collection of fragmented objects, but it is a communion of subjects. Thich Nhat Hahn says, "the bread you are holding in your hands is the body of cosmos" he calls this reality the 'principle of inter-being' because, like the example of a seed and the tree, the whole bread embodies the soil, the rain, the sunshine, the farmer, the baker and so on. Thus each whole is made up of other wholes. In other words the text is made meaningful within the context.

The theories of quantum physics, complexity, chaos, Gaia and systems thinking are completely compatible with the wisdom of Poornam, Tao, Ubuntu and Dreamtime. David Bohm's 'Wholeness and the Implicate Order' encapsulates the truth of integrating intuitive wisdom and empirical science. E F Schumacher called upon us, "to look at the world and see it whole". He was able to see the connection between spirituality and economics; his essay on Buddhist Economics is a classic example of seeing the wholeness and interconnectedness of all human activities, be they economic, social or spiritual.

What appears to be fragmented and opposites are, in reality, complementary and two aspects of a single reality; day and night complement and make whole day, above and below together create a whole space, masculine and feminine make a whole humanity. When we transcend dualism and look deeper we can clearly see that matter and spirit are two aspects of one life force, one reality. We call it universe, one cosmic poem. That is why in the ashram we were required to include the mantra of wholeness as part of our daily prayer rather than study it as an academic discipline. Only when we are caught in dualism, fragmentation, division, separation, specialism and reductionism we fail to see the wood for the trees!

When only nine years old, Satish Kumar renounced the world and joined the wandering brotherhood of Jain monks. At the age of eighteen, he left the monastic order and became a campaigner, working to turn Gandhi's vision of renewed India and a peaceful world into reality. Fired by the example of Bertrand Russell, he undertook an 8,000 mile peace pilgrimage, walking from India to America without any money delivering packets of 'peace tea' to the leaders of the four nuclear powers. Since 1973, he has been the Editor of Resurgence magazine.

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