

A Talk Given on Wall Street

Swami Atmarupananda

[On 6 June 2012, a meeting was held on Wall Street in New York City to discuss ‘Re-Envisioning Prosperity’. Almost 70 people were invited, including financiers, investors, economists, intellectuals, representatives from the activist movement known as *Occupy Wall Street*, and a select group of religious leaders from different faiths known as the *Contemplative Alliance*. Swami Atmarupananda was one of three religious leaders asked to open the meeting with a short talk to set a tone for the ensuing day-long discussion. Below is the substance of what he said, adapted for suitability as an article—*Editor*.]

I WOULD LIKE TO BEGIN BY ASKING, what am I doing here, addressing such a distinguished gathering of economic thinkers and finance actors? [*Laughter*] I have never attended a formal class on economics or finance; I have no money to invest, and therefore am not involved as an actor in the financial world. What, indeed, can I contribute?

Worse yet, I’m a contemplative, dedicated to leading a spiritual life, and thus, according to common opinion, I’m hopelessly impractical. No, had I any sense, I should have refused when Dena Merriam asked me to open today’s discussion.

But I didn’t say no. Let me explain why.

First of all, it isn’t true that contemplatives are by nature impractical. An important member of the business community here in New York City in the late 1800s and early 1900s was a man named Mr Francis Leggett, who was a major innovator in the wholesale grocery business. He was a wealthy man of the time, and a friend of a famous Hindu monk from India named Swami

Vivekananda. Mr Leggett was once asked why a hard-nosed businessman like himself should be friends with an oriental mystic, and he replied, ‘Because I have never met anyone with more common sense.’

Nor is it true that a contemplative has no connection to the interests of economists and financiers. Where does our economic system come from? Our financial system? Wall Street? They aren’t in the air, natural products of the earth or water. They come from human beings, from *inside* human beings, from the inside out. All human institutions, human civilisation, culture, sciences, arts, come from inside the human mind and heart, manifesting outside. And it is the human mind and heart that is the special field of research for the contemplative; not the surface, but the deep mind, the deep heart, the very roots of human existence.

And further, the true contemplative is in search of experiential reality, not theories or concepts. A prominent modern belief—and it’s nothing more than a belief—is that reality is what you make of it: there’s no such thing as reality itself. If that’s true, then we are all prisoners of our own concepts and illusions. The contemplative’s experience, however, is that there is reality; there is truth beyond her or his concepts and projections.

So the contemplative seeks deep in the human heart and mind, the same place from which all human activities proceed, all drives, all needs, all aspirations. But the contemplative seeks to go deeper, to an experiential reality



IMAGE: SHINY WINTER BLOSSOM / ANYZAMARAH (PATRICIA MASCHKE) / DEVIANTART

which is prior to needs and drives and aspirations and activities.

What is found there? Certain truths, a couple of which I want to share with you before I turn the conference over to those who know much more than I about the actual workings of the economy.

First, one finds at a deep level of our being a remarkable freedom. A freedom that gives us a sense of inner inviolability, of timelessness, adamant in quality, unaffected by the waves of action and reaction in the world.

One also discovers a sense of connection, connection to everyone and everything—an apparent contradiction, where we go inward to find connection with the outer; but it is a fact replicated in the experience of countless inner travellers over thousands of years around the world.

And then there is the apparent contradiction between freedom and connection. Freedom we think of as ‘freedom from’—freedom from people telling me what to do, freedom from things I don’t like, freedom from duty and expectations, freedom from all botheration—and most people and most circumstances we experience as botheration. Yet ‘connection’ means connection to others, to the world, to everything that seems to deprive us of freedom. But the contemplative begins to experience both of these—freedom and connection—at a deep level, where they are joined, where they are expressions of the same thing, which can best be described as love.

Let me say here that none of what I have said is beyond the reach of us here: I’m not speaking of lofty and rare states of consciousness like enlightenment, but of truths that any

of us can begin to experience if we wish, and if we train ourselves.

But what does all this have to do with us gathered here today? A great deal, actually.

A deep inner freedom translates at the level of ordinary human activity to the freedom to choose the motivations of my actions, and to choose my reactions to circumstances. That means I need not be a slave to old patterns of behaviour, a slave to habitual reactions to situations. And so this deep sense of freedom paradoxically makes me more responsible for my actions. I *can* begin to take responsibility for my actions, and therefore I begin to make the effort, out of a sense of freedom.

And a deep sense of connection to everything makes me feel a sense of loving responsibility toward others. ‘Responsibility’ is not the right word, being heavy, connoting something forced, and guilt-based. Simply love for others, the desire for the best for others. That, combined with the freedom that allows me to take responsibility for my actions, radically changes my relationship to the world in a wonderful, positive way—difficult at times, but eventually liberating, joyful.

How is this related to economics and finance? Intimately.

You, whether you are thinkers or actors, have a tremendous responsibility. Tremendous, because as Peter Parker tells his Uncle Ben in *Spiderman*, ‘With great power comes great responsibility’. And you here have great power. Decisions you make help people or hurt them, even devastate them, as happened in 2008, largely through misguided and greedy actors in the real estate and financial sectors. The welfare of millions—vulnerable people, the elderly, the sick, the poor, those who have no alternative but to trust the system—is dependent upon you.

Responsibility to others. The US Supreme Court may say that a corporation’s responsibility is simply to enhance value for the stockholders, but that is much worse than nonsense, it is poison. Because it is a decision of the Supreme Court, it may stand in a court of law, but it doesn’t reflect the way life actually works. Whether we want it so or not, we are responsible to others: it’s the way the universe is built, because all this infinite diversity we see out here is founded on a deep inner connection, I would even say a deep inner unity, but at least connection, a connectedness that can be demonstrated scientifically, psychologically, morally, and spiritually. It isn’t a matter of belief, and that’s why simply ignoring it doesn’t work: what you do to others comes back to you. Not for some New Age touchy-feely reason, but because the outer world is intimately connected to you in experiential fact.

So I close by saying that many of you, perhaps all of you, are here today because you are sensitive to the welfare of others. Otherwise you wouldn’t waste time on a meeting like this. But the present financial system, and the even larger economic system, will last only if this understanding, this sensitivity becomes widespread within it. Otherwise the system is on its way out, not today, but in ten years, maybe, or fifty years, certainly less than a hundred years, because the inner contradictions on which it is based are no longer bridgeable. And if the system breaks irreparably because people didn’t learn to care for others, then the breaking will be devastating to countless people, causing untold suffering. The only long term hope is learning to adjust the financial system to the way the universe is actually built, the way it actually works. This is no time for denial, and there is no time to delay.

Thank you.

