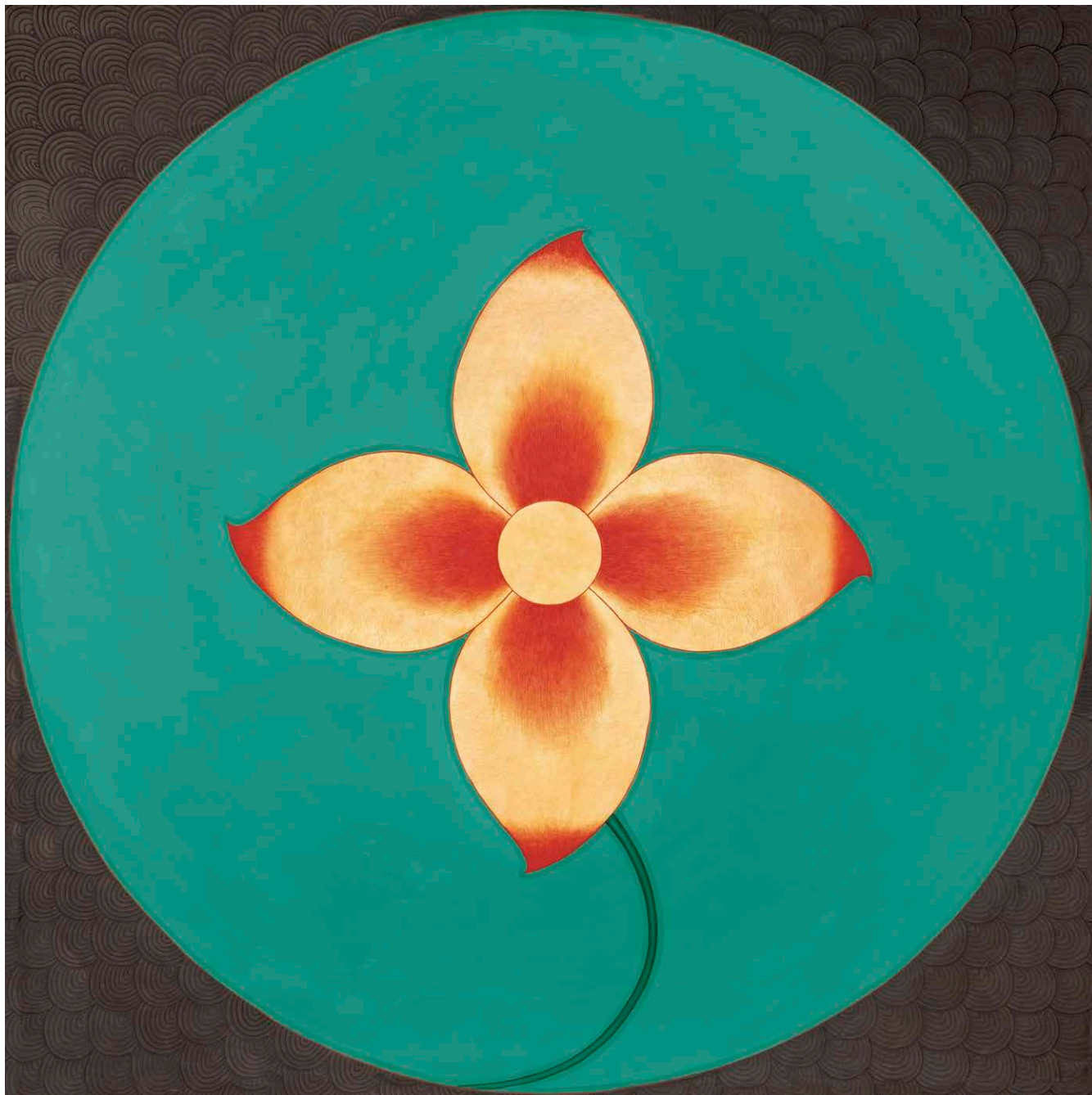
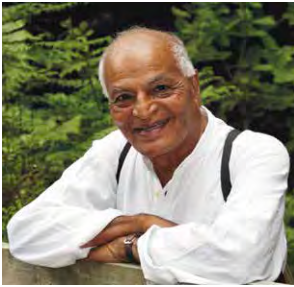


Elegant simplicity



The Golden Lotus by Olivia Fraser. Courtesy of Grosvenor Gallery www.oliviafraser.com

Our age of excess is destroying us, but there is a simple solution, writes **Satish Kumar**



I have written a new book, *Elegant Simplicity*. My reason for writing it is that simplicity has most of the answers to most of our questions. Simplicity is the prerequisite for sustainability, spirituality and social harmony.

