

VEDA JYOTI

Light of Knowledge

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LIVING WITH NATURE

Human health and the health of our planet, the only one we know has life, cannot be separated. The Earth is our home. When we harm it we harm ourselves. This is something each and every one of us has to realise. It's not someone else's problem, it's our very own. The environment provides life support for us all, and if we fail to realise this, we are truly doomed as a civilisation.

Here are some truths about humans and the environment, which many of us know:

Truth Number 1: The Earth's resources are limited.

The earth's resources - oil, forests, water, energy, etc. are limited, but some people don't believe this. It is a fact that resources do not exist in unlimited quantities. If they did, they would be larger than the earth itself and would fill the universe. But they don't fill the universe and are contained within the boundaries of planet earth. Therefore they are limited. Of course, many of earth's resources can be either regenerated or recycled. But this only takes place over a long period, usually hundreds of thousands of years. A recent study by BP measured the total quantity of oil in the whole world. Counting the known oil resources, it stood at 188.8 million tonnes at the end of 2010. This oil is enough to last the next 46.2

years only, should global production remain at the current rate. The rate at which we are using up these resources is faster than the rate at which they can be regenerated naturally. This is true for oil, water, topsoil, forests and other resources.

Truth Number 2: Each person living today uses up some amount of the earth's limited resources.

People consume resources all the time. When we drive a car, we're using up limited natural resources in the form of fuel which is derived from oil. When we buy a car, we're also using up other natural resources like iron from the ground. Every time we turn on a light switch, or open a packet of food, or swallow some food, we are using up some amount of the earth's limited resources.



Help me...

"As our living standards rise, we consume more of earth's limited resources"

The things we consume in our home have to be made somewhere else, like a factory or farm which requires the resources of a much larger area far away from our homes. Unfortunately, as our living standards rise, we tend to consume more of earth's limited resources. In

fact, one could argue that the most highly-educated people on the planet are those who are using up the greatest quantity of natural resources. Poor, uneducated people don't consume much, simply because they cannot afford to.

Truth Number 3: Humans are changing the environment.

Human activity is changing our environment in a big way. Take, for example, the large scale destruction of the planet due to the release of gases into the atmosphere. We've poisoned the rivers, destroyed the natural habitat and polluted the oceans. We have changed the chemical composition of the atmosphere. Nobody can deny these scientific truths. We have radically changed the environment of our planet over the last 200 years.

Nkosazana Dlamini - Zuma, who was the chairwoman of the AU Commission, noted that the rate of deforestation in Africa was four times higher than the world average. Africa contains almost 17 percent of the world's forested areas.

Truth Number 4: Human population is increasing at an alarming rate.

People like to have children. Every family wants children, and those children want their own children, too. In general, human beings want to have any number of children without limitation. This, of course, leads to an explosion in population growth. We've seen this explosion over the last two hundred years as the Earth's population has grown from less than one billion people in 1800 to 7,6 billion today. This is just in the short space of 200 years.

Human beings do not consider their impact on the global population when they bring children into this world. The decision to have children is made privately, selfishly, and without regard to the impact on the planet. One more child seems like no big deal from the point of view of a couple that wishes for another son or daughter. But when we multiply this by billions, these decisions to have children cause overpopulation, which leads to over-consumption of the planet's limited resources.

The Vedic Tradition

The Vedas (meaning knowledge) are reputed to be the oldest scriptures in the library of mankind. The Vedas are considered to be apauruṣeya, which means "not of a man, superhuman" and "impersonal, authorless."



Population Explosion

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) drafted an Earth Charter which sets out the principles for building a fair, sustainable and peaceful global society in the 21st century. It looks at a more all-inclusive approach to global issues, i.e. by taking all factors into account and not looking at things from one point of view only.

The Earth Charter says that the Vedic philosophy of India has always emphasized the human connection with nature. The Vedic way of life is based on scriptures one of which is called Aranyakas, or forest books, which were written by sages who lived in the forest. The holy books of Hinduism such as the Mahabharata, Ramayana, Vedas, Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita

contain some of the earliest messages on nature's balance and the need for people to treat nature with respect. They stress on living in harmony with the elements of nature.

The Vedas provide imagery that show the power of the natural world. They speak of the earth (bhuh), the atmosphere (bhuvah), and sky (svah), as well as the goddess associated with the earth (Prithvi), and the gods associated with water (Aap), fire and heat (Agni) and wind (Vayu). In the Vedic tradition, there are ceremonies which with give praise to these natural elements.

The Vedic view is that the Earth is the supporter of all life and human action should be careful so as not to destroy the balance. This is a strong theme which runs throughout the Vedas. The Atharva Veda (12.1.35) says, "O Mother Earth, when I dig and till the soil to sow the seed, let the seed grow soon and the ground fill up. O gracious, purifying and regenerative Mother, never would I hurt your vitality and fertility,

never will I rip up your heart.” In this verse, we see there is a pledge made by man to respect the land and not do anything to cause it harm. For any unintentional action leading to earth’s excessive exploitation, the seers of the Vedas prayed for forgiveness, “Whatever I dig from thee, O Earth, may that have quick recovery again. O purifier, May we not injure your vitals or your heart”. The seers of Rig Veda speak on behalf of earth for its principle of replenishment “You give me and I give you”. They look at every entity of Nature with the eyes of a friend and sympathiser.

