Healing Ecology - A Buddhist Perspective on the Eco Crisis

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:36:48

I'd like to begin this evening with a word of appreciation, not only on my behalf, but on behalf of all of us who have been able to gather together in these almost ideal conditions. We have had a wonderful opportunity here—this kind of retreat, this kind of opportunity to reflect on our own practice and the wider implications of Buddhist teachings. I am grateful, and I know I'm not the only one grateful, for all the people at Gaia House who have made this possible. We know that many people have worked very hard in all kinds of ways to create this environment and to sustain it.

The topic for this evening is Buddhism and Ecology. The question is whether Buddhism really has something special to offer us that can help us understand and respond to the ecological crisis at this very special time in history when we seem to be doing so much to damage the biosphere.

It's not at all clear that religion is what's called for here. We have scientists who tell us about what's happening. We have technologists who devise new technologies that we need to adapt to the crisis. We have politicians who, at least should be, changing the social structure to adapt to our new situation. So what's the role of something like Buddhism here? Essentially an Iron Age religion, right?

The Buddha lived in a very different time and place—India, at least 2400 years ago. Like his compatriots, he didn't know anything about climate change, global warming, melting glaciers, rising sea levels, carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere, or methane deposits. For that matter, they didn't know anything about carbon or oxygen or calcium or any of the periodic table of elements. They didn't know about the genetic structure of life or the cellular structure of life—so many other things that we today take for granted and that are essential to our understanding of what's happening right now to the biosphere. So we can certainly wonder whether Buddhism might have something really valuable to contribute.

Of course, Buddhism is not just one religion. When you really look closely at it, Buddhism is a big tent that includes many different types of Buddhism. Within all of these types—Pali Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, and so forth—you would expect to find some things that would have something to say about our situation.

There is one story that especially speaks to me. It has to do with the Buddha's relationship to trees. According to the Pali Canon, or the story of the Buddha's life—which we know is largely myth—the Buddha was born under trees when his mother went into labor prematurely as she was traveling. After he left home on his spiritual quest, the Buddha studied, practiced, and did ascetic practices under trees. Later

he meditated under trees. Supposedly he had his great awakening under a Bodhi tree. Thereafter he often lived, taught, and slept under trees. And again, if we can accept the traditional story, he died between two trees.

In particular, there's a story in the Vinaya about a tree spirit who appeared to the Buddha in one of his dreams and complained that one of the bhikkhu monks had cut down its tree in order to make a hut, and now the tree spirit had nowhere to live. I don't know what to think about the tree spirit, but interestingly, the next morning, the Buddha called the Sangha together and made a new rule. He said bhikkhus and bhikkhunis are not allowed to cut down trees. Not only that, they're not allowed even to hack off branches of living trees or even pluck a green leaf from a tree.

That's a nice story. It gives me a good feeling, but I admit it doesn't take us very far when it comes to understanding and addressing the climate crisis. So we can still wonder, where does Buddhism fit in here?

What I want to suggest to you is that there is, in fact, a precise and profound parallel between what Buddhism says about our individual predicament—in the way that we've been talking about it this week—and our collective predicament in relationship to the biosphere. Yesterday I talked quite a bit about collective selves. I mentioned, for example, that David Loy isn't only David Loy; he's a man, not a woman. I'm American, not British, and so forth.

In this case, the interesting collective self is the largest possible one, you might say. It's the human species. It's human civilization in relationship to the rest of the biosphere. The question is, how can we understand that duality? How can we understand that relationship?

What I want to suggest to you is that the ecological crisis is every bit as much a spiritual crisis as it is a technological or economic or political one.

And of course many people refer to this and say this, but I'd like to try to put a little bit more flesh on this claim and go into it in some detail.

Does this mean, therefore, that there might also be some parallel between the two solutions? Does the Buddhist solution to our individual predicament, therefore, imply something important about the collective solution? Well, I'll try to say something about that toward the end of the talk.

Now I'm going to ask Jenny to pass out a handout. There are two sides to it, so you can do me a favor by folding it so that you only see the left-hand side for now. Let's just look at the left-hand side.

If you look at those six points, I think you'll see that basically that's what I've been trying to talk about this week. Just looking at the left-hand side for the moment, let's go through it quickly, and I think you'll see that this is really what we've certainly been spending our time on—the claim that we can understand anatta today in more contemporary terms, that our sense of self is a psychological and social construct.

The problem with the construct is that it involves a sense of separation. The construction of a sense of self

that's separate and inside is also the construction of that which is outside, an objective external world. This involves anxiety because this supposed self inside can never secure itself because there's nothing there, really. Because it has no reality separate from the whole. It's simply, as I've been saying, one of the ways in which the whole comes together.

And anxiety, therefore, that includes—and maybe I haven't said very much about this—confusion, naturally, about who I am and what my life is about as a separate person.

We talked about two nights ago some of the ways in which we try to ground ourselves in response to this anxiety of separation. Ways that often make things worse. So I talked a little bit about money, fame, romantic love. We could have said as much about the desire for power. The irony so often is that by trying to secure myself in this way, I so often make things worse because the things I do, the kind of manipulations I might have to play, deceiving people, or at least using them as means to the ends, has the long-term effect, of course, of increasing the sense of separation, alienation.

