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Healing Ecology

David R. Loy

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> We are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness.
>
> —Thich Nhat Hanh

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Individual Predicament

The Four Noble (or ennobling) Truths of the Buddha are all about *dukkha* and how to end it. To put an end to my *dukkha,* however, I need to experience *anatta*—***n***ot-self—which from the other side is also my interdependence with all other beings, both living and inanimate. As far as I know, no other philosophy or religious tradition focuses so clearly on the intrinsic connection between *dukkha* and our delusive sense of self. It's no exaggeration to say that for Buddhism the self *is dukkha*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Our Collective Situation

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

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

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

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

2. This construct has led to a collective sense of separation (alienation) from the natural world, which causes *dukkha*.

3. This *dukkha* involves anxiety about what it means to be human—in this case, a fundamental confusion about what we as a species should be doing.

4. Our response to that alienation and anxiety—the collective attempt to secure or "self-ground" ourselves technologically and economically—is making things worse.

5. We cannot "return to nature" because we have never left it, but we need to realize our nonduality with the rest of the biosphere, and what that implies.

6. This will resolve our collective existential/spiritual problem about what it means to be human. With us the biosphere becomes self-conscious. Our role today is to heal it, and thereby ourselves.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Evolution?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Moving Forward by Agreeing to Disagree: A Response to "Healing Ecology"

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Moving Forward by Agreeing to Disagree: A Response to "Healing Ecology"

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David Loy has described himself here as male, Caucasian, and a U.S. citizen. We also know from his public profile that he is, among other descriptors, a Buddhist who has been authorized to teach Zen Buddhism by Master Yamada Koun Roshi of the Sanbo Kyodan lineage of Zen. Since portions of what I have to say emerge from reflecting on some differences between our social location, allow me to provide a few identifying markers of my own. I, too, am a U.S. citizen: a second-generation Taiwanese American female. Like Loy I was raised Christian and teach philosophical and religious ethics, but unlike him I never left Christianity (McFarlane and Loy). I identify today as a progressive Christian with denominational membership in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and have never been a practitioner of, or academic specialist in, any variety of Buddhism. I will accordingly put aside otherwise valid questions of what kind of Buddhist soteriology has Loy presented and whether Buddhists should apply concepts such as *dukkha* and *anatta* in the ecological directions that he recommends. I will instead engage his paper through three

[1] Claremont School of Theology. Email: gkao.cst.edu. This response was delivered at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, October 31, 2010. I would like to thank the steering committees of the Comparative Religious Ethics and the Buddhist Critical-Constructive Reflection Groups for their invitation to participate in that joint session. I would also like to thank Richard Amesbury for helpful advice on an earlier draft of these comments.

conceptual lenses with which I am more familiar—Christian, feminist, and what might be called Maritainian or Rawlsian.

Perhaps the first question that came to my mind after reading Loy's paper is how someone like me should even craft a response, particularly since my religious tradition (for reasons of cultural hegemony) has generally been the one to set the terms of discussion on environmentalism and related matters (for example, various "religion and science" debates). Another way of asking this question is whether I ought to engage the conceptual and metaphysical questions that his paper raises or the practical and political ones. There is a respectable tradition in political philosophy that would encourage me to select the latter option, so as to allow people of diverse and even mutually incompatible final commitments to pursue common projects in the absence of agreement about underlying theory. For example, prior to the mid-twentieth century adoption by the United Nations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UNESCO convened a committee to study the feasibility of putting together a charter of rights for all peoples and nations. One of the most active members of that committee, the French Catholic natural law theorist Jacques Maritain, famously remarked that everyone—even delegates with "violently opposed ideologies"—could agree upon a list of rights, but "only on condition that no one asks us why" (Maritain, *Human Rights* 9).[2] Maritain himself was "quite certain that [his] way of justifying belief in the rights of man and the ideal of liberty, equality, fraternity [wa]s the only way with a firm foundation in truth." Still, the strength of his conviction "[did] not prevent [him] from being in agreement on these practical convictions with people who [we]re certain that their

[2] The fourth chapter of Maritain's *Man and State* entitled "The Rights of Man" is appropriately subtitled "Men mutually opposed in their theoretical conceptions can come to a merely practical agreement regarding a list of human rights."

way of justifying them, entirely different...or opposed to [his]...[wa]s equally the only way founded upon truth" (10-11).