Let's begin with the question of sustainability. Consumerism clutters our homes, our lives and our workplaces. Our wardrobes are full of unworn clothes: shoes, jumpers and jackets, and much more. In our kitchens, things sit in cupboards hardly used as we hold on to them thinking that one day they will be useful – but that day rarely arrives. It is the same story on our desks: papers, files and books pile up day after day and clutter the space. We have become habituated to accumulate and store. Look at the attic, look at the bedroom, look at the storeroom – everywhere clutter and more clutter.

All this material has to be taken from somewhere, from the Earth and from Nature. Mass extraction, mass production, mass distribution and consumption result in mass waste and mass pollution. If we are serious about sustainability, then we have to change our habit of accumulating unnecessary possessions in our homes and workplaces, and learn the art of living well with less.

If 7 billion people on this planet Earth were to accumulate, consume and then waste and pollute as we Europeans and Americans do, we would need three planets and perhaps more. But we don't have three planets – we have only one. Therefore, living simply and making a small footprint on the Earth is a sustainability imperative.

Many of the goods we accumulate are made cheaply in China or Bangladesh. They are not only cheap, but often ugly or at least not beautiful. We buy them and soon get bored with them, so we throw them away and the landfills get crammed full. Simplicity requires elegance and beauty. Whatever we have should be beautiful, useful and durable at the same time. I call it the 'BUD' principle of elegant simplicity. The Shakers set a superb example of this principle. My mother used to say: "Have few things, but have beautiful things, so that you can cherish them, use them and wear them with pleasure." This traditional wisdom is common sense, but sadly such common sense is no longer common. Therefore, I have to write a book about it!

Simplicity is a prerequisite for spirituality. For our personal wellbeing, we need to have time for ourselves so that we can meditate, do yoga or tai chi, read poetry or books of spiritual teaching, and be at ease within ourselves. In order to acquire gadgets and other possessions, we have to work hard to earn money, then we have to work hard to shop around and spend money, and then

we have to work hard to look after the stuff we have accumulated. Then we complain that we have no time for ourselves, for our spiritual wellbeing, for imaginative work like reading or writing poetry, for painting or gardening, for music, for walking. Cluttered homes create cluttered minds. If we live simply, we will need less money, we will need to work less, and our time will be liberated from drudgery and boring routine. Then we can pursue the path of spiritual fulfilment, focus on personal wellbeing and on the development of arts and the imagination. Then we can have time and space for friendship and for love. It is a beautiful paradox – material minimalism maximises spiritual wellbeing.

Simplicity is also a prerequisite for social justice. If a few of us have too much, others have too little. So we need to live simply so that others may simply live. Some of the clutter we accumulate is called luxuries: more than one house, more than one car, more than one computer; in other words, more of everything. Then some of us go for even greater extravagances: a private yacht, a private jet, and so on. Such inequality represents injustice and creates envy and social discord. I have known a few people with such luxuries and they are no happier than those who have a much simpler lifestyle. Happiness does not lie in the possession of things: happiness lies in contentment of the heart. When we know that enough is enough, we always have enough; and when we don't know enough is enough, however much we have, it is never enough.

When I speak of simplicity I don't mean a life of deprivation, hair-shirt living or hardship. I believe in a good life, in beautiful things, in arts and crafts, and in sufficiency. I believe in joy and celebration. This is why I put the word 'elegant' before 'simplicity'. Simplicity is and should be elegant. We all need and should have a comfortable and pleasant life. But at the moment our complicated lives are no longer comfortable. We are sacrificing comfort for the sake of convenience, and the pursuit of convenience has led us astray. If we are blessed with wealth, we can use it for philanthropy – for caring for the Earth and her people.

Living simply requires attention, awareness and mindfulness. E.F. Schumacher said that any fool can make things complicated but it requires a genius to make things simple. And we all have that innate genius within us. The only thing we need to do is to pay attention and discover our genius to live well and live simply. **R**

Elegant Simplicity by Satish Kumar will be published by New Society Publishers in spring 2019.

Satish Kumar will give a talk on *Elegant Simplicity* at the October Gallery, 24 Old Gloucester St, Bloomsbury, London WC1N 3AL at 6.30pm on 23 May 2019.

Tickets £10. www.octobergallery.co.uk