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Ecodharma: a new Buddhist path?

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Ecodharma: a new Buddhist path?

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Abstract

Today the climate emergency and other environmental challenges have become the most urgent issue that humanity faces – indeed, arguably the greatest problem that our species has ever faced. Traditional Buddhist texts do not address the types of ecological crises that confront us today, because they did not exist during the Buddha’s time, nor were they problems for the other forms of Buddhism that developed afterwards in other Asian societies. Nevertheless, some Buddhist perspectives seem relevant to our situation. This article extrapolates from two teachings: a curious and perhaps quite significant parallel between our usual individual predicament and our present collective situation; and what that means for what is now being called the *ecosattva* (ecological bodhisattva) path.

Keywords: bodhisattva, dukkha, ecodharma, ecosattva, Lack Projects, progress

Introduction

If we continue abusing the Earth this way, there is no doubt that our civilization will be destroyed. This turnaround takes enlightenment, awakening. The Buddha attained individual awakening. Now we need a collective awakening to stop this course of destruction. Civilization is going to end if we continue to drown in the competition for power, fame, sex, and profit. —Thích Nhất Hạnh

Ecodharma is a new word for a new development in contemporary Buddhism, in response to our dangerous situation today.

Traditional Buddhist texts don't address our present-day ecological challenges, which were not a problem for the Buddha and his Asian successors. Today, however, climate change and other environmental challenges have become the most urgent issue that humanity faces—indeed, arguably the greatest problem that our species has ever faced. And we are doing it to ourselves . . . the eco-crisis is self-inflicted!

This article focuses on two aspects of *ecodharma* that stand out for me: an extraordinary parallel between our usual individual predicament and our present collective situation, and what that means for what is now being called the *ecosattva* path.¹

¹See, for example: One Earth Sangha. <https://oneearthsangha.org/programs/2019-ecosattva-training/>

The Same Problem?

For some time, I have been struck by the profound parallels between our perennial personal predicament, according to established Buddhist teachings, and the current predicament of our now-global civilization. Some teachers have asserted that the eco-crisis is as much a spiritual challenge as a technological and economic one; unpacking those similarities will help to flesh out that claim. Does this mean that there is also a parallel between the two solutions, individual and collective? Does the Buddhist response to our personal predicament also point the way to resolving our collective one?

The Individual Predicament. One way to express our usual individual predicament, which is fundamentally the same now as it was in the Buddha's day, can be summarized as follows:

1. The self is a psychological and social construct.
2. That construct involves a sense of separation from the world "outside," which causes anxiety.
3. That anxiety (*lack*) includes confusion about who I am and the meaning of my life.
4. In response, I try to ground myself in ways that often worsen my situation.
5. I cannot get rid of the self but can realize that it is "empty."
6. This realization frees and empowers me to help "others."

The first claim, that the self is a psycho-social construct, is a truism of developmental psychology. Infants are not born with a sense of self. To be fully human is more than a biological achievement. Socialization is essential: a mother (for example) looks into her baby's eyes and says its name. The baby not only learns to identify with that name, it eventually learns to understand itself in the way that mother (and others) see it—as a self inside, that is separate from and quite different from the other things *outside*.

Where Buddhism differs from most of modern psychology is its implicit claim that there is something inherently uncomfortable (*dukkha*) about this self-construct. From a Buddhist perspective, the internalization of a sense of self, although necessary in order to function, is nonetheless problematic. In psychological terms, the basic difficulty is that the sense of self does not correspond to anything substantial. It isn't a real thing but a confluence of interactive functions: perceiving, feeling, acting, reacting, remembering, intending, which means it is normally anxious and insecure, because there is nothing there that could be secured. We try to secure ourselves by identifying with things "outside" us that (we think) can provide the grounding we crave: money, material possessions, reputation, power, physical attractiveness, and so forth. I call such preoccupations Lack Projects (because we believe they will fill up our sense of lack) or *reality projects* (because we believe they will make us feel more *real*). We normally mis-understand our dis-ease as due to lack of such things. Since none of them can actually ground or secure one's sense of self, it means that no matter how much money, or fame we may accumulate, it never seems enough.

The Buddhist solution to this predicament is not to get rid of the self. That cannot be done and does not need to be done, inasmuch as there never was a separate self. It is the sense of self that needs to be deconstructed (e.g., "forgotten" in meditation) and reconstructed (e.g.,

transforming our motivations from the “three poisons” of greed, ill will and delusion to generosity, loving-kindness, and the wisdom that recognizes our interdependence).

