Seeing the System You Are Part Of

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 45:01

Hi, this is James Barris. I hope you find this talk supports you in your practice. If you'd like to support my teaching, you can use the donate button underneath my picture on Dharma Seed to do that. Your support is greatly appreciated.

First of all, just want to acknowledge it's been a good day for news, at least if you're from Berkeley. Gosh, so now the debates begin, but at least it still might be possible for 30 million people to get health care who need it. The Supreme Court upheld the Health Care Reform Act. You got to really rejoice with every positive step. Not to miss it. Because it's so easy to focus on all the things that are wrong or that seem crazy and insane and the mind goes, where are we headed?

Does your mind ever go down that road? What are we doing to ourselves and to this planet? What are we doing? And will we wake up? And will we wake up in time? As my friend Roger Walsh says, it seems like we're in a race between fear and consciousness. And I believe that in the end, consciousness trumps fear. It's just a matter of—there's a time element here.

That's why I'm calling this series of talks, Appropriate Response at the Tipping Point. Because we, in many people's minds, and I'm sure you've been reading actually recently in the news, we're at a tipping point in our lives, in our evolution and the planet's evolution as far as life on it. And we better wake up soon.

So I wanted to share with you a few things as we continue on with this series. The first is an essay that I found very inspiring that was shared with me. And I know it's not good form to do a lot of reading in a lecture, but I'm going to read a chunk of this essay—not all of it, but a chunk of it because it's articulated in a way much better than I can. It's by Ernest Callenbach, who recently passed away. He passed away in April, April 16th, and he was a professor at Cal and a real visionary who wrote a book called *Ecotopia* a number of years ago, and *Ecotopia Emerging*, yeah, was another book.

And he was this amazing visionary who—it's a novel of what the possibilities of humanity might look like if we really woke up. And this was written in the early 70s, I think. Unfortunately, it's still ahead of its time, way ahead of its time. And before he passed away, he wrote what is called an epistle to the ecotopians that was found on his computer after he passed away. It was like his last reflections on where we're heading with a hopeful possibility. And it's just really beautiful. If you Google "Epistle to the Ecotopians" or "epistle" and probably "Callenbach," that'll do it. It's from Tom Dispatch, this blog that's really a progressive visionary blog.

So I'm going to read parts of it that give inspiration as to the possibility.

"To all brothers and sisters who hold the dream in their hearts of a future world in which humans and all other beings live in harmony and mutual support, a world of sustainability, stability, and confidence, a world something like the one I described so long ago in *Ecotopia* and *Ecotopia Emerging*.

As I survey my life, which is coming near its end, I want to set down a few thoughts that might be useful to those coming after. It will soon be time for me to give back to Gaia the nutrients that I've used during a long, busy and happy life. I'm not bitter or resentful at the approaching end. I've been one of the extraordinarily lucky ones.

So it behooves me here to gather together some thoughts and attitudes that may prove useful in the dark times we are facing, a century or more of exceedingly difficult times. How will those who survive manage it? What can we teach our friends, our children, our communities? Although we may not be capable of changing history, how can we equip ourselves to survive it? I contemplate these questions in the full consciousness of my own mortality. Being offered an actual number of likely months to live, even though the estimate is uncertain, mightily focuses the mind. On personal things, of course, on loved ones and even loved things, but also on the big picture.

But let us begin with last things first for a change. The analysis will come later for those who wish it."

And then he lays out different qualities that are needed to see through the hard times that lie ahead.

So I wanted to share with you the qualities that he feels will be most important.

One, hope. Children exude hope even under the most terrible conditions, and that must inspire us as our conditions get worse. Hopeful patients recover better. Hopeful test candidates score better. Hopeful builders construct better buildings. Hopeful parents produce secure and resilient children. In groups, an atmosphere of hope is essential to shared successful effort.