In response, Buddhism doesn't say that we have to get rid of the self. That's not possible, because there never was a self. But we can wake up—that is to say, we can see through the delusion of a separate self. And this awakening in Buddhism liberates us and empowers us. And I think one of the things it naturally does, because it radically reduces our own self-preoccupation, our own narcissism, because we know that we're not separate from other people, then naturally there's a lot of different ways we can respond. But it's going to be a way that wants to help other people. We can find various ways to do that according to our own temperament and our situation, but in general it's going to be something along that line.

So that's basically what we've spent enough—or maybe too much—time talking about on that left side.

What I think is extraordinary is that this Buddhist account of our individual predicament corresponds so precisely to our collective ecological predicament, which is on the right side, and now we can open it up.

If this parallel is true, then the following must also be true. Human civilization is also a construct, just like the personal sense of self. It's the construct that's led to a collective sense of separation or alienation from the natural world, in this case—an alienation that causes collective anxiety, an anxiety that includes uncertainty about the role of humanity. What does it mean to be a human being? What's the meaning of civilization? Where are we going? Do we have a goal? Is there a meaning to it? I mean, Christians a thousand years ago thought so. What do we think now?

In response, we try to ground ourselves in ways that make our situation worse. Just as if we become preoccupied, say, with money, that can often make our situation worse by aggravating the alienation. So I think that we respond in ways that aggravate our alienation, our collective alienation from the earth.

The solution is not to return to nature. We can't return to nature for the simple reason that we've never left it.

Just as we cannot rid ourselves of the self because there has never been a self, we do need to awaken and realize our non-duality with the biosphere and what that implies. This realization can collectively free and empower us to heal the biosphere. It can resolve our collective existential or spiritual problem about what it means to be human.

With us, the biosphere becomes self-conscious. Our role today has to be to heal it—to heal the biosphere and to heal that sense of bifurcation between us and the biosphere.

Let me set the stage with two favorite quotations. The first is from Thich Nhat Hanh: "We are here to overcome the illusion of our separateness." The second comes from the great 13th century Japanese Zen master Dogen: "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."

The first claim—that human civilization is something constructed by us—is both the most obvious and yet the most significant. We're familiar with revolutions, reform movements, legislatures that can pass laws. If we're not happy with the kind of society we have, we have governments that can reconstruct it.

Nevertheless, this claim that human civilization is a social construct is not something that most ancient societies would have understood. In the West, we owe this insight to classical Greece, which as far as I know was the first civilization to distinguish between what they called *phusis* and *nomos—phusis* being the natural world with all its patterns, and *nomos* being human convention or social convention, including the nature of human society.

The Greeks realized this distinction and proceeded to reform their society. We trace Greece as one of the roots of Western evolution because they had this insight and started the process of self-transformation that we have continued. The Greeks realized that unlike the natural world, whatever is social convention can be reconstructed. In that way we can attempt to determine our own destiny.

Think of Plato's Republic—a complex blueprint for a new society. We're familiar with such blueprints today and take them for granted, but Plato was doing something truly radical. The Republic was revolutionary for its time.

Today it's difficult for us to understand that traditional societies didn't realize this distinction between nature and society. Without our sense of historical development, they lacked our sense that future possibilities might be quite different from the present. Most ancient societies accepted their own social conventions as inevitable, just as natural as their ecosystems.

Rulers might be overthrown, but the new ruler would take his natural place at the top of the social pyramid, which was also a religious pyramid. Kings usually had special roles in relating to the gods, the transcendent powers that supervised the created world. Often human beings had crucial roles in keeping the cosmos functioning.

Consider the Aztecs and their massive human sacrifices, tearing hearts from victims to offer to the sun god. Why? This was necessary to keep the sun on its course through the heavens. Without human participation, chaos would ensue. The Mesopotamians believed humans had been created by the gods as slaves to serve them, to provide what the gods needed—that was our function within the cosmos.

For these societies, the distinctions we take for granted between the natural world, the social order, and religion didn't exist. Understanding one's society as natural justified social arrangements we today wouldn't tolerate. None of us would want to live in an Aztec or ancient Mesopotamian society.

But there was nevertheless a significant advantage they had over us—a psychological benefit. People in such cultures shared and took for granted a collective sense of meaning, the meaning of their lives in the cosmos, that we today do not have, that we've lost.

For them, it's not only that their society and religion are woven into the very fabric of existence—the meaning of their lives is embedded in the cosmos itself and revealed through their spiritual understanding. For them, of course, this isn't conceived as "a religion" but simply as an explanation, an account of the way things truly are.

For us, in contrast—and this is the crucial point—the meaning of our lives and the purpose of our societies has become something we must determine for ourselves in a universe whose meaning, if any, is no longer evident. Even if we choose to be religious, we must choose among countless different possibilities, which tends to diminish the natural security and comfort that comes from growing up within a tradition and simply accepting it as truth.

So although we enjoy many freedoms that such ancient societies didn't provide—freedoms we certainly wouldn't want to surrender—one of the profound costs of our liberation is that we have lost their kind of social security. That is to say, we've lost the basic psychological comfort that comes from knowing our place and role not only in society but in the cosmos itself.

In other words, part of the rich cultural legacy of the Greeks, for better and worse, has been an increasing anxiety about who we are and what it means to be human. This is what accompanies the freedom to reconstruct our societies. This is what comes with recognizing the distinction between the natural world and social convention. Yes, we're free to change things, but then they're no longer natural in that fundamental way.