Lack Projects usually involve self-preoccupation: the meaning of my life is about *me*. Waking up to my groundlessness liberates me from that self-centeredness and transforms my world as well, because it is no longer just the place where I play my compulsive lack-project games. That also changes the meaning of my life. Although I am free now to live as I like, that will naturally be in a way that contributes to the wellbeing of the whole, because I don't feel separate from that whole. The focus shifts from “how can I become more *real*?” to “what can I do to make this a better world for all of us?”

Amazingly, this way of understanding our individual predicament seems to correspond precisely to our ecological situation today.

Our Collective Predicament

We not only have individual senses of self, we also have group selves. I'm not only David Loy; I am male, Caucasian, a U.S. citizen, and so forth. The issue here is whether “separate self = *dukkha*” also holds true for our largest collective sense of self: the duality between us as a species, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, and the rest of the biosphere. In fact, there are remarkable parallels between the individual sense of self and humanity's collective sense of self:

1. Like the personal sense of self, human civilization is a construct.

2. This construct too has led to a collective sense of separation (alienation) from the natural world, which causes *dukkha*.
3. This *dukkha* involves anxiety, including uncertainty about the meaning and direction of our now-global civilization.
4. Our main response to that alienation and anxiety—the collective attempt to secure or “self-ground” ourselves—is making things worse.
5. We cannot “return to nature” but we can realize our nonduality with the rest of the biosphere, and what that implies.
6. This collective realization will clarify what it means to be human. Being a species that is a part of something greater than ourselves, our role is to serve the well-being of that whole—which will also heal us.

Let’s unpack these parallels.

The claim that human civilization is a construct seems so obvious that it’s difficult to understand any alternative view. Today we take for granted that there are various ways to live together. For example, if the democratic process of passing new laws isn’t working well, reform movements and revolutions are possible. Nevertheless, this supposedly self-evident claim was not self-evident to archaic societies. The modern world owes that insight to classical Greece, which around the Buddha’s time began to distinguish *nomos*—the conventions of human society (including culture, technology, etc.)—from *physis*, the natural patterns of the physical world. The Greeks realized that, unlike the natural world, the social conventions that constitute society can be reconstructed. Pla-

to, for example, offered detailed plans to restructure the Greek city-state in two of his dialogues, *The Republic* and *The Laws*. (In the *Aggañña Sutta* the Buddha says something comparable: the caste system is not “natural” —different castes are not different parts of Brahma’s body but a social construct.)

The important point is that archaic civilizations in Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, and China, as well as the Mayas, Incas, and Aztecs in pre-Columbian America, accepted their own traditional and hierarchical social structures as inevitable, because natural and therefore sacred. Rulers were gods or godlike in that they played a unique role in communicating with the higher beings that supervised our created world, which meant there was no distinction between political power (the state) and religious authority. To play one’s part in supporting the hierarchical social order and to be religious—to serve the gods—amounted to the same thing. Furthermore, and this brings us to the most important point, *all of those civilizations believed they played an important role in keeping the cosmos functioning harmoniously*; if they didn’t perform the required task then the universe would break down or fall apart. Probably the best-known example is the Aztecs, who performed mass human sacrifice because blood was needed to keep the sun-god on his course through the heavens. The Sumerians believed that humans have been created by the gods to be their servants, and if we didn’t serve them (by offering sacrifices, for example), the gods would be displeased—and you don’t want to upset the gods! In short, distinctions we now take for granted between the natural world, the social order, and religion did not exist for these ancient civilizations.

None of us, I think, would enjoy living in any of those archaic societies, but there was nonetheless a positive aspect. Belief that the structure of their society was part of the natural order, and that they had an important role to play in keeping that natural order harmonious, con-

ferred an extraordinary psychological benefit unknown to us. The members of such cultures took for granted a collective sense of *meaning* that we today no longer have—indeed, that we can hardly conceive of. Because they understood their society to be built into the cosmos, their essential social role was also built into the cosmos. Both personally and collectively, they knew why they were here and what they had to do.

Today, in contrast, the meaning of our individual lives and our societies has become something that we have to decide for ourselves in a universe whose meaningfulness (if it has any) is not something we agree on. The result is increasing anxiety about who we are and what it means to be human. Loss of faith in the life-orientation provided by traditional religion has left many of us rudderless. Our ever more powerful technologies enable us to accomplish almost anything we want to do, yet we don't know what we *should* do. Insofar as we can no longer rely on God or godlike rulers to tell us, we are thrown back upon ourselves, and the lack of any grounding in something greater than ourselves has become a profound source of *dukkha*, collective as well as individual.

