

Spirituality in the face of the modern world.



Burgs what do you see the life dilemmas facing the current generations are and how do you view the role of spiritual teachings in aiding us to navigate through such times?

Well its become apparent that we are in a time of extraordinary change, and not only is the pace of that change itself very hard to manage; but also the paradigms by which we live our lives are fast becoming invalid and we don not have roadmap by which to redefine the way that we ought to live in the face of the challenges that we now face.

We have a lot of ancient traditions and spiritual teachings that have come down to us from cultures beyond our own that give us guidance about how we can approach challenges and how we can understand our predicament in terms of suffering, impermanence and bigger schemes of things: how we may perhaps even cultivate our minds and produce nobler qualities in it that may help us better face current challenges; but what we are lacking at the moment is a perspective on those teachings that helps us relate them directly to our condition, our society, and our world.

So in looking to ancient teachings how are we to approach them and make them more applicable to our society as it stands?

Well, firstly we have to understand what their message actually was and then how to apply it. So let us take a moment to reflect on what these actual teachings are and then we will look at our own immediate predicament. There have always been two branches of spirituality, one is the quest to find an explanation beyond the apparent for our existence, and that will usually take us to some concept of god or some kind of unified principle which is the basic ground for our existence. In this context spiritual practice is the process of bringing us closer and closer to that. The other thread is the process of personal investigation by which we try to fathom our own identity, our own process, so that we may understand what it is to be a human being, what we are at various levels, and then to look into that to see where our source of happiness might lie. One thread would perceive that the source of happiness would be to return our self to our maker or to the source, and the other would be to perfect oneself to remove all the tendencies in ones being which is the cause of suffering, the latter being more in line with the Buddhist tradition. Both of these principle require removing ourselves from the centred of things, diluting our sense of personal importance, and coming to a realisation that our happiness is never going to depend on external conditions or the things that we usually surround ourselves by. We soon come to the conclusion that these things are unreliable, impermanent and that they cannot be clung onto. Now that's the first basic understanding that comes fairly

early on in the spiritual investigation and immediately asks us to call into question the ideals by which we live our lives, particularly in the west here were we have inherited a view that states that it is our inherent right to strive earnestly to surround ourselves as much as possible with the material comforts that will guarantee safety, security, and wellbeing. But the problem is that these justifiable pursuits do not stop there: our culture thereafter encourages us to continue to pursue material gains for one personal gratification imbuing us with the sense that those material gains: acquiring the objects of our desire; is the road to our happiness. So we have inherited a culture which sees the acquisition of these things that supposedly gratify us as the road to happiness. Our economy is build around a principle which sees desiring more and acquiring more is the way to progress, and that has served us very well through a period of paucity and hardship wherein one is exposed to the elements and where one environment is no necessarily conducive to easy living and brought about the quest for security at a material level. But we have now entered an age where, now we cant speak about everyone on the planet here but we are talking specifically about our peer groups in the developed western world who are predominantly surrounded by the requirements and the

“We have to look at why we want more, why we are not satisfied with what we have got, and that is where the spiritual teachings of the past start to play a role.”

requisites needed to secure ones existence, we no longer require

Spirituality in the face of the modern world.

to be seeking to provide more and its become blatantly obvious that we cannot continue to do that as the resource pool is rapidly running out, the planet is hugely threatened and yet we have not made that quantum shift which says: I've got to stop here, I've got to learn to be satisfied with what I've already got, going to the effort to make sure that it is going to be sustained, but I am going to have to relinquish my desire to continue to desire and consume more, now what that requires is to completely undermine the basic precept that our modern world is built on: the pioneer in search of more seeking to eek out more and more for his personal gratification. Now even 30 or 40 years ago, post war, when our parents and forefathers sought to rebuild economies after a time of strife, it was utterly appropriate to work hard and relentlessly and diligently to provide for oneself and ones family, and that huge middle class which is the bedrock of these developed societies emerged out of that effort. And then came a generation that inherited the fruits of that work and were provided for when their parents had not been, and they inherited their ideals which had served their parents; which is understandable, and went to work looking to provide more and to improve their lot, and it wasn't immediately apparent that that is not valid. And then over that last 20 years it started to become very obvious that the planet was straining to uphold the activity that was going on it. And certain resource started to become depleted, the environment was becoming massively affected and we've got to the point today where it is perceived my many maybe most that we are actually close to a state of peril on the earth right now. Currently we are seeking to find solutions to this

state and we are seeking these solutions within the context of the mindset that we have inherited which is the basis of this society: democracy, the economic principle by which our economies developed which sustained the economy and sought to expand it, and from within this context it is not in the mindset to consider a contraction: that is considered a disaster: tightening the belts is not part of the way we think. So we are talking in terms of how do we stop this crisis in which we consume everything and global warming comes and human life is no longer sustainable.