The loss or reduction of faith in God has left us rudderless, both collectively and individually. Thanks to our modern technologies, it seems we can do almost anything we want to do. Yet paradoxically, the more we become capable of doing, the less we seem to know what we should do, what we want to do, what our role actually is. What sort of world do we want to live in? What kind of society do we want to have? If we can't depend on God or God-like rulers to tell us, we're thrown back entirely on ourselves. And this lack of grounding greater than ourselves becomes another profound source of dukkha, collectively as well as

individually.

To sum up: our modern sense of separation from the natural world has become an ongoing source of alienation and frustration because we no longer know who we are, what the meaning of our lives is, or what purpose human civilization might serve.

Now, what has been our response to this collective predicament? Let's first remember how we respond to the individual, personal predicament. I try to make my anxious sense of self more real, more comfortable, often by becoming attached or preoccupied with things in the outside world—money, for instance. But no matter how much I may acquire, I never seem to have enough because it doesn't address that basic anxiety. Money isn't the real issue when the problem is a fundamental sense of lack stemming from the inherent insecurity of the constructed sense of self.

Believing that something outside myself is the solution to my sense of lack—this is the fundamental delusion, leading to solutions that actually reinforce the basic problem: the sense of separation.

But here's the crucial question: Is there a collective parallel to these personal, individual compulsions? I think as soon as we ask the question this way, the answer becomes apparent. It's our obsession with never-ending progress and growth.

What motivates our attitude toward 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? These are strange questions because we cannot conceive of an endpoint. This suggests that perhaps we're not trying to reach somewhere, but rather running away from something.

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 of what it means to be human. More resources may be excellent means to accomplish something, but they cannot answer the problem as ends in themselves.

They're not good as ends in themselves. But since we're not sure how else to solve the problem, in effect, they have become a collective substitute—you could say forms of secular salvation that we seek but never quite attain. The means have become de facto ends.

Does that make any sense? Because we don't know what to value, we're preoccupied. Since we don't really know where we should go in our secular society, or what we should value, we have become demonically obsessed, I would say, with ever-increasing power and control.

Please notice the parallel with our individual predicament. Lacking the security that comes from knowing our place and role in the cosmos, we have been trying, vainly, unsuccessfully, to create our own security, collectively, as well as individually. Modern technology, in particular, has become our collective attempt to fully control the conditions of our existence on this planet. You could say, in effect, we've been trying to

remold the earth so that it's completely adapted to our purposes, until everything becomes subject to our will, a kind of resource—resources meaning something we can use.

This is despite the fact, or maybe because of the fact, that we don't know what those purposes should be. Ironically, if predictably, this hasn't provided the sense of security and meaning that we seek. In the modern world, we've become more anxious, more confused, not less.

Now, if these parallels are valid, if they're an accurate description of our collective situation, I think we can see that something like the ecological crisis is going to be inevitable. Sooner or later, and it seems to be now, we're going to 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 these problems is actually a symptom of the larger problem, that seems to imply that the ecological crisis requires something more than just a technological response.

That's not to say that technological responses aren't necessary. We know we need, for example, more efficient fuel cells. But the problem is that increasing dependence on ever more sophisticated technologies, ever more powerful technologies, can still aggravate further our sense of separation and alienation from the natural world. Whereas it seems to me that any successful solution has to involve recognizing that we're an integral part of the natural world. That also means embracing our responsibility for the welfare of the whole natural world, the biosphere, because ultimately its well-being cannot be differentiated from our own well-being. The rest of the biosphere is our body—and I mean that literally. It's not just a metaphor.

Remember Thich Nhat Hanh's cloud in the piece of paper? Well, the rainforest is in our bloodstream. Understood properly then, humanity taking care of the earth's rainforest is like me taking care of my own leg.

So what does this mean? Does it mean returning to nature? That would be like getting rid of the self—something neither possible nor desirable. We can't return to nature. Why? Because we have never left it.

We are very good at creating environments for ourselves, like this one, where we see our own image reflected back on us. We're here in this beautiful room, very well done in many ways, and we don't think about the forests or the oceans or what's going on elsewhere. But you don't have to think very hard to realize that everything here in this room, including our own bodies, is not just derived from nature, but is a way of nature taking form. The wood, obviously from trees. The carpet, maybe from wool. Many things are from oil, plastics, metal ore from the earth. Everything here is nature—just nature reformed, nature restructured. It's not as though we've created a world separate from nature.

The environment isn't merely an environment. That is to say, it's not merely the place where we happen to be located. The biosphere is the ground from which and within which we arise.

So the earth isn't only our home, it's our mother. And you could say, in this case, the relationship is even closer because we can never really cut the umbilical cord. We don't cut the umbilical cord. People have fantasies about terraforming Mars or something, but basically, as long as we're on this planet, as long as we're part of this biosphere, think of the air, the water, the food that circulates through us. We take it in our mouths, it's digested, it comes out the other end. That circulation is part of the great circulation of the natural world. It's not separate from that. It's just one microcosm of the macrocosm.

We've never been separate from the natural world. It's just that we've had the illusion that we can somehow sustain ourselves, just as we can have the illusion on the individual level that I have a separate self inside.

