How To Be an Earthling

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 26:58

I thought I would begin by leading you all in Gary Snyder's version of the Pledge of Allegiance. Hands on your hearts, hats off.

"I pledge allegiance to the soil of Turtle Island, and to the beings who thereon dwell, one ecosystem in diversity, under the sun, with joyful interpenetration for all."

Those beatniks were our ancestors and heroes who first truly noticed the natural world and what was happening to it. They were perhaps the first generation to really understand and respond to our environmental crisis.

Tomorrow is the birthday of another great hero, John Muir. Think about walking up into the Sierras and how much he did to preserve the most beautiful part of this continent. Here's a poem by him:

"This grand show is eternal. It is always sunrise somewhere. The dew is never all dried at once. A shower is forever falling. Vapor is ever rising. Eternal sunrise, eternal sunset, eternal dawn and gleaming on sea and continent and islands, each in its turn as the round earth rolls."

We've been talking about many difficult issues we're facing, and I want to address what I think is one of the most challenging—the crisis of crisis itself. There is so much crisis. I used to tell my journalist friends, "You are what you cover." These days it feels like apocalypse all the time.

We're bombarded with fears about viruses and diseases, the thinning ozone layer, potential cosmic threats. There are warnings of worldwide food shortages, government instability, and endless conflicts. The constant stream of things that could kill us can leave us dying of broken hearts from overwhelm and despair.

But perhaps before we can get it together, we need to let it all come apart. Sometimes we need to relax into the chaos, to find our ground even amidst the million things that threaten us. There's wisdom in recognizing that our anxiety about death and destruction can become its own form of suffering—one we can learn to hold with greater equanimity.

Don't consume the sugar. Don't consume the salt. Cholesterol clogs your arteries while giant corporations devour your land and computers consume your consciousness. You've heard the temperatures are rising, and the oceans are too. Soon enough, the beach will come to you.

There are a million things that will kill you, and you're dying of a broken heart. There are a million things

that will kill you, and you're dying of a broken heart. But before you can get it together, you must allow it all to fall apart.

So just relax. Stop singing the blues. Go out and create your own news. There are a million things that will kill you, and you're dying of a broken heart.

Thank you, Mr. Kevin. That was my burst of energy, and now I'll sit down.

Here's a piece I wrote and rewrote for today. Hello, earthlings. Say hallelujah, because springtime has arrived in the northern hemisphere of Earth, and it's time for our annual springtime spiritual jamboree—with Christians honoring Jesus, Jews honoring Moses, and pagans venturing into the woods to celebrate.

If Moses were alive today, he would likely be organizing a people's revolt against the corporate pharaohs who have transformed millions of us into wage slaves, laboring to construct their pyramids of filthy lucre. If Jesus were alive today, he would undoubtedly be dwelling in the Tenderloin as the rabbi of the homeless and poor, distributing loaves and fishes along with wine to wash them down.

Both Jesus and Moses would be urging people to cease worshiping golden calves, pork futures, and the evil mammon.com. Meanwhile, here in Northern California, we've transformed Passover into a spiritually correct liberation party for everyone who is oppressed—and who isn't, really?

In Berkeley, you can find a prayer book for a socialist Seder where the kugel is divided according to each person's need. At my Passover feast, we always raise a glass of wine to the Buddha, even though there remains some dispute over whether he was Jewish. Nonetheless, he helps lead our minds out of bondage. So here's to you, Buddha: Let my people be here now.

For research into Buddha's Jewish origins, you might consult the Oy Vey Sutra or the more esoteric Double-Breasted Sutra.

It is appropriate and auspicious in this season of spiritual renewal that we celebrate Earth Day, getting down to the real essence, paying respects to Pachamama, the goddess Gaia, this ancient rock of ages. This day should be the most important holy day of all because it can be celebrated by all life, regardless of race, religion, nationality, kingdom, genus, or phylum—regardless of coverings of fur, feathers, scales, skin, leaves, or bark, because this Earth is everybody's neighborhood.

Just consider: here we are, all riding together on our home planet, hurtling through space at incredible speeds, spinning in our orbit around the sun at approximately 66,000 miles per hour. You don't even need to hold on because Earth Mother is holding you, embracing you with her strong arms of gravity.

On Earth Day, we offer gratitude to Uncle Charlie Darwin, who began spinning us a wholly new story about who we are and where we came from. As Sir Charles wrote in the final paragraph of his book on the origin of species: "There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally

breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved."

That includes you and me—beautiful and wonderful earthlings born from the three-and-a-half-billion-year dance of life on this planet, a story containing as much awe and wonder as any scripture. To paraphrase cosmologist Brian Swimme: only four billion years ago, the Earth was a ball of molten rock, and now it can play guitar.

Here we are, nearly Earth Day 2014, playing guitar in the Holocene—or is it the Anthropocene? Regardless, it's my scene and your scene, living through this mild interglacial period. But we're heading toward trouble. The biohazards are now in the house: temperatures rising faster than expected, endangered species multiplying, a looming water crisis. There's so much trouble everywhere that the very word "ecology" can make you scream, "Eek-ology!"

What's required of us isn't merely Obama's green economy, recycling, or driving hybrid cars, but a shift of consciousness. We need an upgrade of our mythology. Over centuries, humans have become so arrogant we believe the entire universe was created just for us, that we are separate and specially made. Our major religions have come to regard Earth as some kind of training planet where you learn lessons or burn off karma before departing for your true home elsewhere. This is only a test.

But these beliefs are now dysfunctional because they remove the divine from Earth and extract humans from the great web of life. Hallelujah, because in recent years we've begun telling ourselves a new story about our origins. There's no longer doubt that this evolutionary story is true—at least among people with well-developed forebrains.