“The greater are our need the greater we are from finding happiness, the fewer are our needs the closer we are to happiness and contentment.”

Now all of us are capable of making the reflection, and anyone who has seen AL Gores movie or the recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change on climate change will know, that the rate of decay is acceleration at an exponential rate. Anyone with a reasonable mind can make the reflection that this planet will be utterly incapable of sustaining the life that exists on it already within 20 years and we have got a hugely exploding population: so we are in a huge crisis. Yet when we go to the people: when Al Gore goes to the people and says this is what we are a facing this is what we have bean dealt with, and then goes to the senate, and goes to various countries around the world he is talking to them in the language of economic growth and prosperity, of democracy and free choice and so what ends up happening in that language is

that the solutions that are going to have to be put into place by the politician are tantamount to political suicide. We as the population are going to have to be asked to massively reduce our consumption and we are not going to want to do that. So the only way that that is going to work under the mindset that we currently have which is that we are all free people, its our right etc, is to forcibly have those things taken away from us because we will not choose to restrain ourselves enough on our own. We all have the information and yet we are all still driving around in our cars one person at a time etc, consuming vastly more than we need to consume to support our life: what do we really need: shelter, clothing, and food that's all. So within the context of our existing paradigm we would forcibly have to have those things taken away, which would mean that we would need to have an autocracy: we would need a very determined governing leadership that stood entirely for the long term good and is ready to face extraordinary resistance from the population. Now that is not going to happen, so the only way in which that is going to happen is in which each and every one of us as individuals starts to learn to take accountability and responsibility for the role that we are playing in what is going on. You can't blame the governments for being negligent for giving us these opportunities to acquire more and improve our lot as that is what we want. We have to look at why we want more, why when are not satisfied with what we have got, and that is where the spiritual teachings of the past start to play a role.

It seems that we need to redirect the pioneering spirit and gain our satisfaction and

Spirituality in the face of the modern world.

joy without material acquisition but that seems like an alien concept to many of us and maybe we have forgotten how to do that?

That's absolutely the point that we've got to get to: where does our happiness lie? If we can't perceive a happiness beyond the way that we are living at the moment, if pulling in the belt straps and being deprived of these things is seen as nothing more than misery then we are not going to choose it so we need to engage in a way of enquiry that is going to show us that what we are doing anyway is not the way to happiness and that is the point. Now if you take a 1000 people across from the richest person in the country to the poorest and you put them in a room and said, right hands up who is 100 % happy 70%, 30%, 10%... and who is utterly miserable, you will not find that the people with their hands up first are the ones who have the most, you may well find that those with the most are there in the bracket of the utterly miserable. And you also may find that those who have very little put their hand up first. So it's not about *what* we have, it's about our understanding of it and whether we have learnt how to appreciate it. Just as many people come to me struggling with life that are in the upper echelons of society with more than they could ever need as those struggling to make ends meet. So it's clear anyway that material support and things are not happiness. They are often misery. So we can get to the point where we can see I don't need to go there: don't need the next mobile phone, the next computer an upgrade on my car or a bigger house to gain contentment. But we need to get a little bit deeper before we get to the point in which we can reduce our levels of consumption and even need a

little less than we have got right now. Now that takes a bit of discerning wisdom that comes from meditation, reflection and so on, and taking that discernment from spiritual teachings that tell us that everything is impermanent, that tell us that the obvious: that there is not one thing that you have in your life today that is going to sustain itself indefinitely: it is all going to fall apart in time, even those that you love most go, and you are going to be separated from them at some point in your life. It is by clinging to these things in such a way that they define our sense of happiness and seeing in them the source of all contentment that you are running headlong into misery as you are going to be separated from them: you crash your car, you lose your mobile, you get a virus on your computer, your loved one leaves you: these things are all going to fail us in time. So you have to start to live by this law of impermanence, which is the very basis of these spiritual teachings: the truth of the fact that we can't hold on to these things. It's when we enter deeply into reflection of the nature of impermanence that we start to let go in stages, and eventually we come to the understanding that actually all these things that I am surrounded by are a burden. We start to wonder: why did I think that I needed them all? and that's when we choose to start giving them up: not out of coercion, not out of fear that the world is coming to an end but because we don't need them any more, and this is the understanding that comes to each and every person who investigates the spiritual nature of ones existence rather than the material and sees what the real basis of happiness is, and the real basis of happiness is to be unvexed in ones mind: and what

causes us to be unvexed in ones mind: to be unoppressed by the things that surround us: and what makes them oppressive: the fact that we cling to them so desperately. If we can just appreciate them for what they are knowing that they will come and go, seeing it all as a gift: and that the only requisites for life are somewhere to sleep and have shelter, food and clothing to support the body, and that just to breathe in and out and to take in the world around us is such a gift, we see that contentment is the basis of happiness, and contentment comes of having few needs not many: the greater are our need the greater we are from finding happiness, the fewer are our needs the closer we are to happiness and contentment.

