
A Shift in Consciousness: Implications for Business

A Conversation with Peter Russell

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After earning degrees in theoretical physics, experimental psychology, and computer science at the University of Cambridge, England, Peter Russell traveled to India, where he studied Eastern philosophy. Upon his return, he began research into the psychology of meditation. He was among the first to introduce self-development to the business world. He



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To begin, tell us something of how you see the world at this point.

I think, without any exaggeration, that we are living through the most critical and most exciting and challenging times in human history. Partly this is because of our potential understanding of the world. In our own lifetimes we are approaching scientific understanding to an extent that earlier generations could only dream about. Technologically, we have reached the point where we can accomplish almost anything we can think of. Everything is happening faster and faster and faster. It's hard to imagine where we will be, even in a few years.

But why is it happening faster and faster?

First, because there is a positive feedback loop in evolution and development; new developments facilitate future developments. Each new bit of software builds on what's been accomplished previously. And second, we are *trying* to make things happen faster and faster. This is the prevailing attitude in our culture, based around efficiency. Our goal is to do more in a shorter period of time. We deliberately build things to do things faster. We are approaching infinitely rapid change in the next ten to a hundred years. This may mean that we are approaching burnout, that we can't handle the change. On the other hand, it may mean a shift of emphasis to inward change. Inner development can happen quite rapidly. What I see as a possibility is that the exploration of the human mind, the development of our inner world, understanding ourselves, may be the next phase. If conditions are favorable, this shift could happen very fast. The values that are driving our technology and our lives now are not especially wholesome—in fact, they're self-destructive. One of those values, for example, is material economic growth.

Can you say a little more about how these driving values might change?

Shifting values may not stop the technological acceleration but they could shift the *direction* of the acceleration. The value system that drives us and is spreading around the rest of the world very rapidly is a value system that may have been totally appropriate in the past—perhaps as recently as a half-century ago, when our survival depended upon our ability to feed ourselves, find drinking water, keep ourselves free from disease, survive the winters. And that value system said we need to modify our physical environment to one in which we can survive. We've done that.

And yet we're still not happy; we're still feeling a lack of fulfillment. The reason is that we have some sort of inner hunger that isn't satisfied in our society. But the belief system says if you're still not feeling fulfilled, and you have all these things, then obviously you haven't got enough. You need to do something, change your environment, change your relationship to things, have some new experience. We've got in this trap that says we must have more external comfort, pleasure, opportunity—yet no matter how much we have it is never enough and we have to have more.

How plausible is it, do you feel, that modern society might get out of that trap?

Now that's a difficult question. I think it's not very plausible, to be quite honest. I think the momentum is so great that we're not going to get out of that trap smoothly. It's going to take quite a major shakeup, because that belief system is by now so ingrained in us. But *individuals* can get out of that trap. This is what spiritual traditions have been about for thousands of years—trying to help us see that it's our attachments, our desires for things, that causes us to be unhappy. The spiritual wisdom is there, and more and more people are rediscovering that perennial philosophy for themselves. It's almost like we're being driven towards it by the realization that despite all the luxuries that we have, we're not necessarily any happier.

There is a shift in our societies to begin to look inwardly. I think it's very parallel to what the Buddha went through, two and a half thousand years ago. He had all the riches one could want but it didn't end suffering, so he went out on his search to find a different way. That is happening en masse in our society to millions of millions of people who, knowing inside that the old way doesn't work, are beginning to look for something new. There is the possibility that society as a whole could make that shift, but it's not going to happen that smoothly.

I have begun to wonder whether there is time to escape what we have set in motion. The image I have is of the crash-test dummy in a car—the car has started to crumple against the wall, and the dummy is saying to himself, "This doesn't look too good. I should get out of here." I feel in a way our society has been heading for the wall for a long time, and it's happening in our lives in slow motion. One just has to look around to see the continued degradation of the environment, the falling apart of the inner cities, the precariousness of the whole economic system; everything seems to be more and more fragile.