Now it's time to embrace that story as our new creation myth. We must create ritual around it, sing and dance it, bring it alive in the corridors of our psyche and the marrow of our bones.

Speaking of bones, friends: our bones are composed of calcium, magnesium, phosphate, silicate—literally the clay of Earth molded into human form. Most of our bodies are liquid, and most of that liquid shares the chemical consistency of oceans. We literally sweat and cry seawater. We're not merely on the Earth; we are of the Earth, made of all-natural ingredients.

We are certified organic.

And we're built out of all the life that came before us. Scientists have discovered that we have three brains inside our skull: a reptilian brain, a mammalian brain, and the neocortex, or new human brain. The latest research indicates that we use our new human brain mostly to make excuses for the behavior generated by our other two brains. We are not so much rational animals as we are rationalizing animals.

And yes, the lizard and the wolf still live inside of us. In fact, in this story of evolution, we find that we're

related to every being that ever lived through the miracle molecule of DNA, deoxyribonucleic acid. Too cold and clinical a name for this miraculous substance that separates life from non-life.

So I hereby declare a new acronym. Every time you see or hear the letters DNA, think divine natural abundance. Divine natural abundance.

The unraveling of the genetic code reveals that we share over 98% of our DNA with apes, 70% with worms, nearly 50% with yeast. So if we declare ourselves divine, is not the slime also divine? And if not, where do we draw the line? Let's face it, we are all cell brothers and cell sisters. Can you dig it? A t-shirt from the biology department at UC Santa Cruz makes the point: "You share 25 percent of your DNA with bananas. Get over yourself."

And if we see ourselves in this story of evolution, we find hope because we see that Earth life is tough and creative and has survived comet collisions and continents bumping into each other and ice ages and Dick Cheney. So there's reason for optimism.

I also find hope by reminding myself that the word ecology has only been around for 40 years. And the first UN Conference on the Environment took place in 1970—a blink of a blink of an eye in biological time. We're just now waking up to our impact on the life of the planet, just now learning how we have to change our way of living, change our story.

Turns out that what Mother Earth needs most from humans right now is a few years of negative economic growth. Instead of another stimulus package, what we really need is a sedative package. Let's follow the advice of the great sages and simplify our lives and cut back on consumption in a way that is fair and causes the least amount of suffering for all, and we will all become happier in the process.

And finally, to commemorate Earth Day this year, maybe do something radical. Like, go picket in front of the oil company of your choice. Or go out into the ocean and take a swim in the primal amniotic fluid. And while you're out there, maybe chain yourself to an endangered coral reef. Or just play some soothing music for the fish, who must be very confused lately due to the changing temperature of the oceans.

At least take a vow on this Earth Day, a vow that you will do something more to protect your mother. And at some point in your celebration, take off your shoes, dance on the earth, touching your mother skin to skin, or just lay down flat. Ignore your inner cynic and give your mama a great big hug. As always, she will forgive you and welcome you home.

And this is Scoop saying all praises to the earth. Long may she spin. If you don't like the news, go out and make some of your own.

This is a song whose title comes from Wes, though I can never remember the words properly. I wrote this piece during a family retreat here at Spirit Rock a few years ago. The theme was something like letting go—one of those classic dharma topics. It occurred to me that there was a wonderful line from Wes that

would work perfectly with that theme.

This song was actually written on this very land and appears on my Laughing Buddha CD. I have to confess, there's something deeply satisfying about playing heavy metal chords in the Spirit Rock meditation hall—it just does me good somehow.

The song explores our relationship with material abundance and the endless cycle of wanting more. It playfully catalogs the overwhelming array of possessions that fill our lives: technology, entertainment, convenience items, luxury goods—everything from SUVs to virtual pets to summer houses. The repetitive chorus serves as both a mantra and a reality check: "Enough, enough, we got enough stuff."

There's a wonderful contradiction captured in the lyrics: "We got enough to sink a ship and not enough to make your backbone slip." This speaks to how we can be drowning in possessions yet still feel somehow unsatisfied, still lacking something essential.

The song becomes almost absurd in its inventory of modern life's accumulations—credit cards, bodyguards, hundred-acre backyards, drugs that promise superhuman abilities, even pet Tibetan tiger cubs. Each item represents another attempt to fill some perceived emptiness, another promise of satisfaction that never quite delivers.

As dharma practitioners, we recognize this endless cycle of acquisition and craving. The Buddha spoke of tanha—this thirst or craving that drives us to constantly seek more, whether material possessions, experiences, or states of being. The song captures this beautifully through its relentless rhythm and ever-expanding list of stuff.

Yet there's also humor and lightness in this examination of our material excess. Sometimes we need to laugh at ourselves and our tendencies before we can truly see them clearly. The playful tone invites us to examine our own relationships with possessions without the heavy burden of guilt or judgment.

So here we are. Oh, it seems complicated, but it's not that complicated. In fact, it's very simple.

No matter what you do, try to be here now. Be here now, and then be here now again. I'll tell you where and when: here and now. You'll never get away from here, no matter how it may appear. You won't find "there" out there—it's always here, here, here.

And what time is it? You know you can't miss it. It's never the future or past. It's just now, now, now. And forever it will last.

So be here now, and then be here now again. I'll tell you where and when: here and now.

Now we're going to do a little call and response. I'm going to say "where," and you're going to say "here." I'm going to say "when," and you're going to say "now." Everyone ready?

Feel it as you say it: Where? When? Where? When? Where and when? Where and when? Where, when?

Where, when?

Where, when—here, now. Where, when—here, now.

Stay here and now. Enjoy your life here and now. Be here now again, and again, and again, and again. I'll tell you where and when: here and now, here and now.

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