"Yes, we can" is not an empty slogan, but a mantra for people who intend to do something together, whether it's rescuing victims of hurricanes, rebuilding flood-damaged buildings on higher ground, helping wounded people through first aid, or inventing new social structures—perhaps one in which only people are persons, not corporations. We cannot know what threats we will face, but ingenuity against adversity is one of our species' built-in resources. We cope, and faith in our coping capacity is perhaps the biggest resource of all.

This is something I have often reflected on and used to motivate myself—to somehow hold a positive vision of the best case scenario. Who knows what that is? But if we throw in the towel and just say, "What's the point? It's hopeless," then what we do is contribute to that despairing energy which finds lots of company in the soup of human consciousness and resonates with others who have that vision.

Of course, we can't be pie in the sky, thinking everything is going to be fine. But along with knowing how difficult the times will probably be, to have a vision—an inspiring vision—what you do is contribute to

holding that in the consciousness. That in itself is magnetizing and energizing, and finds others who have that kind of consciousness. Just like in the last election, when there was a groundswell of "Yes, we can"—that was a paradigm shift in feeling of caring and consciousness, the audacity of hope, actually. There's a possibility.

So who knows what's going to happen? But to hold that vision of the best case scenario is something that not only feels good inside, but is also a gift in the larger consciousness. Again, not to live in denial, but to practice what Coleridge called "suspension of disbelief." Instead of thinking, "I know how it's going to end up," we don't know. Nobody knows. We can have an idea of where things might be heading, but all kinds of possibilities are still in the air.

Second, after hope—mutual support, another essential quality. People who do best at basic survival tasks, we know experimentally as well as intuitively, are cooperative, good at teamwork, often altruistic, mindful of the common good. In drastic emergencies like hurricanes or earthquakes, people surprise us by their sacrifice of food, of shelter, even sometimes of life itself. Those who survive social or economic collapse, wars, pandemics, or starvation will be those who manage scarce resources fairly. Hoarders and dominators win only in the short run and end up dead, exiled, or friendless.

So in every way we can, we need to help each other and our children learn to be cooperative rather than competitive, to be helpful rather than hurtful, to look out for the communities of which we are a part and on which we ultimately depend.

Third quality that he sees as essential: practical skills. With the movement into cities of the US population and much of the rest of the world's people, we have had a massive de-skilling in how to do practical tasks. When I was a boy in the country, all of us knew how to build a treehouse or construct a small hut or raise chickens or grow beans or screw pipes together to deliver water. It was a sexist world, of course, so when some of my chums in eighth grade said we wanted to learn "girls'" home skills like making bread or boiling eggs, the teachers were shocked, but we got to do it.

There was widespread competence in fixing things—impossible with most modern contrivances. We all need to learn or relearn how we would keep the rudiments of life going if there were no paid specialists around or means to pay them. Every child should learn elementary carpentry, from layout and sawing to driving nails. Everybody should know how to chop wood safely and build a fire. Everybody should know what to do if dangers appear from fire, flood, electric wires down, and the like. Taking care of each other is one practical step at a time, most of them requiring help from at least one other person. Survival is a team sport.

Next—and there are two more of these—organize. Much of the American ideology, our shared and unusually unspoken assumptions, is hyper-individualistic. We like to imagine that heroes are solitary, have superpowers, glory and violence, and that if our work lives and business lives seem tamer, underneath they are still struggles red in blood and claw. We have sought solitude on the prairies as

cowboys, on the range in our dependence on media rather than real people, and even in our cars—armored cabins of solitude. We have an uneasy and doubting attitude about government as if we all reserve the right to be outlaws.

But of course, human society, like ecological webs, is a complex dance of mutual support and restraint. If we're lucky, it operates by laws openly arrived at and approved by the populace. When the group recognizes its group powers, it can limit any distortions that happen. Thinking together is enormously creative.

Looking at this vast perspective, it has enormous survival value. And lastly, we must learn to live with contradiction.