So according to this understanding, the problem that we have is not our technologies that are destroying the earth. Rather, I think it's the obsessive ways that we have been motivated to exploit the earth. It's not just the technologies themselves, it's our attitude toward the earth. Without these motivations, I think it would be possible to evaluate and use our technologies in a more beneficial sense because we could really discriminate more clearly between the ecological solutions that they can actually contribute to as well as the problems that they have created.

Recently, one example is nuclear power. It's interesting that in response to the disaster in Japan, we've had a big propaganda campaign on the part of nuclear power companies who were gearing up to get going full blast again. People had forgotten Chernobyl. And I feel almost sorry for them. Just when they're starting to get developed, this thing happens. And so a lot of people are spending a lot of time and money to persuade us that what happened in Japan can't really happen here in Europe or in the U.S. because our reactors are different.

The irony, by the way, is that when I was in Japan for twenty years, there was a nuclear movement that was arguing how crazy nuclear power was in a country like Japan with so many earthquakes. And the argument was always, "Oh, don't worry, what happened in Chernobyl could never happen here because we have different types of nuclear power plants."

Personally, I understand that I can see the attraction of nuclear power. If you need large amounts of power and oil and gas because of carbon and coal are very bad, I can see the tendency to want to move to nuclear. But I'm still struck by what I think it was Amory Lovins said: using nuclear power to create electricity is like using a chainsaw to cut butter.

And I still notice that the people who argue for nuclear power, the argument is almost always, "Well, it's better than coal." But I haven't seen anyone really come up with the answer to the fact that it creates waste products. I mean, even if nothing goes wrong, even if there is no disaster—and there are always disasters. I used to have a book, a Greenpeace book, that listed every nuclear accident. And there were hundreds of pages in it. Each page had several incidents. There's always things going wrong. We're human, right? They're going to go wrong.

But even if they go right, what you end up with a nuclear power plant is tons and tons and tons of radioactive material that's radioactive for many, many thousands of years. And I'm just astonished that we don't seem so concerned about that. Most of our CEOs can't think any further than the next quarterly report, or our presidents can't think of anything further than the next election, and we're willing to create these incredibly toxic, dangerous radioactive materials that are going to be dangerous to all living systems for tens of thousands of years and we don't seem to be bothered by that.

I can understand the argument if you need lots of energy: maybe nuclear is the best way to go in the minds of some people because it's better than the carbon fuels. But I'd like to suggest a different solution. The problem is that we keep assuming the necessity for continuous economic and technological expansion—that we're thinking, "Okay, we have this much energy that we're using and we need more and more energy because we're making more and more stuff. And how are we going to find a way to make all that energy if we don't have fossil fuels?"

But if we didn't assume that kind of economy that has to grow if it's not to collapse—if we had a different kind of economic system that was more steady state and more frugal—then maybe we wouldn't need such a huge source of energy. Maybe one of the things that we would be able to do is reduce our energy needs.

In other words, what I'm suggesting is that we reverse our way of thinking. And I want to offer a very simple, if not easy, solution to our energy problems. Instead of asking the question, "How can we get all the energy we need?" I propose that we turn it around and determine how much energy we can get from renewable resources like fuel cells, solar, wind, and so forth. And then on the basis of that—on the basis of the energy that's available—we consider restructuring our societies.

I mean, it seems to me sooner or later that's what we're going to end up doing anyway, whether by choice or not. Doesn't that seem commonsensical? I have to stress it's simple but not easy because it requires pretty basic changes in governance and so forth, but I expect it's going to be necessary.

Are you with me so far? Am I persuading you about the parallels?

There's still one big question left, and that's what I want to finish talking about: how does this kind of approach resolve that basic anxiety I was discussing at the beginning? Remember the Aztecs—they were part of the world, and the meaning of their lives was naturally structured into the cosmos. We're not going to be able to return to that even if we wanted to. So how do we resolve the basic anxiety that haunts us now, where we have to create our own meaning? We have to find our own meaning in a world where God has died, in a secular world.

Like it or not, our individual and collective self-consciousness today, our historical development, distances us from those ancient worldviews and the kind of natural meaning of life they provided. We wouldn't want to return to those even if we could. But the question is, what other kinds of alternatives are available for us?

I think this is really to ask: what kind of collective parallel might correspond to the individual awakening that Buddhism promotes? Thich Nhat Hanh has said, "The Buddha attained individual awakening. Now we need a collective enlightenment to stop the course of destruction." But what can that mean?

I want to conclude with a few reflections on this, and I wonder if the important issue here is evolution—how we understand evolution. It's very interesting. Lots of religions have problems with evolution because they have their own creation myths. But Buddhism has no problem whatsoever. In fact, the whole concept of evolution fits perfectly with basic Buddhist ideas about impermanence, interdependence, lack of substantial identity, and constant transformation.

It seems to me that if religions are to remain relevant today, they need to stop denying or ignoring or minimizing evolution and turn it around. I think we need a religion that makes the evolutionary process central to its teachings. What religion adds is the question about the meaning of that process, which scientists sometimes think they answer themselves, but I think that's a big delusion. They can tell us what's happening, but they don't really understand the meaning of it.

According to Brian Swimme, a cosmologist, the greatest scientific discovery of all time is that if you leave hydrogen gas alone for about fourteen billion years, plus or minus a few hundred thousand, it turns into "giraffes, rose bushes, and humans."

Is that also one of the most important spiritual discoveries of all time?

