



## Addressing Tipping Points for a Precarious Future

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## Contemplative Consciousness

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### [-] Abstract and Keywords

Contemplative consciousness opens up new ways to seeing and understanding, by refreshing the mind and spirit for acceptance of the unusual and the seemingly unconnected. The prophetic seeks radical insights into the transformation of present structures, no matter how apparently complex. Both search for the undeniable human need to give meaning to experience, observation, and prophesy. Mortality provides another backdrop, as well as the merging of contradictions. Simplicity, stillness, meditation, and free ranging thought based on faith and love enable us to contemplate tipping points from the unimaginable to the imaginable. The best science is contemplative. And the best responses are just, moderate, prudent, and courageous. We need to learn to respond, and contemplative meditation opens the pathways of the mind.

*Keywords:* contemplative consciousness, meditation, simplicity, stillness, contemplative science

Contemplative consciousness is a term acceptable, I hope, to the spiritually, religiously, and scientifically inclined. It describes a way of knowledge as old as history. Where do we start in making it useful as a guide through our contemporary labyrinthine crises?

Let me examine this with regard to two interesting aspects of our tipping points conversation. Contemplative consciousness reflects a common openness to radically new approaches (new ways of seeing and judging). It also links quite different specialities, thus aspiring to a new kind of vantage point of perception and action which is integral, simple and, hopefully, wise. I seek to contribute to both of these lines of thought by suggesting that the scientific method needs to be practically complemented by contemplative consciousness. But how might this best be achieved? The connecting link is that scientists and spiritual leaders need to trust each other and work together better. The present media-fuelled debate about religion and atheism is largely irrelevant, and a distracting sideshow to this endeavour.

Generally, the tipping points strategy strikes me, in the right sense of the word, as prophetic. Unfortunately the prophetic cannot be predictive in a way that satisfies our longing to know what is going to happen next. Altruistically, the prophetic seeks radical insights into the present

structure of things in order to see what they *mean* in terms of the greater truth and of the well-being of the people. Contemplative consciousness differs from the scientific method in that it specifically addresses the undeniable human need for meaning.

So, I suggest that we are at a tipping point not only physically in terms of Earth's systems, but consciously, too, with regard to human self-awareness. Self-knowledge, according to some early masters of my spiritual tradition, **(p.152)** is more important than the ability to work miracles. Technology has made the miraculous part of our daily life. So, as usual, human beings look for more. Beyond the miraculous lies ... what?

### Memento mori

To the degree that we can be sure that serious change is coming, and that we don't know quite how to deal with it, reflecting on the crisis is a *memento mori*, a remembering that we are mortal. Mortality characterizes everything from the individual organism to all energy systems we can observe. Spiritual wisdom engages this unsettling truth and has, in fact, turned it into a method for enhancing consciousness and maximizing our potential for experiencing quality of life. Buddhism expresses it in terms of *anatta*, the no-self or 'empty' nature of all things. This is not nihilistic, as it may sound, but denotes the universal characteristics of impermanence and interdependence. Christian thought arrives at the same insight through its terms of 'creatureliness' and poverty of 'spirit'. This is as much descriptive and verifiable as it is dogmatic. *Annata* and *God* are often seen as opposite poles of ways of describing the nature of things and their meaning. Contemplative consciousness is good at reconciling opposites. Nicholas of Cusa said that God is the 'union of opposites'.

Research shows that most people in terminal illness, if they accept their condition and if their pain is managed and they are psychologically cared for, will say that they have never enjoyed a better quality of life. Little more proof is needed than this research result, which never ceases to surprise, namely that happiness does not depend primarily upon our material situation. Terror Management Theory research claims that the repression of the fear of death is our primary repression, greater than the sexual. So, becoming free of repression constitutes an important part of the journey to human well-being. Facing our death is a way to clarity of mind and happiness. 'Keep death always before your eyes', as St Benedict said: environmental scientists today would probably agree. Better to die free than live imprisoned by fears. Science and its particular method of knowing also help us face this reality of mortality dispassionately.