These are dark times. These are bright times. We are implacably making the planet less habitable. Every time a new oil field is discovered, the press cheers—hooray, there's more fuel for the self-destroying machines. We are turning more land into deserts and parking lots. We're wiping out innumerable species that are not only wondrous and beautiful, but might also be useful to us. We're multiplying to the point where our needs and our wastes outweigh the capacities of the biosphere to produce and absorb them.

And yet, despite the bloody headlines and the rocketing military budgets, we are also unbelievably killing fewer of each other proportionately than in earlier centuries. We have mobilized enormous global intelligence and mutual curiosity through the internet and beyond it. We've even evolved, spotily, a global understanding that democracy is better than tyranny, that love and tolerance are better than hate, that hope is better than rage and despair. We're prone, especially in catastrophes, to be astonishingly helpful and cooperative.

We may even have begun to share an understanding that while the dark times may continue for generations, in time new growth and regeneration will begin. In the biological process called succession, a desolate, disturbed area is gradually, by a predictable sequence of returning plants, restored to ecological continuity and durability. When old institutions and habits break down or consume themselves, new experimental shoots begin to appear. And people explore and test and share new and better ways to survive together.

It's never easy or simple, but already we see under the crumbling surface of the conventional world promising developments: new ways of organizing economic activity, like cooperatives, worker-owned companies, nonprofits, trusts; new ways of using low-impact technology to capture solar energy, to sequester carbon dioxide; new ways of building compact, congenial cities that are low in energy use or even self-sufficient, low in waste production, high in recycling of almost everything. A vision of sustainability that sometimes shockingly resembles ecotopia is tremulously coming into existence at the hands of people who've never heard of the book.

Callenbach writes, "When disasters strike and institutions falter, as at the end of empires, it does not mean

that the buildings all fall down and everybody dies. Life goes on, and in particular the remaining people fashion new institutions that they hope will better ensure their survival."

So I look to a long-term process of succession, as the biological concept has it, where disturbances kill off an ecosystem, but little by little new plants colonize the devastated area, prepare the soil for larger and more complex plants and other beings who depend on them. Finally the process achieves a flourishing, resilient, complex state—not necessarily what was there before, but durable and richly productive. In a similar way, experiments underway now all over the world are exploring how sustainability can in fact be achieved locally.

I have become less confident of humans' political ability to act on common sense, shared values. Our era has become one of spectacular polarization, with folly multiplying on every hand. That is the way empires crumble—they're taken over by looter elites who sooner or later cause collapse. But then new games become possible.

Humans tend to try to manage things: land, structures, even rivers. We spend enormous amounts of time, energy, and treasure in imposing our will on nature, on pre-existing or inherited structures, dreaming of permanent solutions, monuments to our ambitions and dreams. But in periods of slack, decline, or collapse, our abilities no longer suffice for all this management. We have to let things go.

All things go somewhere. They evolve with or without us into new forms. So as the decades pass, we should try not always to futilely fight these transformations. As the Japanese know, there's much unnoticed beauty in wabi-sabi—the old, the worn, the tumbledown, those things beginning their transformation into something else. We can embrace this process of devolution, embellish it when strength avails, learn to love it.

There is beauty in weathered and unpainted wood, in orchards overgrown, even in abandoned cars being incorporated into the earth. Let us learn, like the Forest Service sometimes does, to put unwise and unneeded roads to bed, help a little in the healing of the natural contours, the revegetation by native plants. Let us embrace decay, for it is the source of all new life and growth.

That is the question and the task—when your mind has a hard time wrapping around it all and making sense of it all, to at some point let go of what you think you know. For me, in the bigger scheme of things, what the Dharma perspective always does is open up to a much larger sense of time rather than this thin slice called now or called this year or this decade. We can see that there is a natural law that we are a part of, and that life finds its own new ways, with or without humanity—but hopefully we can be participating in a new creative possibility.