Let's take the scenario that the crash-test dummy is headed for the wall, and there's nothing I can do about it—that we are living through the crumbling of Western civilization. What is appropriate action for me now? What would the world be like if that were happening? It would be a world in which there is massive destruction, a lot more suffering at the personal level, not the end of humanity but the end of modern society as we have known it. People would need a lot more external care, a lot more internal care; there would be more suffering, and need for the alleviation of suffering. We would be forced to let go of a lot of our attachments.

And what I realized was that it all comes back to the same thing. In scenario A, if we all get our spiritual act together, we can save our society. In scenario B, it's too late. But what do we need? We need exactly the same inner work. It's about learning to become more loving, more compassionate people; letting go of our attachments; learning how to be at peace with ourselves, to maintain greater inner equanimity despite what's going on around us. And that was a great breakthrough for me, the realization that there's a certain equifinality to things. No matter which way I looked at it, it meant the same deep inner work for myself and equally for other people. This realization had the effect of allowing me to let go to a certain extent. Scenario A or scenario B, it didn't matter—the same deep inner work was required. And I think that is what we are here for. We are the first species that has arisen on this planet with the potential to realize God, if I may put it in spiritual terms. Whether this culture that we are embedded in extinguishes or thrives is a secondary matter. We may even be an evolutionary blind alley, but even so we are the first species capable of God-realization. And that is where I am optimistic. Because of what we as humans can achieve. And the more we can achieve that, it can only have positive ramifications for the world.

The crowning accomplishment of modern society is often taken to be modern science. Do you have any comment about that?

Well, in the first place, it's quite clear that present-day science doesn't deal very successfully with intentionality or consciousness. Molecular biologists and neuroscientists are looking for quantitative theories to explain life. Consciousness was left out of science early in the game, for varied reasons valid at the time. Consciousness is much harder to pin down, to measure, than data about the physical world. You can't actually measure the mind. Secondly, science is looking for "objective" truths, and scientists wanted to eliminate variances that come in because of the observer's state of mind, or whatever. That's fine, provided you realize that that's what you're doing. Most of science is about understanding the external world. It doesn't aim to include consciousness. When the scientific approach tries to include consciousness, it looks at consciousness as part of the space-time-matter realm that science is exploring.

My feeling is that that's a misguided approach. I don't think that consciousness emerges from the space-time-matter realm. My feeling is that consciousness is a primary, an *absolutely* primary aspect of the universe, of reality—in some senses even more primary than space, time, and matter. And I think that the

real paradigm shift science is being called to make—it may make it or it may not, I don't know—is not to try to explain consciousness within its current frameworks, but to actually turn the whole thing inside out and look at consciousness as a primary aspect of existence. A bit like a “new Copernican revolution.” At the moment, the efforts of scientists to “explain” consciousness seem like the pre-Copernican astronomers trying to create ever more complex epicycles to explain the movement of the planets. “Maybe consciousness has something to do with coherent effects in microtubules [in the cell's interior]”, or whatever. To me, that's epicycling. We need a complete new revolution in our worldview.

If I understand you correctly, you believe that something like consciousness permeates the whole. Do you see any signs that this radical viewpoint is very widely held in the modern world?

No, not really. A few people had come to that conclusion, back even thousands of years. You can find it expressed in the Vedantic philosophy of India: Atman is Brahman. Reality is both Purusha and Prakriti; the universe has two aspects, consciousness and the material. We have become enamored by the physical, materialistic side, because that has been very successful in explaining things. And there's nothing wrong with that. I think that most of the truths that physical science has come up with are probably valid. I'm not anti-science at all. But I think that science has to go through another huge revolution. What we're talking about is not just another revolution in physics or a revolution in molecular biology or in any other area of science. We're talking about a revolution in the very worldview that underlies all of the sciences. So that says it's an even more fundamental revolution than the Copernican revolution.