Hindus regard everything around them as infused with the divine presence. The rivers, mountains, lakes, animals, flora and fauna are all examples of God’s creation, and therefore there is a deep respect and gratitude felt towards nature. The emphasis of Hindu religious practices is that human beings cannot separate themselves from their natural surroundings, because Earth has the same relationship with man as that of mother with her child. The mother takes great care of her children, making sure no harm comes to them. She will do everything in her power to clothe, feed and protect the child. The wellbeing of the child is of utmost importance to the mother. In a similar way, the Earth provides all the natural resources and right conditions for man to live in happiness and harmony with others. But we all know that modern man has not honoured his pledge to the earth. Mineral exploitation, deforestation, genetically modified seeds and severe pollution have all become commonplace today.

Hinduism has many references to what our needs are and our attitude when we consume. According to Manusmirti (4.2), believed to be one of the oldest codes and rules of conduct and behaviour, “Happiness is rooted in contentment; its opposite is rooted in misery.” The Isa Upanishad (philosophical text) speaks of how we should consume only

according to our needs. The first verse of the Upanishad is:

*Isha vasyam idam sarvam,
yatkincha jagatyam jagat
Ten tyakten bhunjitha,
ma gridhah kasya swid dhanam*

Know that whatever moves in this moving world is enveloped by God.

Therefore find your enjoyment in renunciation, do not envy what belongs to others.

Mahatma Gandhi interpreted this verse as, “Since God pervades everything, nothing belongs to you, not even your own body.

“ Vedic view - the Earth is the supporter of all life and human action should be careful so as not to destroy the balance.”

God is the undisputed, unchallengeable Master of everything you possess.” We speak of universal brotherhood. It is not only the universal

brotherhood of all human beings but of all living things too.

Right attitudes comes from right knowledge and the Vedas emphasise development of an inner spiritual life, where the focus is not on consuming and owning more material things. Saraswati is the Hindu goddess of Knowledge and Learning. The name Saraswati comes from the root saras, meaning to flow. So, Saraswati is symbol of knowledge, its flow is like a river and knowledge represents a flow to receptive minds. She is not decorated heavily with jewels and gold, but is dressed simply and modestly, representing her choice of knowledge over worldly material things. In India it is customary that, out of respect, when a person’s foot accidentally touches a book or any written material which is considered a symbol of Saraswati, it will be followed by an apology

in the form of a single hand gesture with the right hand, where the offending person first touches the object with the finger tips and then the forehead and/or chest. When an Indian classical dancer steps on to the stage, she touches the floor, offers a little prayer to ask forgiveness from



Do not cut trees because they remove pollution
(Rig Veda 6:48:17)
Do not disturb the sky and do not pollute the atmosphere
(Yajur Veda 5:43)
One should protect the habitat
(Rig Veda Samhita VI:71:3)

the Earth for stamping hard on the ground while she dances. Such is the respect for knowledge and the earth.

What can the Vedas teach us?

Followers of Vedic culture take their lessons from observing the laws of nature.

The Rig Veda (5.51.15) says; "May we pursue the path of welfare like the Sun and Moon. May we move in the company of generous, non-violent and prudent people."

In this mantra, human beings are instructed to follow the path of the sun and the moon. The sun and the moon are examples of peace and welfare. Firstly, these planets are regulated by natural laws which they never break. They teach us to follow the laws of nature. The second lesson these planets teach us is that they are beneficial to all beings, not just some. They are non-judgemental when they provide light, heat, taste in fruit and vegetables, and help them to grow. Thirdly they teach us punctuality. They are set up in a system and that system of punctuality is constantly in action since the dawn of creation without disruption. So we see the path of the sun and the moon as the path of welfare and harmony.

In the second part, the mantra says: May we learn the path of welfare from the company of generous, constructive and prudent people. The spirit of generosity comes from the compassion of our hearts when we start thinking how fortunate we are, when we thank God for the comforts He has granted us, and start thinking about those who are less fortunate and those who are destitute. This feeling inspires us to not only think about ourselves but to help others as well. The spirit of generosity is the spirit to feel the sufferings of others and then do something for them.

There are two tendencies in human beings which are constantly in action. These are constructive and destructive. The constructive people always look for improvement and positive action while the destructive people have negative thoughts. This tendency not only destroys others but indeed it first destroys the person who follows this path.



May we keep the company of constructive people.

The company of sensible people widens our horizon of discretion and judgement. Prudent people are those who have developed a sense of caution in managing their own affairs, they are practical and careful, exercise sound judgement and act with foresight. The company of such people will lead us towards the path of welfare.

It is also important that western thinkers

examine the Hindu view of the world and its deep philosophy of the Vedas which sees the unity of all creation. The Vedas can provide a spiritual and philosophical vision for a deeper approach to the natural environment that we so desperately need to save our planet.

Connect with nature

For any change of view to take root, it must grow from within and then expand outwards. To help you connect with nature, give yourself an allocated time each week, or each day if you can, to walk barefoot on the grass or on the beach, to immerse yourself in nature and just listen. No work assignments, no duties, just listen and observe the perfection of the natural world and God's hand behind it. Remember, the wilderness and beach are therapeutic and will help you develop a deep respect for nature.

"Happiness is rooted in contentment; its opposite is rooted in misery."

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