The work of everyone involved in understanding and preparing for the great coming changes on the Earth can - by itself - help to raise consciousness and contribute to a better quality of life. We are facing change on a scale that involves dying to the past. Many geographical, biological, **(p.153)** and sociological species and patterns that we have become attached to will be lost even in our lifetimes. Extinction, however, is not the only form of death. We demonstrably survive many forms of death - the irretrievable loss of what we once enjoyed. Whether we survive the last form of biological and neurological death is not a relevant part of the discussion here.

When we face mortality and impermanence we soon see that death is part of life and is to be accepted at every level from the molecular to the social. We are not only remembering the predicted death of the cosmos, the second law of thermo-dynamics, but also the inevitable changes in human self-organization which make up history and which have rapidly accelerated in the modern period. The feeling of fast and radical mutation is a particularly modern anxiety. 'Everything that is solid melts into air', according to Marx. The fear of change is no doubt

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related to our fear of death even if change is often as much desired as feared. The panic comes when we realize we cannot control the change. There is, however, no going back to the safe place we come from. Wherever we run, death is waiting for us.

So, the awareness of mortality, which is integral to the contemplative consciousness, is already present in the conversation we have begun regarding the future of the planet.

### The scientific method and contemplative consciousness

The 'spiritual dimension' of a conversation is often placed at the end of a meeting with a full agenda. This may be for a number of reasons: because the spiritual is supposed to sum up and integrate all the preceding contributions (or give a satisfying illusion of this); or that it is intellectually generous to admit its relevance to the conversation even if that relevance is not paid much attention; or that, as we don't know the answer, we scoop the leftovers into this category of the nebulous, the paradoxical, and apophatic until we can deal with them rationally. Perhaps, though, if it is there at all, the spiritual aspect of our discourse should be somewhere in the middle of the agenda so that it exerts a panoptic influence and invites response from every aspect of the conversation. This however may be asking too much of most meetings.

In any case, by 'contemplative' I mean a way of seeing and understanding that integrates all possible perspectives and available information. **(p.154)** It is therefore sapiential rather than encyclopaedic. Many great scientists of our era, from Heisenberg to Eddington, have arrived at this way of seeing through the scientific method. Thomas Aquinas defined it pithily as the 'simple enjoyment of the truth'. Simplicity is not facile but the goal of all truth-seeking and problem-solving. Children's consciousness may be our clearest teacher here.

By 'contemplative consciousness' I also mean a state of mind which is detached and free of absolutizing any point of view or interpretation whether scientific, political, or religious. This non-attachment (which is also good scientific method) is the mind and heart of the spiritual dimension. This too can be partially true of prayer without a contemplative element - even when you are praying 'for' something like good weather, or a medical cure, or world peace. But it is most fully true when contemplative consciousness is in play in prayer or indeed in any other application of our capacity for attention.

To understand the relevance of contemplative consciousness it is helpful to see that faith and belief are two distinct ways of seeing: although of course they cohabit and tread on each other's toes all the time. Briefly, I would say that faith is our capacity for commitment, endurance, transcendence of self-interest, and for love. Belief is how we articulate the reasons and values for our acting in a particular way.

At the end of his life the disillusioned philosopher Martin Heidegger came to believe that philosophy was finished, and that in the age of the new 'technicity', only a god can save us. Contemplative consciousness dispels the grip of this kind of disillusion and the pessimism it engenders with clarity of mind grounded in a verifiable, if not easily measurable, experience that generates only realistic expectations. The knowledge that arises in contemplation is distinct from that achieved by the scientific method, but they are compatible, complementary, and as necessary to each other as the two hemispheres of the brain. Contemplative knowledge is 'advaitic', that is, non-dualistic, free from the subject-object category. At times therefore it looks nonsensical or flaky to the rational mind. But it is also silent, simple, loving, and personally

fulfilling, and it makes us happy. These are all aspects that touch and move us at the deepest human level, as do things like family, compassion, and beauty.

### **(p.155)** The elements of contemplation

I would like to suggest that terms like silence, stillness, and simplicity – universal elements of contemplation – are worthy of a good scientist's or indeed a good politician's attention.

