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Healing Ecology

David R. Loy*

We are here to awaken from the illusion of our separate-ness.

—Thich Nhat Hanh

I came to realize clearly that mind is no other than mountains and rivers and the great wide earth, the sun and the moon and the stars.

—Dogen

Does Buddhism offer any special perspective on the ecological crisis? Do its teachings imply a different way of understanding the biosphere, and our relationship to it, which can really help us at this critical time in history when we are doing so much to destroy it?

There are reasons to doubt it: after all, Śākyamuni Buddha lived in a very different time and place, Iron Age India. He and his society knew nothing about climate change, ozone holes, melting glaciers, or extinction events; for that matter, they also knew nothing about carbon

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dioxide or the other elements of the periodic table, the cellular structure of life, DNA, and innumerable other scientific facts we take for granted now.

So what does Buddhism have to offer us today, as we struggle to respond to the eco-crisis? What the Buddha did know about was *dukkha*, the term usually translated as “suffering” yet to be understood in the broadest sense: dissatisfaction, discontent, anxiety—basically, our manifest inability to be happy. Śākyamuni Buddha declared that all he had to teach was *dukkha* and how to end it, which does not mean that life is always miserable but that even those who are wealthy and healthy experience a dis-ease that keeps gnawing. That we find life frustrating, one damn problem after another, is not accidental, because it is the nature of an unawakened mind to be bothered about something.

What, if anything, does that imply about the ecological crisis? I believe that there are precise and profound parallels between our usual individual predicament, according to Buddhism, and the present situation of human civilization. This suggests that the eco-crisis is as much a spiritual challenge as a technological and economic one. Does this mean that there is also a parallel between the two solutions? Does the Buddhist response to our personal predicament also point the way to resolving our collective one?

The Individual Predicament

The Four Noble (or ennobling) Truths of the Buddha are all about *dukkha* and how to end it. To put an end to my *dukkha*, however, I need to experience *anatta*—not-self—which from the other side is also my interdependence with all other beings, both living and inanimate. As far as I know, no other philosophy or religious tradition focuses so clearly on the intrinsic connection between *dukkha* and our delusive sense of self. It’s no exaggeration to say that for Buddhism the self is *dukkha*.

Although Buddhist teachings explain it in various ways, fundamentally *anatta* denies our separation from other people and, yes, from the (rest of) the natural world. Of course, each of us has a *sense* of self, but in contemporary terms that sense of self is a psychological and social construction, without any self-existence (*svabhāva*) or reality of its own. It is composed of mostly habitual ways of perceiving, feeling, thinking, acting, reacting, remembering, intending, and so forth. The basic problem with this self is its delusive sense of duality. The construction of a separate self inside is also the construction of an “other” outside—an objective world that is different from me. What is special about the Buddhist perspective is its emphasis on the *dukkha* built into this situation.

One way to describe this problem is that, since the sense of self is a mental construct, it is by definition ungrounded and ungroundable, and therefore always insecure. It can never secure itself because there’s nothing substantial or real there that could be secured. The constructed self is better understood as a work in progress, because it is never completed—more precisely, always unhealed. Another way to say it is that the sense of self is always shadowed or haunted by a sense of *lack*. Processes are temporal, necessarily impermanent, but we don’t want to be something that’s changing all the time, vulnerable to illness, old age and death. So we keep trying to secure ourselves, often in ways that just make our situation worse.

This is the core of the *ignorance* that Buddhism emphasizes. We often try to secure ourselves by identifying with things “outside” us that (we think) can provide the grounding we crave: money, material possessions, reputation, power, physical attractiveness, and so forth. That is because we misunderstand our sense of *lack* as due to lack of such things. Since none of them can actually ground or secure my sense-of-self, it means that no matter how much money, and so forth, I may accumulate, I never seem to have enough. The tragedy, from a Buddhist perspective,

is that such attempts to solve the problem so often end up reinforcing the actual problem—the sense that there is a “me” that’s separate from others.