“This is meditation. Sitting with nothing but your being: coming to an acceptance of it, learning to make your peace with it, and through this finding your joy with the simple fact that you are alive.”

So once we get to this stage it is a natural process: it is not something that we are going to be forced to do: it is something that we will choose: to let go the unnecessary and surround ourselves with the necessary and this is the only way that life can be sustained on the planet, and this is the role that even the most basic and fundamental introduction into spirituality will give us: the willingness to commence of letting go that which we do not need.

This may cause a bit of recoil in peoples minds and suggest that they may have to give up everything: can you still practice spiritual teaching while living in society: will

Spirituality in the face of the modern world.

people have to give up everything?

Of course we do not have to give up everything. we only have to get to the point of giving up what is burdensome, being willing to take responsibility for our conduct so that we are not blameworthy and harmful to others, so that we do not live with the oppressive feeling of regret or remorse, and so that we can feel gladdened by the fact that we are on this planet, and all that we have to do to ensure that is to make sure that we are not a detriment to it, so that we can get an inner feeling that we are a contributor or a producer in some way. Now that just means stepping back a little bit: let's make this reflection, you have so many units of material support by which to support the life and so many people to consume them. now if you are consuming more than you are producing you are contributing to the dilemma and the crisis, so if we just step back a little bit and say, hold on: I'm consuming far more than I am contributing lets just address that issue, then one gets to the point that one lives in a comfort that is justified by ones efforts. In this way we are already making a massive step: one continues to live ones lay life and with less so that one is able to contribute more, and in stages one gives up the utterly futile which is the 5 litre Mercedes, the 10 bedroom house when you have 3 kids, but one is still surrounded by things that we enjoy and that give us pleasure without being excessive. You know, lets think about it: why is it any more enjoyable to drive to work in a 100,000 pound 5 litre Mercedes than a 10,000 pound 1 litre Ford Fiesta? It's a little bit more comfortable, but at the end of the day most of it is about look at me I got a 100,000 Mercedes.

It's not necessary, it's just not necessary. It gives us gratification but that gratification does not last. It is this gratification which is empty and not conducive to lasting happiness that we have to knock on the head to begin with and then we move to a lower level of consumption, and it may well be that one says I don't need all of that and steps down again but we do not need to go out into a life of homelessness we just have to be prepared to live of what is reasonable and start to get a sense of gratitude and appreciation rather than a sense of need. You know there are countless people on this planet who need and we are not those people. If we can get to a point of even shaming ourselves somewhat even just a little that we couldn't consume one litre of gas to get to work when we could have consumed one, then we are going to start to make a difference, so we don't have to go to the forest or go to a cave, we just have to be content with life.

How can meditation help our contentment? There is an overwhelming spiritual marketplace with technologies and promises that these spiritual alternatives will transform our being: how can people make the right choices within techniques such as TM, Vipassana, Psychotherapy, yoga and find a good teacher to guide them along such paths.

Well it's like anything isn't it. Among the masses of people that have embrace new age spirituality there are those who are genuinely committed to unravelling the quandaries in their lives and there are those who are replacing one attachment and dependency with another and producing a new kind of spiritual consumption. You know it is going to take a while before the

refinement of our character and personality comes about. and there is no guarantee. Your not going to know that you have found the right teacher and got the right practice, and you are often not going to: and this is, call it karma. If we don't have the karma to easily get ourselves out of this predicament that is just how it is, but the point is that we have to commit to making the enquiry amid the knowledge that there may not be a quick fix.

“Real spiritual practice happens amongst the grind of daily life in the world and it is here we find our grit and start to incarnate what we have learned through reflection and meditation.”

While looking and sincerely enquiring you have always got to relate it back to your life and ask yourself: am I happier now? do I need less? am I more content? and this is the way to check, not yes I got to grips with this process which everyone thinks is quite hip and the way to go: it does not matter a jot, it does not matter whether you can do all the yoga asana under the sun, it is about how you feel when you wake up in the morning, and when you go home at night. So again we have to redefine the way in which we approach things, and look at the ease we feel within our lives and how quickly is it bringing results. We have to be discerning, to be willing to make mistake, to say this is not working, and it's not the case that “spirituality” is the answer. The answer is that we make our own inner enquiry with a sense of real honesty and a complete determination to find a simple peace, a sustainable sense of

Spirituality in the face of the modern world.

happiness and a real meaning in our lives that we can rely on and that is the real task.