*Simplicity* is empirical and irreducible. Its focus is on the thing being paid attention to, not the observer's own sense of identity or self-interest. Once we have connected to it we can more confidently confront the complexities of our problems, together with diverse models and metaphors for their resolution. *Silence* can, of course, be psychologically negative – as in denial or repression. But the silence of contemplation is a positive level of consciousness often enhancing creativity. It empowers us to use in a detached but energetic way all the necessary – even if necessarily abstract – models of intellectual enquiry. It is not anti-intellectual but it is not thought, as we ordinarily understand it, either. If the contemplative mind has been developed we can think, measure, analyse, and in fact do everything in a contemplative way. *Stillness* protects detachment and keeps us centred and free from emotional attachments, though it does not repress or deny feeling. It keeps us creative even after we have started to test the models and theories of our research and come to see that they need to be revised. This means we remain healthily detached from our own questions and answers, and hence open to criticism and change even after we have begun to invest our reputation in them.

### Open minds

Contemplative consciousness is more concrete than it may sound. It therefore helps us to repair the abstraction and axiological poverty of an unintegrated, unbalanced scientific method – the kind that puts science above morality or common sense. I don't mean that contemplation discovers or endorses a particular morality or particular values. In this sense it is more about faith than belief. It touches on moral ideas and values, however, in ways that the scientific method is not called to do. Contemplative consciousness thus helps us to develop the axiologies that are necessary and relevant for our time. It teaches us that we cannot live by fixed, unchangeable beliefs as humanity did in the pre-industrial world. But it also reminds us that it is not enough to live by the law of market forces, by entrepreneurial projects driven by financial interest – or by science alone.

**(p.156)** This contemplative approach leads to the opening of the 'catholic' mind. Forget the denominational associations with the word because it means the opposite of the sectarian. The *mens catolicus* is open to all sources of information and processing. Its default response to something new or strange is to try to include, not exclude. This means it is prepared, even eager, to change and expand its own parameters of belief. This openness to change in the patterns in which our mind works, is captured in the word 'metanoia' (turning of mind), and is equally essential to scientific development and to moral and spiritual growth.

Sometimes we get unexpected breakthroughs through this open-mindedness in understanding. Unassociated things come together in a wonderfully clear and simple way. But contemplative consciousness is generally developed by incremental growth rather than sudden enlightenments. Spiritual practices, pre-eminently the practice of meditation, have this effect. It is comparable with other 'nonlinear transitions where small changes make big differences'. The world's mystical traditions, which are all expressions of the catholic mind, distinguish between temporary (reversible) and permanent (irreversible) change. *States* of mind come and go and may give fleeting insights into truth. *Stages* of development represent the testing and

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integration of an insight after which we have changed direction, once and for all, even if we have not yet arrived at the destination.

This illustrates, I hope, why the 'spiritual dimension' of the conversation needs to be in the middle, not at the end. Contemplative consciousness does not build the solution, but it does help to create an integrated consciousness that is both more humorous and more serious, more playful and less dogmatic. It is a clearer mind. It also develops personal temperaments of finer quality and depth. This is what I mean by 'being spiritual'. The experiments through which we try to 'save the world' or improve it, are shaped by this way of seeing because they change people involved from within, developing those qualities that are embodied in the personalities who are doing the work. How many international summits on economic or environmental questions stumble and fail to apply the obvious necessary remedies because these personal qualities are not steering the debate or rescuing it from prejudiced nationalism or short-term political self-interest?

The current environmental crisis illustrates how urgent is this process of metanoia, this change of mind. The goal is a common or catholic mind that respects the rights of both the global and the local, and balances them. To advance the goal all possible ways of entering the common ground of **(p.157)** humanity should be employed. Science is clearly one portal. Art and sport are others. Cultural exchange especially opens young minds. Education, rather than just technical training for employment, is a basic pre-requisite of this personal development. Religion is also necessary. The totalitarian failures to destroy it in the last century show that, like art and science, it is an integral part of the human mix.

### The embarrassment of religion: contemplative science

The divorce and distrust between religion and science in the modern period is out of date in an era that demands a new consciousness. However much religious institutions may embarrass or outrage, the contemplative is often carried and transmitted by them.