Given that backdrop I wanted to share as a way that we can hold some vision, I wanted to now start exploring this book I mentioned before the break. It's called *From Me to We*, with the subtitle "The Five Transformational Commitments Required to Rescue the Planet, Your Organization, and Your Life," by Bob

Doppelt, who is a systems expert and executive director for the Resource Innovation Group, a sustainability and climate change education, research, and technical assistance organization. It's connected with Willamette University, and he also teaches at the University of Oregon and has written a number of books on sustainable thinking.

But he's an old Dharma friend. He sat with me, oh, twenty-five years ago at Breitenbush. I used to teach there regularly, and he and his partner would come on retreats. He's taking the Joy course now, and he said, "Hey, you might not remember me, but I'm taking this Joy course. I really like it."

He sent me his book, and when it arrived, it was one of those things that sits on your nightstand for a while—you know, thinking, "I really should pick this up and at least honor him by reading a bit of it." I do receive quite a number of books, but the fact that this one was thin certainly helped. And then there was this beautiful piece by Ernest Kallenbach in the Inquiring Mind issue, alongside this book. When I started reading it, I thought, "Oh, this is good. This is really good."

What he does is examine some basic Dharma principles—not new to any of you, probably—but sees them in the context of what would be needed to shift our consciousness, the keys to making that transformation. The not-seeing of these principles is what keeps us bound in ignorance, confusion, and suffering.

When I contemplate the word Dharma, it's often translated as nature or the natural law. Many of the Buddha's teachings were based on observing how things work in nature. He would say, "There are trees and roots of trees. Go sit in nature and see how life works." In that experience of being part of nature and examining the mind and body in that context, you become more connected to the basic principles of life.

What's particularly interesting is that he doesn't use Buddhist jargon in this book—just a brief mention of the Buddha in the preface or introduction. It's written for any mainstream person, yet it's based on Buddha Dharma. These five principles are five Dharma principles, returning to that definition: understanding the natural law, the laws of nature, and applying them to the planet. This is really what deep ecology is about.

It's not just about recycling, doing our part, avoiding further pollution, or shopping locally—though these matter. It's about seeing that the underlying consciousness needed to save us requires a completely different way of bringing practice into this situation. As he says, and as I mentioned in that previous essay, we are right now at a moment of choice, a choice point in our evolution.

His title, "From Me to We," captures the essence of this choice point. We live in a society that, as Ernest Kallenbach observed, glorifies the individual. The shift required is to move away from the erroneous idea that individual focus is where true happiness and fulfillment lie, to see quite the opposite. That individualistic approach is a prescription for doom. The task that all these principles point to is this movement from "me" to "we."

He references Erik Erikson—many of you are probably familiar with his stages of human development. Erikson's theory shows how we start off completely absorbed in "me" and our physiological and emotional needs. In the first year or two, the infant is so me-centered that the whole world is "me." But gradually, from childhood through adolescence and into young adulthood, we begin seeing the importance of connections and love. Moving into greater maturity, there's a movement toward finding fulfillment and happiness through feeling greater connection beyond ourselves. True happiness comes from living a life of contribution—both to those around us through connection and love, and through vision for future generations as well.

This aligns with positive psychology, where authentic happiness, as Martin Seligman describes it, isn't about getting as much as you can as fast as you can. Genuine, deeper, fulfilling happiness comes from discovering your gifts and sharing them with the world. Again, it's that movement from "what's in it for me?" to "what do I have to offer? What do I have to give?"

We are, as Bob describes it, in an adolescent stage of human development, hopefully moving from showing our power and sowing our wild oats to asking, "How can I feel greater connection to others in this world?"

Throughout different periods of human history, there has been this back-and-forth movement from "me" to "we." He points out that hunter-gatherers were completely focused on "me" and getting individual needs met. When agriculture emerged, there was a need to organize and help each other—a shift toward more of a collective approach. Of course, people helped each other in hunting as well, but agriculture created a different kind of cooperation. Then, moving into cities and organizing at that level...