Our situation today is well expressed in the concluding sentences of Yuval Harari's book [*Sapiens: a brief history of humankind*](#):

despite the astonishing things that humans are capable of doing, we remain unsure of our goals and we seem to be as discontented as ever. We have advanced from canoes to galleys to steamships to space shuttles—but nobody knows where we're going. We are more powerful than ever before, but have very little idea what to do with all that power. Worse still, humans seem to be more irresponsible than ever. Self-made gods with only the laws of physics to keep us company, we are accountable to no one. We are consequently wreaking havoc on our fellow animals and on the surrounding ecosystem, seeking little more than

our own comfort and amusement, yet never finding satisfaction.

Is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied and irresponsible gods who don't know what they want?²

The heart of the problem—*why* we don't know what we want—is that we no longer believe we have any role to play in the cosmos. Since we “know” that humans, like all other species that have evolved, are mere accidents of genetic mutation, we are accountable to no one and nothing beyond ourselves. All we can do, then, is enjoy ourselves—if we can, while we can, as long as we can—until we die.

No wonder we feel dissatisfied and act irresponsibly.

To sum up, today our sense of separation from the natural world has become an ongoing source of alienation and frustration. This explains parallels one through three, above: modern human civilization as our communal construct involves individual uncertainty about what it means to be human, and collective uncertainty about what our now-global civilization should be doing.

That brings us to point number four: what has been our collective response to this predicament?

To highlight the parallel with our individual situation, let's remember how we usually respond personally. Our individual predicament is that the sense of a separate self is shadowed by a sense of *lack*: the feeling that something is wrong with me. Normally we misunderstand the source of the problem and project it outwards. What's wrong with me is that *I don't have enough* of something: money, consumer goods, prestige, etc. Since these are only symptoms of the true problem, I can never ob-

²Harari, *Sapiens*, 465–66.

tain enough of them to allay the sense of *lack* at my core. In fact, my efforts to do so may actually aggravate the situation. Attempts to manipulate others to get what I seek tend to reinforce the sense of separation between us. . . . Is there a collective version of all this?

I think so: It's our obsession with "progress," a slippery term, from the Latin *pro-gressus*, to advance or walk forward. But surely that's a good thing? The problem is that the term has been hijacked to validate the consequences of continuous economic growth and never-ending technological development, whatever the cost. The implication is that, although there may be some adverse "by-products" to such developments, they can be fixed—usually by more of the same economic and technological growth, which will provide us with more resources to solve such problems.

Nevertheless, we may wonder: when will we consume enough? When will corporate profits and share prices and our collective Gross National Product be large enough? When will we have all the technology we need? These questions seem odd because we know there are no limits to those ever-escalating processes, but isn't there something *odd* about *that*? Why is *more and more* always *better* if it can never be *enough*? If progress means walking forward, how do we know we are headed in the right direction?

Technological and economic growth in themselves may be valuable *means*, insofar as they can provide the resources to accomplish what we want to do. They are less good as ends-in-themselves, because they cannot answer the fundamental question about what it means to be human and what we should be doing with all those resources. However, since we have no other answer to that basic question—none that we collectively agree on, anyway—technological and economic development have become, in effect, a substitute. The means have become the ends. They function as forms of secular salvation that we seek but never quite

attain. Not knowing where to go or what to value, our civilization has become obsessed with ever-increasing power and control.

Because we no longer feel grounded in the natural world, we have the burden of trying to create our own ground—to *self-ground* ourselves, in effect. And what we are discovering, ecologically as well as psychologically, is that can't be achieved technologically. We are becoming more anxious and compulsive, not less. We are haunted by a collective sense of *lack*, and our efforts to resolve it are destroying the biosphere.

The individual sense of *lack* impels us to focus on the future, when (we hope) my dissatisfaction will finally be resolved, as I achieve my goals. Our collective focus on “progress” amounts to the same thing. The promise of technological development and economic growth is that the world will be better in the future if we utilize the present as the means to get there. Instead of getting better, however, the social changes happening in the present continue to accelerate and become more and more stressful, for the relatively few “winners” in the new global order as well as for the vast majority of “losers.” The future continues to beckon but for some reason we never get there.

This way of understanding our collective situation suggests that the ecological crisis is unavoidable. Any techno-economic system that needs to keep growing (or else it collapses) will sooner or later bump up against the limits of the biosphere.