The Buddhist solution to this predicament is not to get rid of the self. That cannot be done, and does not need to be done, because there is no separate self. There never was such a self. It is the *sense* of self that needs to be deconstructed (for example, in meditation) and reconstructed (for example, replacing the “three poisons” of greed, ill will and delusion with their more positive counterparts: generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom). We need to “wake up” and see through the illusion of self: I am not inside, peering out at the objective world out there. Rather, “I” am one of the ways in which all the causes and conditions of the world come together—what the whole world is doing—right here and now. This realization does not automatically solve all my personal problems, but it reveals how my sense of self can be reconstructed, so that my way of experiencing the world is more “permeable” and I relate to others in a less dualistic fashion.

That brings us to the *bodhisattva* path. In Buddhism that path is often presented as a personal sacrifice: a *bodhisattva* is someone who is enlightened and could choose to leave this world of *dukkha*, yet he or she sticks around to help the rest of us. But there’s another way to understand it. If I’m not separate from everyone else, can my well-being really be distinguished from the well-being of “others”? How can I be fully enlightened, then, unless everyone else is as well? In that case, following the *bodhisattva* path is better understood as a more advanced stage of Buddhist practice: learning to live in ways that apply this insight to our daily lives. Taking care of “others,” then, becomes as natural as taking care of my own leg.

To summarize: for Buddhism the sense of self is not something self-existing and real but a psychological construction, which involves a

sense of separation from others. Our deepest *dukkha* is that we feel disconnected from the rest of the world, and this feeling is always uncomfortable, because insecure. We do many things that (we hope) will make us feel more real, yet they often have the opposite effect: they reinforce that sense of separation. No matter what we have or what we do, it's never enough. While we cannot get rid of a self that does not exist, we can "wake up" and realize it is delusive. This also addresses the existential question about the meaning of one's life: realizing my nonduality with the world frees me to live as I choose, but that will naturally be in a way that contributes to the well-being of the whole, because I don't feel apart from that whole.

This Buddhist account of our individual predicament corresponds precisely to our collective ecological predicament today.

Our Collective Situation

We not only have individual senses of self, we also have group selves. I'm not only David Loy; I am male, Caucasian, a U.S. citizen, and so forth. And just as one's individual sense of self tends to be problematic, so collective senses of self are often problematical, because they too distinguish those of us *inside* from those who are *outside*: men from women, white from black, Americans from Chinese, and so forth. Those of us who are inside are not only different from those outside; we like to think that we are better than them. Obviously, a lot of the world's problems occur because of competition between group selves.

The issue here is whether "separate self = *dukkha*" also holds true for our biggest collective sense of self: the duality between us as a species, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, and the rest of the biosphere.

For such a parallel between the individual sense of self and humanity's collective sense of self, the following must be true:

1. Like the personal sense of self, human civilization is a construct.
2. This construct has led to a collective sense of separation (alienation) from the natural world, which causes *dukkha*.
3. This *dukkha* involves anxiety about what it means to be human—in this case, a fundamental confusion about what we as a species should be doing.
4. Our response to that alienation and anxiety—the collective attempt to secure or “self-ground” ourselves technologically and economically—is making things worse.
5. We cannot “return to nature” because we have never left it, but we need to realize our nonduality with the rest of the biosphere, and what that implies.
6. This will resolve our collective existential/spiritual problem about what it means to be human. With us the biosphere becomes self-conscious. Our role today is to heal it, and thereby ourselves.

The first claim, that human civilization is something constructed, seems obvious to us today; we are familiar with revolutions and reform movements, and the democratic process of passing new laws, and so forth. Nevertheless, this claim is not something most ancient societies understood. The West owes that insight to classical Greece, which as far as I know was the first to distinguish *nomos*—the conventions of human society (including culture, technology, and so forth.)—from *phusis*, the natural patterns of the physical world. The Greeks realized that, unlike the natural world, *whatever is social convention can be reconstructed*: we can reorganize our own societies and in that way (attempt to) determine our own destiny. Plato, for example, offered detailed plans to restructure the

Greek city-state in two of his dialogues, the *Republic* and the *Laws*. When we study his *Republic* we are reading something that was quite revolutionary in its time.

Today it is difficult for us to understand that traditional societies did not realize this distinction between nature and social convention. Without our sense of historical development, and therefore different possibilities in the future, most premodern peoples accepted their own social conventions as inevitable and just as natural as their local ecosystems. Rulers might be overthrown, but new rulers took their place at the top of the social pyramid, which was also a religious pyramid: kings were gods or godlike because they had a special role to play in relating to the transcendent powers that supervised the created world. Often human societies served an important function in keeping the cosmos going: the Aztecs, for example, required mass human sacrifice because blood was what kept the sun-god on his correct course through the heavens. In short, the distinctions we now make between the natural world, the social order, and religion did not exist for such cultures.