The contemporary British polemics in the media between scientific atheism and religious superstition is entertaining but quaint. It misses the spirit of the age. The twentieth-century prediction of the extinction of religion in the face of scientific advances has been disappointed. But despite the rise of religious fundamentalism - a modernist product of this divorce between religion and science - a new kind of global, contemplative religious consciousness is developing. Each religious tradition revolves around a contemplative sun and the awareness of this is growing stronger in them all as their followers mature. Contemplative religious consciousness understandably receives much less media attention but what if it represents a *stage* of development, not (as in the case of fundamentalism) just a passing *state* of mind? Inter-religious dialogue, scientifically engaged religious teachers like the Dalai Lama, and countless grassroots movements are advancing a global metanoia through religion. The secular worldview that has emerged in all cultures to differing degrees is not inherently anti-religious. It simply sees that religion occupies a new place in the world, particularly in relation to science and personal freedom. Religion can no longer claim special privileges and must meet the non-religious on a level playing field of reason and faith.

The goal of a generalized contemplative consciousness is not just abstract science. It is an effective implementation of the best science. (Similarly the goal is not a platonic, unfeeling religion but one actively engaged in addressing the material and spiritual needs of all humanity.) This kind of 'total (or contemplative) science' is prophetic. It can be **(p.158)** ridiculed and may

be treated with suspicion in the academy; but it could also turn out to be the kind of science needed today, upheld by the most authentic and effective kind of scientific behaviour.

Science and contemplative religion in the global crisis are both concerned with advancing the deepest well-being for the greatest number while they follow different protocols. But they are complementary; and so real connections can be made if the time is given to identifying them. These connections will be manifestations of wisdom, good sense guided by simple human kindness, and clear thinking backed up by courageous risk-taking. In the Book of Wisdom it says that the 'hope for the salvation of the world lies in the greatest number of wise people'. Unfortunately it doesn't say how many are needed, but presumably more than we have at present.

I suggest thought be given as to how the connections can be made between scientists and spiritual practitioners operating within a contemplative, integrated framework. This connection could easily begin (and perhaps has begun already) by acknowledging the psychological and physical benefits of meditation. It stands that if these benefits are useful at the personal and interpersonal levels they will also help in resolving the crisis we all face. For example, the British National Health Service has recognized that meditation may be more effective and certainly less expensive than medication in addressing the problems of mental illness and promoting mental health.

I think this approach to developing the contemplative consciousness is well-researched and persuasive. I would push it further, however, beyond cholesterol levels and depression. Beyond these benefits lie, in the next realm, many spiritual fruits.

Relating the scientific method to contemplative consciousness promises a radical new approach to human problem-solving. We need intercultural and political agreements about the rules of living together in the future, but for these to be sustainable there is also a need for consensus about the role of wisdom itself. This agreement would evoke the axiological matrices from which specific moral values can be created inside diverse human cultures and also govern our innovative projects for improving quality of life worldwide. It is important, of course, that these ways of agreeing on values are not too specific, and in particular not too occidental.

It is now time in my argument to get down to a practical issue, the role of meditation in developing contemplative consciousness.

### **(p.159) Meditation**

Once religion has been set free from the sectarian instinct to convert, it is able to explore reality and to advance the integration of all forms of knowledge. Central to this venture is the practice of meditation.

Present in the 40,000-year-old aboriginal culture (*dadirri*) and first recorded in Indian philosophy about 1500 BC, meditation is a universal human wisdom and form of knowledge. It is global and it is locally present at the core of all the religious traditions. It is a gateway to humanity's common ground. Medical research over the past sixty years concludes that meditation is good for people at the physical and psychological levels. The NHS is currently adopting meditation as part of its cost-cutting mental health policy. Schools are widely introducing it into the classroom. Many financial and industrial institutions have designated meditation spaces and like it being taught to their staff to reduce stress and increase productivity. These *benefits* – stress-reduction, anger-control, immune system enhancement – are

not incompatible with those spiritual *fruits* of meditation which are less easily measured but no less constitutive of human well-being – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, and self-control.

There are circumstances when a purely ‘secular’ approach to meditation works best. However the religious origin and spiritual significance of meditation should not be ignored, as there are distinct advantages in teaching meditation with a spiritual approach as well. For example, the practice of meditation is a discipline as well as a technique. Disciplines are best learned and sustained in learning groups – the sense of community and the local and global networks which meditation naturally engenders at transcultural and inter-religious levels.