So, what is the solution? “Returning to nature”? Remember the individual parallel: according to Buddhism one can't get rid of the self because it never existed. In a similar fashion, we cannot return to the natural world because we have never left it. What we call the “environment” is not just a place where we happen to be located. Rather, the biosphere is the ground from which and within which we arise. We are not

in nature, we are nature. The earth is not only our home, it is our mother. Before it is a resource, it is The Source.

In fact, our relationship with Mother Earth is even more intimate, because we can never cut the umbilical cord. Fantasies about terraforming Mars reveal how estranged we have become from our planetary home. Our bodies don't end at our fingertips and toenails. The air in your lungs, like the water and food that enter your mouth and pass through your digestive system, is part of a greater holistic system that circulates through each of us. Human bodies are made of the same elements that compose the oceans, rivers, mountains, and trees. Our blood is salty because it duplicates our original ocean home. We share over ninety-nine percent of our DNA with chimpanzees and bonobos. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu reminds us what this means:

The entire cosmos is a cooperative. The sun, the moon, and the stars live together as a cooperative. The same is true for humans and animals, trees and the earth. Our bodily parts function as a cooperative. When we realize that the world is a mutual, interdependent, cooperative enterprise, that human beings are all mutual friends in the process of birth, old age, suffering, and death, then we can build a noble, even a heavenly environment. If our lives are not based on this truth then we'll all perish.³

Our species has never been separate, just "autistic."⁴

³ Cited in Powers, *The Buddhist World*, 647.

⁴ Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 205-216.

A Collective Enlightenment?

One of the mysterious aspects of Buddhist awakening is that, if there is no self, who or what awakens? The “new cosmology” proposed by Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme offers an answer: humans are a way that “the universe reflects on and celebrates itself in a special mode of conscious awareness.” Or, more simply, “we are the self-consciousness of the universe.”

More modestly, we are a way that the earth can awaken. Mara questioned the Buddha’s enlightenment: “Who testifies that your awakening is genuine?” The Buddha didn’t say anything in response but simply touched the earth. I am reminded again of my favorite Buddhist quotation, which the Japanese Zen master Dōgen used to describe his own awakening: “I came to realize clearly that mind is nothing other than rivers and mountains and the great wide earth, the sun and the moon and the stars.”⁵

This gives us a different perspective on the ecological crisis, which is a spiritual test as much as a technological and economic task because it challenges us to take that next step. Thích Nhất Hạnh’s claim that we need a collective enlightenment to stop the course of destruction implies that today we need to evolve spiritually in order to survive physically.

If so, it becomes all the more urgent to clarify what *collective enlightenment* means. If awakened beings such as Gautama Buddha are prototypes for the larger cultural transformation that’s necessary, does collective enlightenment mean that a significant percentage of individuals awaken in the traditional Buddhist sense, or something else? It’s difficult to imagine what that “something else” might be. It’s even more difficult

⁵ Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, 205.

to believe that a massive number of practitioners will awaken soon enough to form a group savvy enough to lead the kind of social movement necessary to resolve our ecological predicament quickly enough.

Or is the problem here that our understanding of enlightenment is too narrow? We might be looking in the wrong place, thus missing what we are looking for—a social revolution in consciousness and commitment that may already be happening.

In his book *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came Into Being, and Why No One Saw it Coming* (Viking, 2007), Paul Hawken documents the emergence of a loose worldwide network of socially-engaged organizations that has arisen in response to the global challenges that threaten us today, social justice issues as well as ecological crises. This “movement of movements” is both the largest ever—at least two million organizations, maybe many more—and the fastest growing. “It’s the first time in history that a movement of such scale and breadth has arisen from within every country, city, and culture in the world, with no leader, rulebook, or central headquarters. . . . It is vast and the issues broadly defined as social justice and the environment are not separate issues at all.”⁶

Most striking of all is the metaphor that Hawken uses to describe this movement. It is the “immune response” of humanity, arising as if spontaneously to protect us and the planet from the forces that are despoiling our world. The organizations that compose this movement are “social antibodies attaching themselves to the pathologies of power.”⁷ He devotes a whole chapter to unpacking this analogy.

⁶Hawken, “The Movement.”

⁷Hawken, “The Movement.”