Of course, understanding one's own society as natural justified social arrangements that we would not tolerate today. Needless to say, the Aztecs did not have a democratic government or an independent legal system to defend one's human rights. But there was nevertheless an important psychological benefit in thinking the way they did: people in such cultures share a collective sense of *meaning* that we have lost today. For them, the meaning of their lives is built into the cosmos and revealed by their religion, both of which are taken for granted. For us, in contrast, the meaning of our lives and our societies has become something that we have to determine for ourselves in a universe whose meaningfulness (if any) is no longer obvious. Even if we choose to be religious, we must decide between various possibilities, which diminishes the spiritual security that exclusive affiliation traditionally provides. While we enjoy many

freedoms that pre-modern societies did not provide, the price of that freedom is losing their kind of “social security”: the basic psychological comfort that comes from “knowing” one’s place and role in society and in the world.

In other words, part of the rich cultural legacy that the Greeks bequeathed to the West—for better and worse—is an increasing anxiety about who we are and what it means to be human. Loss (or reduction) of faith in God has left us rudderless, collectively as well as individually. Thanks to ever more powerful technologies, it seems like we can accomplish almost anything we want to do—yet we don’t know what our role is, what we *should* do. What sort of world do we want to live in? What kind of society should we have? If we cannot depend on God or godlike rulers to tell us, we are thrown back upon ourselves, and the lack of any grounding greater than ourselves is a profound source of *dukkha*, collective as well as individual.

To sum up, our modern sense of separation from the natural world has become an ongoing source of alienation and frustration. (This corresponds to points one through three, above.) What has been our collective response to this predicament?

Remember how we usually react to our individual predicament. I try to make my anxious sense of self “inside” more real by becoming attached to (identifying with) things in the “outside” world, such as money, fame, and power. No matter how much of them I may acquire, however, I never seem to have enough, because they cannot allay the basic anxiety, which stems from the inherent insecurity of my constructed sense of self. Believing that something outside myself is the solution to my sense of *lack* is the fundamental delusion. Such “solutions” actually reinforce the problem, which is the sense of separation or distance between myself and others. Is there a collective parallel to these sorts of compulsions?

When we ask the question in this way, I believe that the answer becomes apparent: it's our obsession with never-ending "progress" and growth. What motivates our attitude towards economic and technological development? When will our Gross National Product be large enough? When will we collectively consume enough? When will we have all the technology we need? Why is *more* always *better* if it can never be *enough*?

My point is that technology and economic growth in themselves cannot resolve the basic human problem about what it means to be human. They may be a good *means* to accomplish something but they are not good as ends-in-themselves. Since we are not sure how else to solve that problem, however, they have become a collective substitute, in effect: forms of secular salvation that we seek but never quite attain. Since we don't really know where we want to go, or what we should value, we have become demonically obsessed with ever-increasing power and control.

Notice the parallel with one's individual predicament: lacking the security that comes from knowing our place and role in the cosmos, we have been trying to create our own security. Modern technology, in particular, has become our collective attempt to fully control the conditions of our existence on this planet. In effect, we have been trying to remold the earth so that it is completely adapted to serve our purposes, until everything becomes subject to our will, a "resource" we can use. This is despite the fact, or rather because of the fact, that we do not know what those purposes should be. Ironically, if predictably, this has not been providing the sense of security and meaning that we seek. We have become more anxious and confused, not less.

If these parallels are valid—if they are an accurate description of our collective situation—something like the ecological crisis is inevitable. Sooner or later (now?) we must bump up against the limits of this

compulsive project of endless growth and never-enough control. And if our increasing reliance on technology as the solution to such problems is itself a symptom of this larger problem, the ecological crisis requires more than a technological response (although technological developments are certainly necessary, of course—for example, more efficient solar panels). Increasing dependence on sophisticated, ever more powerful technologies tends to aggravate our sense of separation from the natural world, whereas any successful solution (if the parallel still holds) must involve recognizing that we are an integral part of the natural world. That also means embracing our responsibility for the welfare of the biosphere, because its well-being ultimately cannot be distinguished from our own well-being. Understood properly, then, humanity's taking care of the earth's rainforests is like me taking care of my own leg. (Sound familiar?)