It seems to me fourteen billion years is actually a very short period of time to evolve from hydrogen gas—thinking about the Big Bang, first plasma, then hydrogen. Fourteen billion years from the Big Bang to create a Buddha, a Jesus, an Einstein, a Gandhi—that's remarkably short. I know my sixty-three years have gone very quickly.

Unless, of course, hydrogen gas is actually something a little different than the reductionistic way it's usually understood. And that's the issue here.

What we normally think of as evolution—genetic evolution, biological evolution—is only one part of a triple evolution. I suggest we need to look at the whole arc and see all three evolutions as part of one big evolutionary developmental curve.

Well, at the time of the Big Bang, what do you have? You have plasma and then you have basically hydrogen. That's the first element that's formed. But then how do you get all the other elements that we know about? They have to develop, they have to evolve in a sense. And where do they develop? In the cores of stars.

What happens is that after a long time, the cloud of hydrogen gathers and then it condenses. When it reaches a certain density, nuclear fusion begins. In the very core of the stars, hydrogen starts to fuse into heavier elements. You start getting helium, and the process continues from there. That's where the

heavier elements are created. So that's the first evolutionary process.

I remember reading somewhere—I think it was Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*—that a normal star can only fuse elements up to gold. Gold is too difficult. In order for gold and the higher elements to be fused and created, you need supernovas that are so big and so powerful that they can create all the higher elements. But then these stars have to explode and scatter all these heavier elements around, right? So that's the first stage of evolution.

Then over time—and this is a wonderful story, I think. It's incredible. Think about it. And it's our story. We're talking about our bodies here. After time, you get these secondary solar systems forming. Now you not only have hydrogen, but on Earth, you've got all these heavier elements. And it just so happens they're the elements that we need for life, or at least life learns to depend on the ones that are here. You get calcium, CO_2—carbon, oxygen—and so forth.

Because you have all these higher elements, heavier elements, you have the possibility of life and self-replicating life, where some of these elements somehow work together. You get amino acids and DNA, and you actually have something that can replicate itself. Then you get this incredible story—we all know the Darwinian story about the evolution of life on earth. But even that is only the secondary evolution.

We cannot minimize the third evolution, which is what? Cultural evolution, of course. There's still a big development—although comparatively fast now—between the first human beings, wherever you want to draw that line, and Einstein. You're not going to have an Einstein unless you've got the evolution of an incredibly sophisticated culture, civilization, which is what we have, which is what we're part of, which is what created all of us, as well as Einstein.

These are nested. If you think about these three developmental processes, the first one creates the conditions necessary for the second one, and the second one creates the conditions necessary for the third one. Human beings, our species depends on many other species still.

Here's the question: How are we to understand this whole sweep of 14 billion years? What's going on here? Is there a meaning to it? Theists, a lot of people who believe in God, they say that there's a being outside these processes that's directing it. In contrast, you'll find a lot of scientists who say this is basically a kind of haphazard, accidental process, including the evolution of life due to random DNA mutations.

The question is, is there a third alternative here? According to the evolutionary biologist Theodore Dobzhansky, evolution is neither random nor determined, but creative. That's his word: creative. Creative of what? Well, obviously, in one sense, the tendency toward increasing complexity is hard to overlook, and also the fact that this increasing complexity seems to be associated with some kind of greater awareness. From a Buddhist perspective, this opens up very interesting possibilities.

Here's the important question, I think: Can we understand this groping self-organization of the universe, this whole sweep, as the universe struggling to become more self-aware, or groping in its own way toward

awareness? Is my desire to awaken—remembering that the word Buddha means "the awakened"—is my desire to awaken supposedly the desire of this separate sense of self that doesn't really exist?

Is my desire to awaken from the other side the urge of the cosmos to become aware of itself—in me, as me? Is this the answer to that old question: if there is no self, who becomes awakened?

Please put this in the context of what we were saying yesterday about Indra's net and the piece of paper. Everything comes together in a certain way to create the piece of paper and us. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry wrote a wonderful book in this direction called *The Universe Story*, which I recommend highly. They make this kind of claim: "The mind that searches for contact with the Milky Way is the very mind of the Milky Way galaxy itself in search of its own inner depths."

What does this imply, for example, about Walt Whitman admiring a beautiful sunset? "Walt Whitman is a space the Milky Way fashioned to feel its own grandeur." Isn't that beautiful?

Think about our eye. Think about the evolution of the eye. Isn't the eye something that the whole biosphere has evolved in order to see itself, rather than thinking of me as something behind the eye looking out at the world? What different perspective do we have on the eye if we think of it just like Thich Nhat Hanh's piece of paper?

Is this how Buddhist enlightenment can be understood today? What did Shakyamuni Buddha realize when he looked up? According to one Mahayana tradition, he had his enlightenment when he looked up from his meditations and saw the morning star, Venus, shining brightly in the sky. And then he said something like, "I now realize that all beings have the Buddha nature."

But there's another phrase that sometimes is said—and I think I've mentioned this already—that when the Buddha became enlightened, the whole universe became enlightened. All of us became enlightened. And 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."

But there's a problem. As we know, here we go back to the problem. Every species can be looked upon as a kind of experiment of the biosphere. And scientists tell us, biologists, that less than one percent of all the species that have ever evolved on Earth still exist. Over ninety-nine percent have evolved and then disappeared.