Just as the immune system recognizes self and non-self, the movement recognizes what is humane and what is not humane. Just as the immune system is the line of internal defense that allows an organism to persist over time, sustainability is a strategy for humanity to continue to exist over time. The word immunity comes from the Latin *immunis*, meaning ready to serve.⁸

Note that an immune system is part of something greater than itself, which it serves by defending. White blood cells do not have a problem figuring out what their role is. Given the kinds of infections that confront our collective immune system today, this parallel too seems obvious. The ecosattva path is about helping the earth to heal, a process that will also heal us. This may be a new way of understanding the Buddhist path, but this path is not new. Hawken again: “In terms of commitment, I think Buddhist practice is by its very nature social change. It cultivates compassion, which is the source of transformation.”⁹

A Zen practitioner, Hawken sees Buddhism as a growing part of this movement.

Buddhism as an institution will become much more engaged in social issues, because I cannot see a future where conditions do not worsen for all of us. The gift of the years ahead is that we cannot address the salient issues of our time and be the same people we are today. *Dukkha*, suffering, has always been the crucible of transformation for those who practice.” The Buddhist path is not

⁸ Quoted in Loy, *Ecodharma*, 119.

⁹ Hawken, “The Movement.”

about avoiding suffering but being transformed by it, which suggests there's lots of transformation in our future.¹⁰

Joanna Macy points to the same thing:

Wherever I go with workshops, I find the readiness to experience a collective awakening. I'm astonished by how explicit this is. It's a sense of wanting to belong to the Earth, aching for reverence for the Earth. Again and again, I believe that people would be ready to die for our world, to save the life process. There is something pressing within the heart-mind that is just huge. It's happening very fast.¹¹

So, is the collective enlightenment that Thích Nhất Hạnh calls for already happening? As a small part of this worldwide movement, might Buddhism play a distinctive role in encouraging not only the liberation of consciousness but the application of liberated consciousness to the social and ecological crises that challenge us today?

The Ecosattva Path

Although the bodhisattva ideal is usually understood as a Mahāyāna development, the bodhisattva path is increasingly perceived by contemporary Buddhists in a nonsectarian fashion, as an inspirational archetype that embodies a new vision of human possibility—in particular, an alter-

¹⁰Hawken, "The Movement."

¹¹Macy, "It Looks Bleak."

native to rampant, self-preoccupied individualism, including any approach to Buddhist practice that is concerned only with one's own personal awakening. Understood in a more socially and ecologically engaged way, as ready to grapple with the collective and institutional causes of *dukkha*, the bodhisattva seems to be precisely the spiritual paradigm we need today.

The traditional Buddhist focus on individual awakening and individual compassion is consistent with the traditional focus on individual *dukkha*—on the suffering due to my own karma and the ways my own mind works. But what if one's suffering is not always due to what one has done or is doing now? What about the massive amounts of collective *dukkha* caused by oppressive institutions and other social structures? How might conventional conceptions of the bodhisattva path be adapted, to make Buddhist teachings more relevant to such challenges?

Acknowledging the importance of social engagement is a big step for many Buddhists, who have usually been taught to focus on their own individual peace of mind. On the other side, those committed to social action tend to suffer from frustration, anger, depression, fatigue, and burnout. The engaged bodhisattva path provides what each needs, because it involves a double practice, inner and outer, in which the two aspects not only balance but reinforce each other. While deeply engaged, bodhisattvas also remain committed to their own personal practice, which normally includes some form of mindfulness. Meditation cultivates not only equanimity but the insight that supports it: awareness of that “empty” dimension where there is no better or worse, nothing to gain or lose. That perspective is especially important in especially difficult times, when one can be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task. The temptation, for Buddhist practitioners, is attachment to that dimension and therefore becoming indifferent to what is happening in the world: too much “form is emptiness” and not enough “emptiness is

form.” The problem, for activists, is on the other side: without the serenity cultivated by meditation, they often lack a stable ground for their life-work, a lack that tends to reduce what they are able to contribute.

Combining the two practices enables intense engagement in goal-directed behaviour with less exhaustion and burnout. Such activism also helps meditators avoid becoming captivated with their own mental condition and progress towards enlightenment. Insofar as a sense of separate self is the basic problem, compassionate commitment to the wellbeing of others is an important part of the solution. Engagement with the world’s problems is therefore not to be understood as a distraction from our personal spiritual practice but as an essential part of it.

Cultivating insight and equanimity supports what is most distinctive and powerful about spiritual activism: the bodhisattva *acts without attachment to the results of action*. As aphorism twenty-eight of the Tibetan *lojong* training puts it: “Abandon any hope of fruition. Don't get caught up in how you will be in the future, stay in the present moment.”