And there have been these oscillations throughout different periods in history—like during the time of the Buddha, which coincided with the emergence of Taoism and Lao Tzu in China and the Golden Age in Greece. That era seemed to represent a flowering of consciousness to some extent. I don't want to romanticize it, but there was a quality of consciousness in human thinking at that time that gave birth to some of the greatest insights about the importance of recognizing that we're part of something much larger.

Then came the dark ages, followed by feudalism, then periods of collective organizing—whether around church or country—each with its own shadow side. This was followed by the age of reason and the period of enlightenment, which emphasized the individual. We've been gradually growing beyond that age of reason with its focus on individualism, and now we're hopefully moving into a new era of "we."

At this crucial choice point, our sustainability depends on looking carefully and considering this movement toward greater connection, this fundamental shift in our life perspective.

Let me give you an overview of the five principles, the five commitments that he discusses. We'll explore just the first one this evening.

The first commitment is: See the systems you are a part of. This encompasses the understanding that we're all interconnected—really seeing deeply into interdependence, into the Buddhist concepts of śūnyatā (emptiness) and anattā (not-self). All of these fall under this commitment, which I'll explore in a moment.

The second commitment: Be accountable for all the consequences of your actions—simply recognizing the law of cause and effect.

The third: Abide by society's most deeply held universal principles of morality and justice.

The fourth: Acknowledge your fiduciary obligations and take responsibility for the continuation of all life. This is compassion in action, compassionate engagement.

And the fifth: Choose your own destiny—which embodies the principle of intention and vision.

The more consciously we can embrace these commitments, the deeper our Dharma practice becomes, both internally and externally. It aligns with recognizing: "This is my part in this puzzle."

So, the first commitment: See the systems you are a part of.

You've probably all encountered the concept of emptiness. Emptiness means being empty of a separate self—empty of anything that exists independently. As John Muir said, "When you try to pick out anything by itself, you find it hitched to everything else in the universe." Nothing can be separated out.

Thich Nhat Hanh offers the example of a piece of paper. He says when you look at a sheet of paper, all of life is present in it. When you look deeply, you see the tree that became this paper, and the rain and the sun, and the logger and the logger's family, and everything that went into the production—the earthworms tilling the soil, the nutrients, everything can be found in this single sheet of paper.

In the same way, when you see yourself as part of a larger system, it shifts your limited worldview.

I want to share another passage I love, from Lewis Thomas. Has anyone read *Lives of a Cell*? It's a wonderful, slim book written many years ago. This is from the very beginning, and it really captures, at the most fundamental level, the reality that you are not separate from anything:

"A good case can be made for our non-existence as entities. We are not made up, as we had always supposed, of successively enriched packets of our own parts. We are shared, rented, occupied. At the interior of our cells, driving them, providing the oxidative energy that sends us out for the improvement of each shining day, are mitochondria, and in a strict sense they are not ours. They turn out to be little separate creatures, replicating in their own fashion, privately, with their own DNA and RNA quite different from ours. Without them we would not move a muscle, drum a finger, think a thought. Mitochondria are stable and responsible lodgers, and I choose to trust them. But what of the other little animals, similarly established in my cells, sorting and balancing me, clustering me together? My centrioles, basal bodies, and probably a good many other more obscure tiny beings at work inside my

cells, each with its own special genome, are as foreign and as essential as aphids in anthills. My cells are no longer the pure line entities I was raised with. They are ecosystems more complex than Jamaica Bay. I like to think that they work in my interest, that each breath they draw for me. But perhaps it is they who walk through the local park in the early morning, sensing my senses, listening to my music, thinking my thoughts."

This is what's really happening.

And if you probably know that you have trillions of bacteria—billions and billions, I should say—of bacteria in your stomach, in your mouth. I love that line Wes Nisker has, that there are more living organisms in your mouth right now than there have been humans since the beginning of time. It's true. And without those bacteria, you're gone. You are an ecosystem. That's an interesting way to think of yourself. But that's how it works.