Does this solution involve “returning to nature”? That would be like getting rid of the self: something neither desirable nor possible. We cannot return to nature because we have never left it. Look around yourself: even if you're inside a windowless room, everything you see is derived from nature: not only wood from trees, but plastic from oil and concrete from sand and stone. The environment is not merely an “environment”—that is, not only the place where we happen to be located. Rather, the biosphere is the ground from which and within which we arise. The earth is not only our home, it is our mother. In fact, our relationship is even more intimate, because we can never cut the umbilical cord. The air in my lungs, like the water and food that enter my mouth and pass through my digestive system, is part of a greater holistic system that circulates through me. My life is a dissipative process that depends upon and contributes to that never-ending circulation. The same is true collectively. Our waste products do not disappear when we find somewhere else to dump them. The world is big enough that we may be able

to ignore such problems for a while, but what goes around eventually comes around. If we befoul our own nest, there is nowhere else to go.

According to this understanding, the problem is not technology itself but the obsessive ways that we have been motivated to exploit it. Without those motivations, we would be able to evaluate our technologies better, in light of the ecological problems to which they have contributed, as well as the ecological solutions to which they might contribute. Given all the long-term risks associated with nuclear power, for example, I cannot see that as anything but a short-sighted solution to our energy needs. In place of fossil fuels, the answer will have to be renewable sources of natural power (solar, wind, and so forth), along with a reduced need for energy. As long as we assume the necessity of continuous economic and technological expansion, the prospect of a steep reduction in our energy needs is impossible, but a new understanding of our basic situation opens up other possibilities. This points to a very simple (although not necessarily easy) solution to our energy problems: instead of asking “how can we get all the energy we need?” I propose that we turn that around by determining how much renewable energy is available and restructuring human civilization accordingly.

Evolution?

But—this is my last point—how does such an understanding resolve the basic anxiety that haunts us now, when we must create our own meaning in a world where God has died? Like it or not, today our individual and collective self-consciousness distances us from pre-modern worldviews and the “natural” meaning-of-life they provided. Nor would we want to return to such constrictive worldviews—often maintained by force—even if we could. But what other alternatives are possible for us?

This is really to ask what collective parallel might correspond to the individual awakening that Buddhism promotes. “The Buddha at-

tained individual awakening. Now we need a collective enlightenment to stop the course of destruction” (Thich Nhat Hanh). I conclude with some reflections on what a collective enlightenment might mean.

Perhaps the important issue is how we understand evolution, which seems quite compatible with Buddhist emphasis on impermanence (process), insubstantiality, and interdependence. If religions are to remain relevant today, they need to stop denying (or ignoring, or minimizing) evolution and instead refocus their messages on its *meaning*. According to Brian Swimme the greatest scientific discovery of all time is that if you leave hydrogen gas alone (for fourteen billion years, plus or minus a few hundred million years) “it turns into rosebushes, giraffes, and humans.” I believe that is also an important spiritual discovery, and furthermore it seems to me that even fourteen billion years is a short period of time [!] for the cosmos to develop from the Big Bang to a Buddha or an Einstein—unless hydrogen gas is something quite different from the reductionistic way it is usually understood.

What we normally think of as evolution is only one of three progressive processes: the fusion of Big Bang particles into higher elements (in the cores of stars and supernovas), followed by the origination of self-replicating life and the evolution of plant and animal species, and last but not least the cultural developments necessary to produce highly-evolved human beings such as Śākyamuni Buddha and Einstein. The later (“higher”?) processes depend upon the earlier ones: life as we know it requires elements such as carbon and oxygen, and of course human culture is the development of a particular species that depends upon many other species to survive and thrive.

How shall we understand these three “nested” processes? Theists tend to see a Being outside these processes who is directing them. Many scientists see these developments as haphazard, including the evolution of life due to random DNA mutations. Is there a third alternative? Ac-

According to the evolutionary biologist Theodore Dobzhansky, evolution is neither random nor determined but *creative*. Of what? The tendency towards increasing complexity is hard to overlook, and greater complexity seems to be associated with greater awareness. From a Buddhist perspective, this opens up interesting possibilities. Can we understand this groping self-organization as the universe struggling to become more self-aware? Is my desire to awaken (“the Buddha” means “the awakened one”) the urge of the cosmos to become aware of itself, in and as me?