Now a great amount has already been written about the wisdom of bracketing theory for the sake of praxis, as the voluminous literature on John Rawls's comparable but non-identical notions of "political liberalism," "overlapping consensus" and "public reason" attest.[3] Rather than rehearse those arguments here, what I would like to do instead is explore how we might respond to Loy's paper if subjected to Maritainian or Rawlsian analysis.

The answer, in short, would first require us to divide the content of his paper in two. We would understand his attempt to draw a spiritual analogy between our individual predicament on the one hand, and our ecological crisis on the other, as principally designed for, and primarily addressed to, fellow Buddhists. His co-religionists would thus have free rein to affirm or to contest the manner in which he employs the theoretical apparatus of Buddhism toward environmental ends. We would simultaneously regard his practical proposals to "heal ecology" as fit for public commentary or critique among *all* people of good will, whether they belong in some fashion to Buddhism or not.

To be clear, so long as Loy's constructive measures could be distinguished conceptually from the particular Buddhist rationale that he provides for them, so that the former were theoretically "freestanding" to invoke the Ralwsian term, we need not assess the truth or justifiability of his underlying philosophical and religious ideas before forging ahead. We ethicists of all stripes would not first have to identify similarities within and incongruities between and among our respective traditions: Loy's *anatta* compared to Augustine's immortal soul compared to Hume's

[3] For Rawls's discussion of these ideas, see especially his *Political Liberalism*, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited" in *The Law of Peoples with The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,* and *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*.

"bundle of perceptions," to name a few possibilities. Nor would we have to convince one another of the merits (or lack thereof) of one metaphysical description of the world and account of human nature against other alternatives: Loy's description of the delusional self who needs enlightenment, or Kierkegaard's understanding of anxiety, subjectivity, and faith, or still some other account of who we are and how we can become free from what ails us so. Before partnering together to repair the world, we would not even be required to ground Loy's conclusions that "we are an integral part of the natural world" and that human civilization is a construct that never "left" nature on Buddhist views on dependent co-origination. Instead, others could rely upon some other conceptual scaffolding, such as biblical ideas of humanity being formed from the "dust of the ground," of the various covenants (for example, Noahide, Mosaic) linking the people to God and nature, and of Christ holding all of creation together.[4] These examples, of course, do not exhaust the possibilities.

Now the upshot of permitting plural, even if internally contradictory, bases of support by remaining noncommittal at the public level about the truth or validity of each theoretical possibility is that we could spend our collective energies instead on assessing Loy's practical principles and proposals of action. These include putting an end to our "obsession with never-ending 'progress'" and the patterns of overconsumption encouraged by that mindset, responsibly managing our waste products in such a way where they would not simply be moved out of sight, and collectively turning to renewable sources of natural power in lieu of reliance upon nuclear power or fossil fuels. In short, in our search for agreement on various practical initiatives to combat "climate change, ozone holes, melting glaciers, or extinction events," we would not care at the public level if some groups internally were to cha-

[4] See, for example, John 1:3 and Colossians 1:15-17.

racterize these and other measures as the human species becoming the "collective Bodhisattva of the biosphere," while others were to regard it as reflecting what proper dominion and stewardship over the created order would require, and so forth.

While a full Maritainian or Rawlsian interpretation would require more elaboration than what I have only been able to sketch here, in the interest of time let me turn now to two major difficulties with the reading I have provided thus far. First, as discussed extensively in the secondary literature on political liberalism, it would be a mistake for us to believe that "political" calls for social action could really be as devoid of "metaphysical" commitments as the overall strategy of bracketing theory for praxis would imply. Consider the solution Loy offers to our energy problems. He writes: "instead of asking 'how can we get all the energy we need?' perhaps we should turn that around by determining how much renewable energy is available and restructuring human civilization accordingly." His is a welcome and worthy suggestion, and one that prima facie involves no contentious theoretical assumptions. If we were to put his proposal into action, however, the veneer of neutrality between "comprehensive doctrines" would quickly dissipate. For even if we could actually calculate how much renewable energy there was, it would still not be obvious how we would then go about apportioning it among ourselves (for example, equally among all individuals or across all countries? A greater share to those who have financed the harnessing of natural power? "To each according to his need"?). As these possibilities suggest, the models of distributive justice that might be proposed to solve this problem would most likely entail comprehensive philosophical or religious commitments of their own.