And when Bob talks about just seeing the world in terms of systems, seeing this emptiness of separate self, this law of interdependence or interconnectedness—when you see there's no separate me, then who are you serving? Who is the you that is wanting things better? If you're an ecosystem, then you're representing a whole lot of beings right in here.

When you think about this, as he says there are systems nested in larger systems, nested in larger systems—if you see how it's all held together, we're connected. We're part of many, many systems, both from the micro to the macro. Where are you in that continuum?

When you think about it, the mitochondria or the cells—when a couple of cells go haywire, it affects the whole system, doesn't it? The cells work together and create a functional tissue which is different in your kidneys than it is in your lungs or your heart or any other organ. Your organs are working together in a complex way, in balance, that creates this pattern of life called you.

And you are part of other systems, starting with your family system, but moving beyond and beyond and beyond—from family to tribe to perhaps geographical region to city, state, country, planet, solar system, galaxy, universe. Where does it stop? You draw a line around and say, "This is me and there's life out there." That's just a very narrow perception of things.

Unfortunately, one of the perceptions that we have not seen, or one of the perceptions that we've fallen into misunderstanding, is the perception of humans separate from the rest of life. Because we think in terms of economic systems—at least that's what's driving our worldview. And in those economic systems, growth can be measured in how many units are consumed. The whole understanding of the whole system needing to be in balance to thrive is missed. And so that's where the real dysfunction comes—just not seeing the systems that you are a part of.

So I'd like to just lead us in a little reflection that can perhaps get us in touch with that aspect of systems.

[A brief interlude about adjusting the fan, with the teacher noting how one little shift in the system has a big effect on the body.]

Just close your eyes for a moment. And first, get a sense of all the beings who've come before you, who've given and passed on love and caring and understanding. Might start with the ones that you've received directly—kindness and caring and wisdom and support.

And get in touch with the next generation back, where they've received their own kindness and caring and love and wisdom that was passed on through your benefactors to you. And back generations—all the lineage of caring and kindness and goodness and compassion and wisdom that's been passed through the generations that has come through those beings and poured into you, into your heart, into your mind. You've been the beneficiary of a lineage of caring and consciousness that's continually evolved and is coming through you right now.

And think of all the people now who are touched by your own goodness and caring.

Maybe friends, relatives, children, people in your life to whom you extend that caring and kindness. And how that ripples out. And how it will ripple out through future generations. Who does that belong to? Who does your caring belong to? Who does your good heart or your love belong to? It's just been passed on. And you've been a fortunate recipient. And you can pass it on. You do pass it on.

And now for a moment, reflect on all the beings who have had an impact on you, one way or another, who shaped who you are through experiences, through interactions, and all the beings who you impact in your own unique way.

And now for a moment, move out of just the limiting human realm and reflect on all the beings right inside of you right now who go into keeping your ecosystem in balance. And all the sources of food that go into your mouth through your alimentary canal, digested into your body for nutrients, for fuel, passed on. The whole recycling process of life—it's just life moving through this form, and the essential importance to keep that life in balance. Know all the systems that you're part of. See the systems that you're part of.

This is the first commitment to bringing more consciousness to this planet. You are not separate. You are simply a vehicle for life to express itself. And the more you see that and care about it, the more you naturally are in harmony with it.

So just as we close, since it's time to close, just appreciate the web of life running through you, called you, and that you are connected with all around you. And send some love and appreciation, well-being inside and outside.

May I care about this being and the systems that it is part of. May I keep in mind my connection with all of life and allow the love and kindness to shine through me. And may all beings find happiness and peace.

So, thank you for your attention, and this week I would really encourage you to just kind of play around

with seeing yourself as part of something much bigger—on an ongoing practice perspective. Life is just moving through you, in you, within you, without you.

Okay, see you next week.

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