If we are to think radically, I would suggest an approach to a strategy for dealing with tipping points that includes acknowledging the practice of meditation as a way of metanoia, seeing in a new way. It can also be recommended because it develops the best possible environment for communicating hard truths to the general public, such as that of keeping global warming to a moderated 2 per cent over pre-industrial levels. Scientific method, political policy and religious wisdom can ‘meet’ in meditation where the personal and the collective are harmonized. They need to meet; they don’t need to merge.

I suggest thought be given as to how the connections can be made between scientists and spiritual leaders operating within a contemplative, **(p.160)** integrated framework. This connection could begin with an acknowledgement of the value of meditation for resolving the crisis and the responsibility of religion to collaborate in the work. It would also help to disseminate the insights necessary to change public policy from the grassroots upwards. It would encourage political and economic leaders to think and act with a common mind.

Meditation, of course, is part of the most ancient wisdom of humanity and has been carried through history by religious traditions, especially the monastic lineages. Seen with the detached but not cold gaze of the contemplative consciousness, the benefits are attractive but the spiritual fruits also come into view – ranging from love to self-control. In the understanding of this contemplative practice (maybe a technique to the scientist, a discipline to the spiritual) a possible new relationship between techno-science and religion becomes imaginable.

Teaching meditation as a spiritual practice has convinced me it is relevant to the contemporary crisis. As a way of experiencing unity with those of different cultural, intellectual and religious backgrounds it is the most direct way to verify the common ground of humanity. In teaching children to meditate the teacher or parent is often amazed at how readily – and profitably – the child responds. Better learning, happier behavioural patterns, personal peace, and calmness quickly become evident results. The benefits are the measurable expressions of the spiritual.

Thinking about medium- to long-term responses to the crisis, the teaching of meditation to children on a global scale makes a sense that is hard to deny. Within twenty years it would ensure a generation more attuned to the contemplative consciousness than we might imagine. If we believe that the way we look at a problem is an indispensable part of its solution, what better, cheaper, and simpler way do we have to change the way humanity approaches itself and its situation? Recent figures say that the number of people on anti-depressants in the UK has increased in the past four years by 40 per cent. We also know that more than half of the cases of diagnosed mental illness in later life make their first appearance before the age of fourteen. And we know that meditation makes a significant and beneficial difference.

### **(p.161)** Crisis

This 'contemplative dimension' to the science, economics and politics of global warming will help the tipping point to ease from the malign to the benign.

Critical moments are good for developing contemplative consciousness. Historically, some of the most flourishing contemplative schools of wisdom have come to birth in times of social and economic breakdown – like the great English mystical school of the fourteenth century during the Black Death and the Hundred Years War. Contemplative consciousness provides intellectual depth and stability in practical problem solving. It operates with greater calmness and clarity in the midst of crisis because it is able to trust the basic goodness of human nature.

Trusting the goodness of people is necessary for the kind of managed change that does not infantilize society or tyrannize it. Contemplative consciousness – even when it has been developed in a small minority of people – exposes lies and the machinations of tyranny. It helps to shape policy and allow quick response in ways that are not excessive or over-controlling. In times of social breakdown, 'security' becomes a major concern but, if it becomes obsessive, it leads to a perilous and hard to reverse mass surrender of civil liberties such as occurred in Germany in the 1930s. The cardinal virtues of justice, moderation, prudence, and courage infiltrate the political and social ethos through the contemplative mind and determine good political and economic policy that applies the recommendations of science. These virtues that underlie civilized behaviour are demonstrably generated and developed in the contemplative experience.

Developing a contemplative consciousness in a time of crisis is the opposite of indoctrination. It may not be a mass movement, and political or religious institutions have a limited power to promote it. Yet all are capable of it and all are influenced by its development. There is a hunger – a market for this – and enlightened scientists can help promote it by their endorsement. The contemplative way of *seeing* manifests liberty at the deepest level. It can be taught but it cannot be imposed and must be learned through personal experience. As Plato's allegory of the cave illustrates, it will be only a few at first who venture out of the realm of shadows into the clear light of day and then urge their fellows to do the same. But we must start somewhere.