In *The Universe Story* Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry offer a similar claim: “The mind that searches for contact with the Milky Way is the very mind of the Milky Way galaxy in search of its inner depths.” What does this imply about Walt Whitman, for example, admiring a beautiful sunset? “Walt Whitman is a space the Milky Way fashioned to feel its own grandeur.” Is that how Buddhist enlightenment should be understood today? What did Śākyamuni Buddha realize when he looked up and saw the morning star? How did Dogen describe his own awakening? “*I came to realize clearly that mind is no other than mountains and rivers and the great wide earth, the sun and the moon and the stars.*”

Every species is an experiment of the biosphere, and according to biologists less than one percent of all species that have ever appeared on earth still survive today. Our super-sized cortex enables us to be co-creators (“created in the image of God”), and with us new types of “species” have become possible: knives and cities, poetry and world wars, cathedrals and concentration camps, symphonies and nuclear bombs. As these examples suggest, however, there is a problem with our hyper-rationality. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra says that “man is a rope across an abyss”: are we a transitional species? Must we evolve further in order to survive at all? In *Thank God for Evolution* Michael Dowd describes our collective problem as “systemic sin”: “The fundamental immaturity of the human species at this time in history is that our systems of governance

and economics not only permit but actually encourage subsets of the whole (individuals and corporations) to benefit at the expense of the whole.” Again, we bump up against the delusion of separate selves that pursue their own benefit at the cost of the whole. In Buddhist terms, I wonder if such delusions are haunted by too much *dukkha* dis-ease, which motivates us (both individually and collectively) to do too many self-destructive things.

Perhaps figures like the Buddha and Gandhi are harbingers of how our species needs to develop, in which case the cultural evolution that is most needed today involves spiritual practices that address the fiction of a separate self whose own well-being is distinguishable from the well-being of “others.”[†] Perhaps our basic problem is not self-love

[†]Is this way of understanding evolution fully compatible with Buddhist teachings? The topic is too complicated to address fully here, but a few points can be made. One issue is teleological: I am not suggesting that there is a final goal to the evolutionary process, but that there appears to be a *direction*: increasing complexity associated with increasing awareness. The Mahāyāna claim that “form is no other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than form” is consistent with this: all the beings (forms) of the universe are always *sūnya*, no matter how simple or complex their structure, and from that perspective the universe does not get better or worse. In other words, the meaning of the cosmos is “just this!” at every moment, insofar as everything is a complete manifestation of the whole, with nothing to lose or gain. This might be called the vertical dimension (or “higher truth”), but there is also a horizontal one (“relative truth”), which reveals that forms complexify over time. Can this be understood as “progress”? What is the special role of human beings in this process? Are we the only beings that can “awaken”—or need to?

Another issue is what difference all this makes in how we live, day to day. I believe Robert Neville has made the point that the development of life is no less precious if it is an accident. Neurologists have recently discovered that contemplative practices can actually re-configure the way the brain functions: in meditation *the brain re-wires itself*. If my main argument is correct, then, the best way to participate in the cultural evolutionary process might be to live fully in the present.

I suspect the most important issue of all is how we understand and experience *sūnyatā*, but that is a topic for another occasion.

but a profound misunderstanding of what one's self really is. Without the compassion that arises when we realize our nonduality—empathy not only with other humans but with the whole biosphere—it is becoming likely that civilization as we know it will not survive the next few centuries. Nor would it deserve to. If my speculations are valid, it remains to be seen whether the *Homo sapiens* experiment will be a successful vehicle for the cosmic evolutionary process.

To conclude, does this give us another perspective on our collective relationship with the biosphere? Is the eco-crisis a spiritual challenge that calls upon us to realize our nonduality with the earth?

Remember what was said earlier about the *bodhisattva* path. Although living beings are innumerable, the *bodhisattva* vows to save them all. This commitment flows naturally from realizing that none of those beings is separate from oneself.

This suggests a final parallel between the individual and the collective. Will our species become the collective *bodhisattva* of the biosphere? Today humanity is challenged to discover the meaning and role it seeks in the ongoing, long-term task of repairing the rupture between us and mother earth. That healing will transform us as much as the biosphere.