So where does one start? There is a tendency, I think, to go and get into some transcendental state, which I feel is another form of escapism from what is really in front of us: the hard work that has to be done in refining and cultivating our beings in the world and around our peers and family. Where we are rather than running away to some lonely hill and blissing out in escapism. What is some practical advice about how to get started and to make sure that we do not fall into pitfalls within our 'spiritual' path?

That's absolutely right. We have to make sure that we are not engaging in some form of escapism. You know the Buddha realised that no matter how exalted a state of Samadhi he could enter into sooner or later he is going to come back into the very world that existed before he entered into his meditation, so it is not about transcendence: you are not going to transcend this existence, or you might for a while but you are still going to come back to it, it is about cultivation and integration and finding sense in the existence that you real have: the bottom line is that you are a human being, you have a physical body that support your life and you have a mind that gives you the experience of being alive, and it is in the integration of this life principle that your practice lies. We do not have to look into lofty principle such as where the universe came from or what god might be: what we have to do is start imbuing ourselves with the qualities that might be necessary in our mundane life by which we might start to live responsibly whilst also working out our happiness. It's a spirit of self cultivation we must find: of

developing nobler qualities and working diligently to overcome the ignoble qualities of our characters: of self honesty, discipline; of patience: this is real spiritual practice. It is not spiritual practice to sit in a room with a candle and to be able to get beyond this existence for a while and feel some kind of bliss and then come back and not be able to cope with your life. Real spiritual practice happens amongst the grind of daily life, in the world and it is here we find our grit and start to incarnate what we have learn through reflection and meditation: and it is here that we should come back to as a checking point to make sure that we are not falling into the pitfalls of spiritual pride or materialism, that misses the very point of the endeavour it engages with.

Yes, that seems to me to be exactly the point. So what actually happens on the meditation cushion? you talked about one kind of meditation that leads us into a transcendental state, but a common meditation technique within Buddhism is called Vipassana which is meant to change the structure of who we are and transform our beings in terms of virtue and character rather than a temporary release: in terms of our actual expression in the daily life.

Ok, well, what's meditation? Well it's sitting quietly and alone in a room on a mat and doing nothing else, but sitting still. Well what happens when you start to sit still. Well if you pay attention pretty soon you start to feel uncomfortable: and why is this: on account of restlessness: what is it that means that you can sit still on a cushion and concentrate upon your breath and calm your self an relax with the physical sense

of your body: it is the absence of restlessness it is letting go gradually the desire for something more gratifying than what we have got right now. Now as I have said earlier on in this talk, we have to get to the point of being satisfied with what we have got right now and even get to the point of being willing to give some of it up, so when we can get to the point of being satisfied to sit still on the cushion and that is enough , to find a peace with that, its not about having to take the mind beyond that to some exhaled and rarefied state beyond here and now, but its about being able to be here and now and find a peace and serenity arising out of that awareness, that mindfulness, that coming to understand that there is nothing but here and now, and there is never going to be anything but here and now, and until here and now is enough we are not happy. So we sit on the cushion and we learn patience, we learn restraint, we learn determination, we overcome restlessness and we find some simple serenity and some simple peace, so at the end of the day it does not matter what you meditation object is, although I do agree with The Buddha, you take an object which is found immediately in front of you, that is present, so that you do not remove yourself , so that you enquiry and spirit of investigation goes on in what is immediately manifest, right here right now, this body and this mind which is living this life is where we cultivate ourselves, internally, learning to sit with it, to fathom it in stages, to be with it in stages, learning to reorganise it in stages, to refine it in stages, to ennoble it in stages: this is meditation: sitting with nothing but your being: coming to an acceptance of it, learning to make your peace with it, and through this finding your joy with the simple

Spirituality in the face of the modern world.

fact that you are alive: that is the miracle, that is the gift, just to be able to look out of these eyes, be here with this body, and appreciate that is enough to justify your existence, and that realisation comes with sitting with yourself and nothing else: your surroundings and nothing else, going inwards and looking at the process unfolding and making your peace with it. It is on account of restlessness that we are discontent, the perceived notion that it is something other than what I have now that will bring me happiness and the quest for the acquisition of it that is the endless pursuit of this and that which never ends: that pursuit only finally ends when it is alright to be just this: and with that comes the peace that we really yearn for in our hearts.

Thank you Burgs.