But acting without attachment is easily misunderstood to suggest a casual attitude, an approach that can never bring about the changes that are necessary, because it misses the point about what nonattachment really means.

Consider the difference between a marathon and a hundred-meter dash. When you run a hundred-meter race, the only thing that matters is sprinting to the goal as quickly as possible. You don’t have time to think about anything else. But you can’t run a marathon that way, because you’ll quickly exhaust yourself. Instead, you follow the course without fixating on the goal line. If you run in the right direction you will eventually get there, but in the process, you need to focus on being here and now, just this step, just this next step; there is a Japanese term for it: *tada*, just this!

This perspective can lead to a “runner’s high,” when the running becomes effortless—a taste of what Daoists call *wei wu wei*, literally “the action of non-action.” This type of non-action does not mean doing nothing. The runner does not give up and sit by the side of the road. Instead, the running is no-running: one is not attached to the running inasmuch as one is not thinking about the goal. Nonetheless, one is approaching the goal because one is doing what is necessary right now: *just this!*

But what about a path with no end, with a task so difficult that it is difficult not to become discouraged? Such as “saving” all sentient beings in the universe, however we understand that?

In Japanese Zen temples, practitioners daily recite the four “bodhisattva vows.” The first is to help all living beings awaken: “Sentient beings are numberless; I vow to liberate them all.” If we really understand what this commitment involves, how can we avoid feeling overwhelmed? We are vowing to do something that cannot possibly be accomplished. Is that crazy, or what?

That the vow cannot be fulfilled is not the problem but the point. Since it can’t be achieved, what the vow really calls for is re-orienting the meaning of one’s life, from our usual self-preoccupation to primary concern for the wellbeing of everyone. On a day-to-day level, what becomes important is not the unattainable goal but the direction of one’s efforts—a direction that in this case orients us without providing any endpoint. What does that imply about how we respond to the eco-crisis? *Someone who has volunteered for a job that is literally impossible is not going to be intimidated by challenges because they sometimes appear hopeless.*

No matter how momentous the task of working with others to try to save global civilization from destroying itself, that is nonetheless a small subset of what the bodhisattva has committed to doing. No matter

what happens, we are not discouraged —well, not for long: we may need a few mindful breaths after a setback, but then we dust ourselves off and get on with it. That's because this vow goes beyond any attachment to any particular accomplishment, or defeat. When our efforts are successful, it's time to move on to the next thing. When they're not successful, we keep trying—indefinitely.

But that's not all. To really understand what is happening ecologically is to realize the very real possibility that our efforts will be in vain. Privately, an increasing number of scientists are becoming pessimistic about the future of human civilization and even the survival of the human species: we may be close to tipping points or have already passed them.¹² It's difficult to anticipate what will happen, yet it doesn't look good. We just don't know.

“We just don't know.” Hmm... does that sound familiar? Isn't that something our contemplative practices cultivate: “don't know mind?” It is the first tenet of the Zen Peacemakers (the other two are bearing witness to the joys and suffering of the world and taking actions that arise from not-knowing and bearing witness). One of my Zen teachers, Robert Aitken, liked to say that our task is not to clear up the mystery but to make the mystery clear. The spiritual path isn't about coming to understand everything but opening up to experience a sacred and mysterious world where everything is changing whether or not we notice. Bodhisattvas access this mystery not by grasping it, in order to rest serenely in it, but by manifesting something greater than their egos. We do what

¹²For example, Frank Fenner's views expressed in Firth, “Human Race;” Anderson, “What they Won't Tell You;” and Johan Rockstrom et al., “A safe operating place.”

we can in response to what we know, although we never know for sure what's happening or what's possible.

This points to the deepest meaning of nonattachment to results. *Our task is to do the very best we can, not knowing what the consequences will be*—not knowing if our efforts will make any difference whatsoever. Have we already passed ecological tipping-points and civilization as we know it is doomed? We don't know, and that's okay. Of course, we hope our efforts will bear fruit, yet ultimately, they are our gift to the earth, *gratis*.

We don't know if what we do is important, but we do know that it's important for us to do it. To act without attachment to results is very difficult for most of us, perhaps impossible, unless one has some spiritual grounding. Even then, to be completely unattached to the results of our efforts is to set the bar unrealistically high. And that's okay too. Our job is not to be perfect, but to do the best we can.

In conclusion, I wonder if the bodhisattva path may be the single most important contribution of Buddhism to our present situation. In these urgent times, is the earth today calling upon all of us to become bodhisattvas/ecosattvas?

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