**(p.162)** Expanding our notion of prayer to include the exercise of contemplative consciousness, this definition by Origen, a second-century Christian teacher, makes good sense for us today:

We do not pray to get benefits from God but to become like God. Praying itself is good. It calms the mind, reduces sin and promotes good deeds.

*(De Oratione)*

In crisis, vulnerability and uncertainty also expose us, not just to the truths of chaos theory but also to the graciousness of life, the pure givenness of reality and, at times, the goodness of human nature. We can be open on a global scale and simultaneously as never before to the richness of a silent and non-formulaic truth. The contemplative state of mind attunes to this purity of existence and to the silence of truth. It gives space for all kinds of existence and yet also frees our powers of clear discernment. We are then not confused by a multiplicity of choices, and do not worship choice as the exclusive mark of freedom.



### Language and silence

Conversations easily get bogged down when too much time is given to defining terms. Tipping points is a readily understood and attractive image for understanding the problems of change and uncertainty we face. If it is true that we can be imprisoned or misled by our metaphors, we can also practice detachment from them in the silence of the contemplative mind.

Stories and narratives are as necessary and helpful, but also as tenuous, as individual terms and vocabularies. The 'parable' may be a more helpful term for the ways we narrate the story of our quest. It means literally a 'throwing alongside' and it is more than a moral story or an allegory. It is an invitation to integrate that which seems incompatible and therefore leads to wisdom, the union of opposites, and creative intelligence. Parables, like *koans*, tend to leave us a little in the air, not totally certain that the end has yet come. They are ideal teaching tools, therefore, because they instruct with interest but do not deliver dogmatic answers. They cultivate the contemplative consciousness because they focus on the next stage of the process of understanding rather than building a shrine to what you have reached so far.

### **(p.163)** Some conclusions

The consequence of tipping points can, malignantly, be catastrophic both environmentally and socially. Driven by panic, the virtue of justice and the practice of compassion towards the weakest can quickly be lost. The more leaders develop a personal level of contemplative consciousness, the less likely are any downward spirals of collapsing social values.

Tipping points are nonlinear and unpredictable. This can terrify the rational mind. But the fear factor inspired by uncertainty is mitigated by the 'apophatic' mind. This complements the 'kataphatic' because it recognizes that 'unknowing' is also a way of knowing. In the same way, the left-and right-hand hemispheres of the brain are in constant communication while operating in distinct modes.

There are ethical questions raised by the science of tipping points. The personal dimension or the dignity of individuals in a time of crisis must not be overridden by scientific knowledge or political considerations. Balancing the local and the global, the individual and the collective, demands a new way of seeing and knowing. It is not merely of academic or political interest. The contemplative dimension of consciousness allows for the integration of these complementary perspectives - at times, faced with impossible choices, with the 'wisdom of Solomon'.

There may be a good outcome from all this. Most certainly there can be, and it depends largely upon the individuals who are leading the way through the crisis. The virtue of hope is not putting the best spin on bad news or fiddling while the planet burns. It is a conviction that because of, and not despite the human element, an eventually positive outcome is always possible.

Is it too late? The contemplative consciousness is programmed to find meaning in the worst. With the experience of meaning our confidence in the fundamental goodness of human nature allows for resilience in the face of failure or defeat that always transforms despair into hope - and an unexpected, new way of seeing.

I appreciate this opportunity to contribute to the discussion, because of what I have learnt from it, and also because it helps to clarify in my own mind the particular tipping point - many such points make up the current global crisis - that religion itself is passing through. In one perspective this looks like failure and erosion. From another - what I call the contemplative - it

is full of hope and wonder as a new kind of religious consciousness evolves in humanity, one which advances the satisfying experience of unity **(p.164)** without diminishing the richness of diversity. If this is true of one area of human experience during our time of transition, it might well be of hope and interest to many other areas of human life and knowledge that are also undergoing our present transformation. Each newly perceived connection between all the tipping points releases energy and yields new insight. And, to end on a practical note, meditation shows how it is possible to create a community of faith, leading to action, among people of different beliefs.

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