Now the second difficulty with the Maritainian-Rawlsian reading that I have offered thus far is that it is arguably one that Loy himself would not want, as it might even do harm to the integrity of his argu-

ment. For Loy's remarks do not neatly divide into two types: those directed primarily at Buddhists on account of their (presumably) shared metaphysics and ontology, and those aimed at a general audience in light of the universality of the prescriptions and effects of his plan to heal the biosphere. Quite the contrary, Loy's central thesis is that there are common "spiritual roots" to our ecological crisis and that the Buddhist soteriological structure, when properly understood and applied from the individual to the collective case, holds the key to our way out. Loy's wish is not simply that we all "stop befoul[ing] our own nest" in the ways already mentioned, but that we all "awaken" to the true causes of environmental spoilage—our false belief in an ultimate "separation from other people and...from...the natural world" and our dysfunctional striving after "ever-increasing power and control" as a way of resolving our collective anxiety about what it means to be human. If these points weren't proof enough of Loy's unwillingness to play by any Maritainian or Rawlsian-inspired rules of compartmentalization, there is also his direct appeal to religions to change their internal lives: to "stop denying evolution and instead refocus their messages on its *meaning*" (emphasis in original).[5]

Despite the difficulties endemic to bracketing approaches in political philosophy in general and as applied to Loy's paper in particular, I would still like to encourage Loy to disentangle practical solutions to re-

[5] Loy offers this prescription after noting that the relevance of religion would be at stake. But Loy is either mistaken about what is relevant to religious practitioners, or he means something else by the term than what is germane or applicable, because surveys in the United States have repeatedly showed not only that a majority of Americans do not believe in evolution, but also that disbelief in evolution is strongly correlated with religiosity. Witness the February 11, 2009 Gallup Poll that was conducted on the eve of the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birthday, where only 39% of Americans said that they "believe in the theory of evolution" and where those who reported attending church the most often (for example, weekly) were the least likely to report belief in evolution. See http://www.gallup.com/poll/114544/darwin-birthday-believe-evolution.aspx [last retrieved on October 28, 2010].

ducing our ecological footprint from his grand meta-narrative of why the world is now facing ecological ruin. Let me now conclude with a few reasons in support of my recommendation and let me also register my regret that I can do so only in a cursory manner here.

First, the urgency of our myriad environmental problems combined with the "fact of reasonable pluralism" leads me to believe that we cannot and should not wait for universal enlightenment about something as contestable as the true origins of environmental devastation before taking action.[6] Doubtless I share Loy's conviction that technology alone should neither bear the blame for our current situation, nor be our sole hope for a better future. My worry, however, is that any environmentalism that is conditional upon human civilization becoming "awakened" from its illusory worldviews is going have to wait a dreadfully long time before becoming actualized, if ever. For however ultimately false the socially-constructed distinctions between selves and others, egoism and altruism, and nature and culture are or may be, these ways of thinking are firmly entrenched and dominant today. On *this* side of (spiritual or secular) *nirvāṇa*, then, I submit that environmental campaigns will stand a greater chance of success if they strategically work *within* those paradigms, even if by appealing directly to people's selfish desires and "illusory" assumptions, than if they insist upon first trying to liberate us all from them.

Second, I am slightly troubled by the gendered dimensions of Loy's analysis of the problem as well as some of the language he uses to describe humanity's relation to nature (*viz.*, umbilical cord imagery,

[6] I do not mean to imply that Loy himself was suggesting this (i.e., that we suspend practical action until we all agree upon theory), but only to emphasize the dangers of paralysis if the two were inextricably connected if and when enlightenment about underlying theory were not forthcoming.

