

Transforming our way of living

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This year, the Doomsday Clock devised by the Chicago-based Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists was advanced two minutes, for the first time in five years. It now stands at 11:55 p.m., just five minutes away from the “midnight” of human annihilation. This change not only reflects last year’s nuclear test by North Korea and uncertainties regarding Iran’s nuclear development goals; it is also a reflection of the impact of environmental degradation and climate change.

This “clock” was established in 1947 at a time when nuclear weapons were understood to be the greatest threat to human survival. Today, the global ecological crisis casts a stark shadow over the future, one that demands immediate action.

It is now 35 years since The Club of Rome issued their initial report on the global environment, “The Limits to Growth.” Three years later, in 1975, I met with the club’s founder, Aurelio Peccei. He expressed his deep concern that, unless we change direction, the 21st century could see the Earth become a barren planet, with both nature and humanity in ruin. Despite the severity of the crisis, leaders in the business, political and other fields were failing to focus earnestly on the search for solutions; they were more preoccupied with short-term gain, with little thought for future generations.

Discussing these realities, Peccei and I concurred that nothing was more crucial than a revolutionary change within human beings themselves.

Humanity has experienced many revolutionary changes over the course of history: revolutions in agriculture, in science, industrial production, as well as numerous political revolutions. But these have all been limited to the external aspects of our individual and collective lives.

In other words, while we have made great leaps forward in our technological capacity to control and shape the world around us, we have not achieved a correspondingly dramatic expansion and elevation of the human spirit. As a result, we end up at the mercy of the very forces we have unleashed.

For millenniums humanity has pursued the goal of obtaining the material necessities of our survival. Yet, as Mahatma Gandhi stated, the Earth can produce enough to satisfy everyone's need, but not everyone's greed.

If it continues to be driven by the unrestrained impulses of desire, our materialistic culture will completely escape our control. Even now, it threatens to consume and exhaust the Earth itself, undermining the life systems that support our existence.

Ultimately, all human activities have as their goal the realization of happiness. Why, then, have we ended up producing the opposite result? Could the underlying cause be our failure to correctly understand the true nature of happiness?

The gratification of desire is not happiness. If it were, as Socrates noted, a person who spends his life scratching an itch would have to be considered happy. Genuine happiness can only be achieved when we transform our way of life from the unthinking pursuit of pleasure to one committed to enriching our inner lives, when we focus on "being more" rather than simply having more.

Our own lives are most effectively enhanced and fulfilled when we seek the kind of happiness that is not limited to ourselves, but includes the welfare of others. I further believe that a commitment to the happiness of others holds the key to the achievement of peaceful coexistence among people and between people and the natural world.

In the Buddhist tradition, the pursuit of such an ideal is embodied by the bodhisattva. Bodhisattvas are described as seeking not simply their own release from suffering. Rather, they are prepared to risk everything in order to take action on behalf of those who suffer. For the bodhisattva, there is a profound harmonization of the interests of self and other; wholehearted efforts on behalf of others are the greatest source of benefit and joy. Bodhisattvas are said to fear the loss of the altruistic spirit more than the torments of hell itself; for to lose the spirit of altruism is to lose the very reason for one's being.

While I have used the specifically Buddhist term bodhisattva, this is not to imply the existence of a special kind of person, somehow different or better. Rather,

the capacity for altruism is something inherent in every human heart. The term describes anyone — of whatever culture or religion — who acts for the sake of others.

Working for people's happiness is something everyone can do, regardless of circumstances. It requires no special titles or qualifications. In the end, it comes down to the effort to engage with and encourage others. But this encouragement is not something offered at arm's length, keeping oneself at a safe distance. Real encouragement is conveyed only in the process of sharing the reality of life's sufferings and challenges.

Making the effort to live this way amid the corruptions and humiliations of society, striving to offer the gifts of courage and hope, brings out the inner radiance of our lives. Encouraging others enables us to fully grasp the meaning of our lives and experience enduring happiness.

The transformation from a self-centered, self-involved way of life to one dedicated to the well-being of others is the process of "human revolution."

Even in the face of the severe crisis confronting humanity today, I cannot side with the advocates of apocalypse. Rather than the spurs and promptings of fear, we can best negotiate the challenges we face when guided by a vision of hope.

The inner transformation resulting from even a single person's human revolution holds just such a hope. This is a revolution open to all, one that does not demand the sacrifice of a single life.

When this process achieves a critical momentum — with waves of positive change spreading from one person to another — global society itself will be dramatically transformed.

This is a revolution that starts here, now — in the heart of every one of us.