You are suggesting that just as all of the institutions of Western society changed after the Copernican revolution, they are likely to change again. But only if this new worldview spreads widely enough.

Yes, this is the direction we are headed. How it's going to play out, I have no idea. As I said earlier, I think we are in a very, very critical time as regards the stability of modern society. We may never come to the shift. It may be that things fall apart and we move back into some sort of Dark Age for a time, where we are thrown back into looking after our physical survival. And it may be a long time in the future that we are going to come to this point. I'm not saying that this will have to happen now, although personally I find in my own life that moving in that direction

and helping other people move that way is the only game worth playing. So that's what I try to do.

It would seem that if there is anything at all to this story it would be tremendously important for higher-level decision makers in business and government to begin to take very seriously the question of what can be done to affect the outcome.

I think two things have to happen here, or perhaps it's two stages. We can begin to shift our values, shift our worldview. That will have ramifications right throughout our society. We're talking about a very fundamental shift in worldview, which is going to change our values, our views of what is important. If I really see the primacy of consciousness in myself, and that the bottom line is how I feel, not what I have in the world, that really takes the whole motor out of our peculiar society. In a sense, that's the second stage—creating that change.

However, there's another thing that has to happen first, in order to get to that stage at all. That is people beginning to appreciate that a common element to nearly all the problems we see going on around us is their relation to our perception. At the moment people aren't seeing that. We're in a firefighting mode as it were. "Here's a problem; we must solve that. Oh, there's a problem in the rain forest; we must negotiate tradeoffs with land for debt in the third world." Or, "We have a problem with the ozone layer; we have to stop CFC production." We're seeing the problems—problems in our inner cities, problems with our school system, problems with the health care system, and business and government have grown up in a problem-oriented mode. Business people are very good at solving problems. The life of most people in government is wondering how all the problems got on their plate each day. So they try to solve problems instead of inquiring into the deeper causes. And that's a bit like a doctor treating a patient by continually attending to each symptom. "You've got a cut? Put this bandage on. You've got a skin rash? Here, put this salve on the skin. You've got a stomach ache? Take some milk of magnesia or something." Now a good doctor's going to say okay, we need to do what we can to alleviate the pain, but let's also see what underlies all these symptoms. Why are all these symptoms bubbling up? I don't see many people at all in those circles in business or in government really asking the fundamental question: Why is it that these interconnected problems are happening to us?

We call ourselves an intelligent species. We ought to realize that we are destroying our environment, and if we continue doing so, twenty or thirty years from now we may not have suit-

able habitat for many creatures. To continue with policies that continue to create such destruction is insane.

You do a fair amount of consulting with business organizations. Your clients are not interested in hearing a pessimistic story about the decline of the modern world. You must give them—perhaps not advice—but you must give them something of value from which they can guide their decisions.

I don't go in as an expert in management or finance or marketing or any of those things. I go in to help people with the issues they're facing in the company. And that's usually in two different areas, closely related. A lot of the time recently it's been in the area of creativity, creative problem solving. Not teaching creativity; I don't believe in techniques of creativity. I believe that we are all inherently creative but that we block it in various ways. And if we can understand how we block it we can become more creative. So I will work with a client, usually with a team of people who are involved with a problem. I take them away, and help them explore that problem, and explore their relationship to the problem, how they get themselves stuck in one particular channel, and usually we get into the relationships between the people, and how those personal issues affect the problem.

The company sees value in what I am doing because I am helping the individuals become more free, more productive, more efficient, more communicative, helping the individuals move in the direction the company would like. I think the individuals get a lot of value from it, and that is really my greatest satisfaction—the value the individuals receive. It very often leads to their discovering a very different way of looking at things in their personal lives.

People in business rarely get the opportunity to look at themselves, to understand how they themselves function. One of the things I emphasize quite a bit in either stress or creativity training is how our mindsets condition the way we create reality for ourselves—the way we perceive reality, and thus the way we react. And for many of these people, it is the first time in their lives they really see that, and appreciate how it works in them. To see the ways in which one is controlled by one's mindset, and to step out of that and see that I am freer in my life than I had previously thought is, for many people, quite a transforming experience. And that's why I enjoy the work—seeing that inner transformation take place in people. And if the company sees benefit from that, I'm happy that they pay me to do the work.