"earth as mother, "mother earth")[7] and thus am concerned about what practical consequences for feminism might follow. Loy has repeatedly characterized our anxious, delusional selves as incessantly trying to "identify with [an] 'outside' [of] us that (we think) can provide the grounding we crave." But most of his examples of the ways we generally try to fill our existential lack involve what many feminists have alleged are more reflective of male experience (*viz.*, through "money, material possessions, reputation, power") than of women's experiences (*i.e.*, through relationships with others). It stands to reason, then, that his dual call that we abandon our incorrect understanding that there is a "'me' that's separate from others" and accordingly "tak[e] care of 'others'" might have gendered implications as well. To be clear, whether directed at Loy's Buddhist soteriology, Reinhold Niebuhr's sin as pride theology,[8] or secular care theorists who promote an unpoliticized ethic of care, my overarching concern is that any normative theory that valorizes other-regard and the negation of self may inadvertently serve the purposes of denying the moral agency of, and justifying endless self-sacrifice among, certain classes of people who need to be exalted instead: namely, those who either are already in powerless, subordinate positions or are operating under forms of self-hatred such as internalized misogyny. To be sure, I am aware that Buddhist feminists themselves have ways of reconciling the (real or apparent) tension between the overarching feminist sociopolitical agenda of promoting women and the Buddhist

[7] For a discussion of the concerns that "earthcare" or "ecomaternalist" discourse raises, see, for example, Kao.

[8] In Christian social ethics, this was essentially the concern that Valerie Saivings raised against Reinhold Neibuhr's concept of sin as pride. She noted in her path-breaking article, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," that women were tempted more by "underdevelopment or negation of the Self" through "triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center or focus; dependence on others for one's self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards" and so forth than the sins of "pride" and "will to power" that were more representative of male experience (Saivings 37).

metaphysical denial of discrete unified selves.[9] What I'm wondering, then, is whether Loy is sympathetic to that line of work and if so, how he might qualify his remarks accordingly.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not mention my own reservations about the *practical* value of providing somewhat ahistorical explanations for what I take to be historical problems. As you all know, much attention has been directed toward global climate change and the need for the industrialized world to make drastic changes in transportation, be it through efficient mass transit or "greener" commuter alternatives to the personal car. To the surprise of many, however, a recent report by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (UNFAO) found that the global livestock sector generates even more greenhouse gas emissions than does the worldwide transport sector and that the former is also a major source of land and water degradation and loss of biodiversity (Steinfield et al.). Now, the reasons why we Americans in particular since the mid-twentieth century have been steadily increasing in our consumption of meat are quite complex (*n.b.* we Americans consumed roughly 200 pounds of meat per person in 2005, which is 22 pounds more than in 1970 and 68 pounds more than in 1945).[10] They involve diverse factors such as the intensification, industrialization, and corporate consolidation of farming in the U.S. (for example, the rise of the "factory farm"), improvements in refrigeration technologies, increasing urbanization, U.S. food policy from the 1970s onwards, myths about the superiority of animal protein to plant protein, what ecofeminist Carol Adams has identified as the "sexual politics of meat,"[11] and so forth. In this case of environmental destruction through the global pro-

[9] See, for example, Gross and Ruether as well as, Dalmiya 61-72.

[10] These figures are taken from February 15, 2007 statistics of the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS).

[11] For a discussion of the gendered dimensions of meat-eating, see Adams.

duction of meat (and perhaps in others), I am simply not sure that the origins are ultimately reducible to a timeless spiritual one. I'm also concerned that Loy's spiritual diagnosis may inadvertently obscure important political and economic dimensions of these problems in his attempt to identify one root cause.

In any event, Christian theologian and ecofeminist Rosemary Radford Ruether has observed, correctly in my view, that "an ecological crisis of global proportions can mean nothing less than a true dialogue and mutual enrichment of all spiritual traditions."[12] So may you, David Loy, receive my comments in the spirit of interreligious dialogue and as one earthling to another who is also attempting to find ways to heal the biosphere and ourselves. Thank you.

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[12] See Ruether *Deep Ecology* 232.

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