What's special about our species is that our supersized cortex enables us to become co-creators. And here I'm thinking about that famous phrase from the Bible where we're told that humans are created in the image of God. What does it mean to be created in the image of God? Does that mean God has two eyes and one nose? Or is it the case that somehow... I think God is this kind of creative principle, this self-organizing creating principle. And what's unique about human beings is that with us, new types of creativity become possible.

If God wanted to create a symphony, he needs us. He's got to work through us, right? And there are a lot of things he's got to do—or it's got to do, or she's got to do—to create a symphony. Think about it. But there's a new kind of creativity that's become possible. With human evolution, with cultural evolution, the creative possibilities explode exponentially. We not only have symphonies, we have incredible things. With us, new types of species become possible that we co-create. Again, made in the image of God.

Knives—there wouldn't be any knives without us. Cities. Poetry. And world wars. Cathedrals and concentration camps. Symphonies, as I said, and nuclear bombs.

As some of these examples suggest, there does seem to be a problem with our hyper-rational cortex. Nietzsche has his Zarathustra saying that "man is a rope across an abyss"—I think we can put that in gender-neutral language.

The human species is a rope across an abyss. The implication I derive from this is that we're a transitional species, that there's something incomplete about us. Must we evolve further in order to survive at all?

There's a book by Michael Dowd called *Thank God for Evolution*—I love the title, and it's a pretty good book too. In it, he describes our collective problem as "systemic sin"—that's the Christian word. He writes: "The fundamental immaturity of the human species at this time is that our systems of governance and economics not only permit but actually encourage subsets of the whole to benefit at the expense of the whole." Our systems encourage subsets of the whole—he gives the example of individuals and corporations—to benefit at the expense of the whole.

Is that where we're stuck? Because those subsets think of themselves as separate from the whole? Again, we come back to this sense of separation that's so problematical. Again, we bump into the delusion of separate selves that pursue their own self-interest at the cost of the greater whole that they're actually part of.

So what I'm suggesting is perhaps figures like the Buddha and Gandhi—maybe we can look upon them as prototypes, harbingers of the way in which our species needs to develop. What do you think? If that's true, then the kind of cultural evolution or evolutionary development that's most necessary now involves spiritual practices that address this fiction of a separate self, that help us overcome the fiction of a separate self whose well-being is separate from other people.

I'm really struck by this realization in recent years—how plastic the brain is, how it changes, how when we are meditating, the brain is changing. The brain is restructuring, rewiring itself. I'm just amazed by that, and I almost can't help thinking of it as like a fourth kind of evolutionary process. At this point in our cultural evolution, we have reached the point where we realize that in order to survive, we don't just need genetic DNA mutations of a certain sort, but we can contribute to the process by doing nothing—getting out of the way, as it were—and this whole transformation, this evolutionary development continues when we are on our cushion. That's the way it seems to me.

Perhaps our basic problem isn't self-love, but a real deep misunderstanding of what the self really is. I think it's becoming very clear that without the compassion that arises when we realize our non-duality—that is to say, empathy not only with other human beings, but with the whole of the biosphere—it's becoming more and more likely that civilization as we know it is not going to survive the next few centuries. Nor would it deserve to.

And I think it remains to be seen whether the Homo sapiens species experiment will be a successful vehicle for this evolutionary process. Maybe it won't. Maybe we'll be like the other 99% who have their day and then disappear. But it would be kind of a shame. I mean, it seems like there's that possibility, and it depends on us.

But then I always remember that in one way it's really strange to think of ourselves, as we always do, as separate from the natural world. We are literally an experiment of the biosphere. So if the experiment goes wrong, it's the biosphere that tried something that didn't work. But it does feel as if we're being told now: grow up or get out of the way. That's the feeling I have, and not only me.

To conclude: Does all this give us a different perspective on our collective relationship with the biosphere? Is the eco-crisis a spiritual challenge that calls upon us to realize our non-duality with the earth? It's very interesting at this particular point in history—remember from the first night, the coming together of these two worldviews, the Buddhist emphasis on personal transformation and the Western one on social transformation, the new possibilities that happen when they come together. It's very interesting that this occurs at a time of urgent change. And I think it's more than eco-crisis—it's social and economic crisis as well. Very interesting. Is it just a coincidence?

So what I'm doing to conclude: I think all this suggests a final parallel between the individual and the collective. The question is, will our species become the collective bodhisattva of the biosphere? Isn't humanity challenged today to discover the meaning and the role it seeks in what I think is going to have to be the ongoing long-term task of repairing the rupture between us and Mother Earth? In other words, repairing what we've done to the biosphere. It seems to me that's going to be—isn't that the meaning that's given to us at this point in history? Of what it means for us collectively.

And that process, that healing—one suspects will therefore transform us as a civilization as much as the rest of the biosphere. What do you think?

Well, I realize I forgot one beautiful quote from Thomas Berry, who has been one of the major figures in this whole evolutionary perspective. We might summarize our present human situation by the simple statement: in the twentieth century, the glory of the human has become the desolation of the earth. And now, the desolation of the earth is becoming the destiny of the human.

Ouch.

A participant asked: "You wrote about thinking of awareness as bound and unbound. Would you say now,

regarding this subject, that actually this unbound awareness you're speaking about is exactly the key to realizing this connection? The natural way of..."