For a long time I was running a program for IBM that was billed, up front, as personal development. They were looking

for something for their marketing managers, to enable them to begin to explore themselves and find how they function and work as individuals. They had concluded this was a missing dimension in their educational programs. It's not very often I can give a program straight out on personal development. It usually has to be dressed up to show more clearly the direct benefits to the company. Occasionally I will work with a client on strategic questions, such as how to deal with environmental issues—but I suppose that really falls into creative problem solving. What kinds of policies and strategies does the company want to develop to respond to the problems? But I go in as a facilitator, rather than as an expert.

Let's imagine that I am a major corporate client and we have hired you many times on creative problem solving and stress management. But now I'm faced with some really tough problems. There is strong pressure from the financial community to keep attention on the short-term financial bottom line. What advice can you give me about how I can behave more constructively regarding environmental and social issues?

It's interesting that you ask that, because I actually had exactly that situation with a client a few years ago. It was a chemical company that I had been working with for about three or four years. On this issue the company was split down the middle, from the board down to the shop floor. On one side, there was the president who said, "We want to become the 'greenest' company in the world within five years. We want to adopt this as our mission statement." This position was supported enthusiastically by a number of executives and many others farther down in the company. On the other side of the fence you had the financial director and many others, right down through the company, who said, "That is naive; in today's climate that would be corporate suicide. We have to face up to the realities of life; we can't do such a stupid thing."

So I was brought in, with a colleague with whom I often work, to facilitate their strategy meeting. There were about forty people in the meeting. What we did was a process of just getting people to air their views and beginning to hear each other. And by about the middle of the morning on the second day we ended up with sheets of flipchart paper, on which we had everybody's mindset on this issue, papering the walls all around the room. We got everybody to share their outlook. And that I find is a very useful process, to get everybody's beliefs and views up on the wall. Because it does two things. First, everybody feels they're heard; they've had the opportunity to get what they feel up there,

and they know that everybody else in the room can see it. And second, everybody begins to see the whole picture, and nobody's names are attached to particular beliefs. You can wander around the room for an hour and just see that these are all the different beliefs of these forty people.

Then we said okay, what do you see here that's common? Is there any common ground in all of this? And after some exploring and discussion, it turned out that nobody in the room could put their hand on their heart and say they were happy working in the chemical industry. The chemical industry by nature is dirty. You're messing around with chemicals that aren't natural; you're producing pollutants and substances which the environment can't contain. Nobody could put their hand on their heart and say, "This is my mission in life, working in the chemical industry." And I remember when one of the union managers heard the president say "Yes, that's true for me too," he said, "If that's the way you feel, I'm with you totally."

And the room came together, and it was no longer the "greens" versus the corporate survivors. Suddenly everybody was together. They shared something. And knowing that none of them was happy working in that industry, the next question was okay, so what do we do? We started at ground zero and we decided there were six areas in which the company could improve: the emission controls for the factory, transportation of dangerous substances, safety of the employees—they came up with six areas, and they set up six teams and started to work on it. And it wasn't a question of are you going to "become the 'greenest' company in the world, within five years" but "we are going to do everything we can within the constraints to become as green as we can." And within one year they had made tremendous progress.

You probably know of a study that sociologist Paul Ray has been conducting for the Fetzer Institute. His estimate of the number of "culturally creatives" in the United States is something like 40 million. And I believe he would say that they are fairly well distributed throughout society among people who are rather well educated and feel capable of guiding their own destiny, with perhaps fewer at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale, and fewer at the top, where the system seems to be working well for them.

Yes, I know the study. I don't know about the distribution. The ones at the bottom of the Maslow hierarchy may be mainly concerned with food and survival. But I'm not so sure about the top levels in society. In my experience I find that senior people in

business are among the most aware people I have met—both in the U.S. and in Europe. They are intelligent people—you don't get to be a corporate CEO because you're stupid. They are aware of what is going on in the world. They see where things could be going. They are also, many of them, aware of their own issues. They pick up the sorts of information you and I do. Many times when I am with a group of business executives and we have gotten to know one another a bit, perhaps around the bar, they share what they're reading about. My experience is that the upper levels of society are interested in this "new paradigm" stuff. I fly tourist class and often strike up conversations with people on the planes, and when I try to explain to them what I'm involved with they say, Oh yes, I think the same way. Just the other day I flew back to California from Pennsylvania where I had been giving a lecture, and I sat next to a head schoolteacher from somewhere out in East Bay with his daughter, and we spent the whole flight talking about these things. His daughter was sitting next to him, and she had been reading *The Celestine Prophecy*. We had a wonderful discussion about that.

People not just in high places but also ordinary people are asking "What could I do?" And your answer, I believe, is (1) Do your inner work, and (2)—what?

Look at your sphere of influence. Each of us has a sphere of influence, with us at the center, so the first question is, What could I do with regard to my sphere of influence? The only person I *truly* have responsibility for is myself. So what can I do for myself to help release myself from my fears, my inhibitions, my conditioning, to find the courage to stand up for the truth that I know inside? And then look around and say, okay, what is my sphere of influence? For some people it may be the family, the children they are bringing up, their colleagues they interact with at work. Some of us have a much larger sphere of influence, through our writing or speaking.

It's all very well to say we must have more responsible government, or chemical companies should be more aware of the environment, or the like. These things may be perfectly true, but we tend to spend our time thinking about what *they* should do, when *they* are not within our sphere of influence. A much more useful question would be, What can the company I work for do? And what can I do to help that company? Sometimes the work that I do is about empowering the individual within the organization, giving them the courage to stand up for the truth that they feel inside, and begin to find ways to put those truths into practice within the organization. I think there's no simple an-

swer, no recipe, about what to do. I think it's a matter of, What can you realistically do in your own world? But the primary thing is, I think, is ourselves. I hear people say, "People must change." But the one person I can influence is myself.

Is there any particular part of that environment that strikes you as a critical point, as the most difficult dilemma to deal with?

Yes. Our economic system. And within that, what's happened to money. It's easy to see how much of what goes wrong comes back to money decisions being made in the name of the financial bottom line. We have fallen in love with money. Money represents our ability to control our environment, to purchase things that we think will make us happy, to purchase experiences, to influence other people. It's our attitude toward money that is being controlled by this belief system that says whether or not I'm a success depends upon what I have or do, upon how much control I have over the world. The more control I have, the more security I have—and money gives us that control. I think that's why we have fallen in love with money. It's not money that is the root of all evil, but the *love* of money. There's nothing wrong with money—it's a symbolic means of exchange. But because we have gotten trapped in this materialistic mindset, we have gotten attached to money in itself. We believe that the more money we have the happier we will be.

What I see happening is that money is no longer primarily a means of exchange. People who have money can use money to make more money. That's the basis of what we call usury, profiteering off lending money. This has been condemned in various religious traditions and still tends to be banned in Islam. I think there are several reasons: (1) It tends to make the rich richer and the poor poorer because the people who have money and lend it at interest, get more money, and the people who don't have the money are borrowing and paying out interest. (2) I think there is a far more serious effect on our society, and that is that it actually drives the need for economic growth because if there is a certain amount of money out on loan (and in our society something like nine-tenths of the money is out on loan), the interest has to be paid on that eventually, and unless the net wealth of a nation (or the planet) is actually increasing, you get inflation because you have the same amount of goods chasing more and more money. The money supply has to keep increasing, and that is one of the chief factors keeping us tied to economic growth.