That's a fascinating question. The issue of awareness is quite complicated, and that way of expressing it is complex in itself. I haven't usually developed it in relationship to this ecological perspective.

The article starts with some quotations, including a very famous line from the Diamond Sutra that's sometimes translated as: "Let your mind arise without fixing it anywhere." It points to the tendency of awareness to stick to things. I think we can understand this in the context of what I was saying earlier—we're always looking for security. Our awareness is constantly seeking security, trying to secure the sense of self. It's the very nature of awareness that it's looking for something to grasp onto.

And yet that's the problem. Awareness isn't aware that in and of itself it doesn't need to do that. The liberation of awareness is the realization that the mind doesn't need to stick anywhere.

This goes back to the Heart Sutra's famous teaching: "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form." For a long time I puzzled over that, looking for the emptiness inside that takes form as things. But of course, the real emptiness is the emptiness of our own minds—the nature of our own awareness, our own consciousness. It has no qualities in and of itself, and that's why it can become anything. That's why it can take any form.

Whether I can relate that to evolution right now, I'll have to think more about that, to be honest. It's a very intriguing question. Did you have some connection in mind?

The participant responded: "I think I can put it like this—by not letting our awareness be unbound, we actually hinder evolution in the sense you were talking about. We are always in the way of evolution by creating a self which is not there."

Yes, awareness gets stuck. For example, I was suggesting that in meditation there's a kind of transformation going on in the brain—and we know this is physically true. This happens because awareness isn't sticking to something. There's an open quality to it, and then transformation occurs naturally. That makes a lot of sense.

Another participant raised the challenging issue of population: "David Attenborough said at a conference last year that the actual problem is not climate change—the problem is population growth. From an ecological perspective, this makes sense, but when people are already struggling to respond to climate change, and you introduce a subject like population growth—how do you even begin to discuss something like that? Unless you get to a crisis point where you really have to limit population, people are not going to want to respond."

Exactly. What politician is going to run on the platform of restricting population? That may be the toughest challenge of all in a democratic society. And yet, obviously, there are too many people.

The unconscious presents another fascinating dimension. I read Guy Claxton's *The Wayward Mind*, which

explores how we might understand this realm beneath consciousness. For some, like Freud, the unconscious becomes a repository of troublesome impulses. Jung saw it more positively—as something archetypal, even religious in nature, containing far more wisdom than what operates at the conscious level.

Buddhism also has a concept of the unconscious in the Yogacara school, which describes different levels of awareness. It speaks of the alaya-vijnana, the seed repository consciousness, where the karmic seeds—the habitualized patterns of thinking and acting from our past—are somehow stored. Though in this Buddhist understanding, these seeds are generally viewed as problematic. The goal is to "roast the seeds," to eliminate these conditioning patterns that perpetuate suffering.

In terms of practice, if we're working to get the ego-self out of the way, then we're allowing something deeper to manifest. The sixth patriarch expressed this beautifully when he said he had nothing to teach—no doctrine to transmit. He simply recognized where people were stuck, where their minds had become caught, and offered whatever might help them let go. It wasn't about giving them something new, but removing obstacles so their true nature could manifest.

This connects to something profound about our cosmic story. When we hear about how we're literally made of stardust—how the atoms in our bodies were forged in the hearts of ancient stars—it fills us with awe. John Seed, working with Joanna Macy, tells the story from the Big Bang onward as our creation myth. But we don't usually recognize it as myth; we present it as science. Yet traditional societies understand that creation stories serve essential psychological and spiritual functions.

If we could embrace this cosmic narrative as our creation myth, we might better envision where the story goes next. This beautifully parallels the Buddhist understanding of overcoming separation. When Thich Nhat Hanh speaks of the piece of paper containing clouds and rain and sun, or when we contemplate Indra's net of infinite interconnection, these aren't vague concepts. We can see how evolution demonstrates this interdependence—how everything truly inter-is with everything else.

It's a magnificent story. Yet as long as we maintain this sense of separate self, somehow apart from the web of life, we tend to distort this understanding. We can't quite rest comfortably in it.

There's something strangely comforting in recognizing that every atom in our bodies will be recycled through cosmic processes. Yet there's also a tragic dimension we shouldn't ignore. The Beethoven symphonies will be lost. Our individual consciousness, our unique way of experiencing the world—these too will pass away.

Buddhism helps us transcend attachment to these losses, but we needn't deny their poignancy. David Loy will die. The people I love will be lost. This tragic element remains real and shouldn't be dismissed as we explore these deeper truths.

Regarding population control—this raises such intense feelings, and I understand the anger it can

provoke. It's often presented as a red herring that distracts from more fundamental issues. History shows us repeatedly—from the Irish famine to crises in India—that the problem isn't typically too many people. The problem is how resources are controlled and distributed under systems like capitalism. When we focus solely on population, we risk overlooking these deeper structural inequities that create scarcity amid abundance.

This dialogue continues today. What concerns me deeply is that environmental catastrophe could become a dangerous red herring, because as you've just articulated, the logical conclusion of certain population arguments can lead toward authoritarianism—and that's truly perilous territory.

This is precisely why I felt compelled to speak. It's a crucial consideration that the reality of these massive catastrophes we face could result in total annihilation, or perhaps the emergence of something entirely new. But in that very process, we could easily find ourselves capitulating to some of the authoritarian tendencies we discussed yesterday. I believe this represents one of our greatest challenges—one that anyone considering themselves an environmentalist must seriously grapple with.