Also, this desire to make money out of having money is what's behind a lot of international trading. Today something like 95 percent of the money that's passing through banks in

international trade is not about buying and selling oil or coffee or whatever; it's about buying and selling money, to make money off the exchange rate. We are now seeing this with the derivatives market, which takes the game to one higher level of abstraction—people are buying the *right* to make money out of having money. And that, I think, makes the system *extremely* fragile and could well bring the whole economy down.

It's interesting what happened in the fall of the Barings bank in January, 1995. This was one of the oldest, most prestigious banks. The Queen of England made it her bank; it had five Lords on its board. And that was derivatives trading getting out of hand.

Except there's another factor which I find interesting. One of the reasons Nick Leeson got caught was because he was betting on the Japanese economy improving, and had it done so he might have got out of the fix and the bank would have survived. And I'm sure that the sort of thing he did, other people are doing all the time. The reason he was unfortunate enough to get caught was because at the very time he needed the Japanese economy to rise, the Kobe earthquake struck. For a long time I've been fascinated by the interrelation between earthquakes and the economic system. For example, the insured value of San Francisco is more than the global insurance market can stand. If San Francisco falls down, the global insurance industry is in deep, deep trouble. I remember watching the news when the Kobe earthquake happened. I was listening carefully, and the next day the economic commentators were saying that this shouldn't be a major disruption to the global insurance market because the Japanese economy is relatively strong at the moment and Japan reckons it can eat the costs internally. But to meet the costs internally obviously meant quite a hiccup in the Japanese economy, and within hours the stock market in Japan had gone down because people knew this. That's what caught out Nick Leeson and the Barings Bank. That just points up how vulnerable this economic system is.

"Investing" and gambling are tending to be the same thing. Most of the people in the stock market today are gamblers; they're trying to make money out of having money. The average person in the street who is an "investor"—putting money into a company, and wanting the stock price to increase, and the dividends to be high—is playing exactly the same game as the big bankers who are playing around with billions. This attachment to money is endemic throughout our whole society. And from that comes the desire to make more money out of the fact you have it. If I were dictator of the world, I think I would declare that all interest rates will be fixed at zero, and I would ban all international

trading of money and futures markets. That would probably create quite a lot of chaos and difficult situations for many people in the short term but I think it would help us out in the long term. It would bring money back to a pure means of exchange.

I think that's a most difficult thing to change. I don't see anybody in political circles talking about that. I don't see many economists talking about how to structure a system that doesn't have that element of usury in it. Even if they were talking about it, it would require a massive support of government to do it. I don't see how it could be accomplished, because that system has evolved over time—out of human greed. Which comes back to our consciousness again. Our way of approaching money is a reflection of our consciousness. I think the present system is going to collapse or fall apart in one way or another. And maybe we are already seeing the seeds of the new system in things like LETS [Local Employment Trading System]—people developing their own local currency, purely as a means of exchange. I mend your roof for five “lets” and spend them on a baby sitter. LETS systems are spreading all over the world now. Big cities are beginning to have their LETS systems; there's quite a large one going in London. The challenge is to keep those systems out of the usury trap.

But the money system is not really the *cause* of our problems. It's again only a symptom of the more fundamental problem of consciousness or attitude.

Some of your clients and readers must think you a bit pessimistic.

I know that it sounds like a lot of what I'm saying is pessimistic. And it well may be, viewed within the context of what might happen to our culture. But as I said earlier, I have tremendous hope for what we as individuals can attain in our own lives, and I think this is the time in history where we probably have an opportunity as never before to attain spiritual heights. They've always been there. We're fundamentally no different from people living in the time of Buddha or ten thousand years before that. But because of the physical freedoms we have, and because of the challenges through the world, we're being pushed into seeing the need to make the inner shift. And with the communication technologies we have we can learn from people around the world, through books and television and Internet, and that to me is what makes the time so exciting.

If indeed we have a discoverable higher purpose in being here, then this is a time in history when that may become manifest on a widespread level. In that scenario, the potentialities are unlimited.