Thank you for raising that point. Sheila, did you want to respond?

Could I offer just one brief thought first? I find this a very important argument, and I actually find myself agreeing with both perspectives. I completely agree that population arguments are so often used to rationalize the present inequities. Those who already possess great wealth and power invoke population as the real problem, diverting attention from the profound maldistribution of resources in our civilization. I accept that critique entirely.

Nonetheless, I also believe that six billion human beings on this biosphere represents an enormous load with vast consequences for all other ecosystems. My conversations with biologists suggest this is genuinely problematic. We can sustain this population, but not without consuming so much of the earth's resources that it creates serious problems for countless other species.

So while I share your main concern, I still suspect we face genuine overpopulation. I also admit I have no clear solution to this dilemma—at least not in the short term. There are various approaches to population issues: educating women, for instance, typically leads to lower birth rates. That seems like a constructive path. But my sense remains that population represents a very serious and growing challenge, without dismissing your concern that it's so easily weaponized as a red herring to distract from the widening gap between rich and poor.

Sheila?

You present a very grim picture, notwithstanding your inspiring portrayal of evolution's different stages. Though I'm not sure it's quite that grim, actually. I'm experiencing something of a déjà vu at this moment. I feel as though I'm in a Catholic church in the late sixties, at one of those missions where a visiting priest arrives to tell you how sinful you are, how dire the situation is, how you better watch out. I was a teenager

then and felt frightened. I'm not frightened now, but I wonder...

If we truly believe—and we do, as you say—that we are part of nature, then we are. Our awareness of this connection is another matter entirely, but the fundamental unity remains. This implies something hugely powerful. And I believe this awareness is dawning in people. I spoke recently about the banking crisis in Ireland and how there's a genuine feeling throughout the country that, as one academic put it, everything is now out on the table. There's nothing left to hide.

Even Americans who claim not to believe in climate change actually do understand what's happening to the planet. They're not in denial—they're lying for political reasons. Eventually they'll have to stop lying. They do believe it.

So I simply don't see things as quite so grim. We haven't reached the end yet. We don't know what power we collectively possess to unleash positive change. I don't want it to be that grim, and I genuinely don't believe it is. Things may be factually and statistically dire, but I don't necessarily think the outcome will be as bleak as you paint it.

When you say things aren't that grim, do you mean the situation climate scientists describe—the carbon levels and their consequences? That's as grim as they say it is.

But you think because of our response and the fact that...

I think our response is more than what is being portrayed. Our response is manifold and varied throughout the world in all sorts of different ways, both large and small. Things are happening in response.

Yes, I think they are responding, and I think they are too. Whether they're enough, I don't know, but they are happening.

Someone in the back raised a point about being proven right or wrong in ten years time, noting that much damage has already happened to the ecology. But it's not a question of proving anything in that sense. I could spend a week quantifying the response that's been happening around the world in all sorts of ways. The situation is as grim as it is, yes. But I'm saying that we are responding. The world is responding. Not adequately enough, perhaps, but I don't think it's as grim as it's being painted.

Another question came up about people's belief or disbelief in climate change - watching someone shift from a consensus view during election periods. I'm not denying climate change; I'm simply saying that our view of what's happening doesn't have to be as grim. And yes, it doesn't take much energy to stop people believing something.

But let's consider this: if that thesis about our predicament is correct, the only way we can move forward is to look at what we can actually grow with the resources we currently have - our natural resources. If that thesis is correct, we've actually got an answer in one of the Buddha's teachings that shows how we

can reframe this situation.

His famous teaching to Angulimala. Can you recall it? Angulimala had killed ninety-nine people when he encountered the Buddha. He started running after the Buddha, but the Buddha was simply walking. However hard Angulimala ran, he couldn't catch up - the Buddha just walked. Finally Angulimala called out, "You stop too!" And the Buddha replied, "I have stopped. You stop too." Through this, Angulimala gained insight.

If we reframe that teaching into a wider context, if Buddhists are going to adopt this perspective, we could say simply: "You stop."

Speaking of reframing, what Buddhism says about śūnyatā, emptiness, is understood and presented in different ways across Buddhist traditions. Nāgārjuna, for example, understands it as shorthand for the absence of being, the absence of svabhāva or self-being in things. It's a way to deny that things have any inherent self-existence.

But can we understand śūnyatā, this emptiness, more dynamically? Could it be another way to understand that fundamental creative principle we've been discussing?

Is that the fundamental principle of... Is that the emptiness that's always taking form, taking new forms, transforming? Not taking new form out of nothing. It's dependent on the previous evolutionary possibilities that are available there. But it's not bound. It's always creative. It's always taking new form.

Looking at the time and the fact that we're limited now, the question I'd like to leave you with is this: going back to your point about mind bound and unbound, this fundamental creative principle that Dobzhansky talks about and the nature of our own minds—as in the Diamond Sutra, "let your mind arise without fixing it anywhere," because your mind in and of itself has no qualities, it can take any form—is it the same thing? Is that the creative principle?

Is it the same creative principle that existed at the time of the Big Bang and the kind of transformations that took place with the Big Bang, and then all the evolutionary developments I was talking about? Is that the same creative principle that is the very nature of our own minds?

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